

# Benin, the Western Niger Delta, and the Development of the Atlantic World<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Before the Portuguese arrived in the Niger Delta in the 1480s, Benin was a fledgling empire that had some influence in the Western Niger Delta. In the course of the four centuries in which the European trade with Africa blossomed, following the Portuguese arrival in the region, Benin expanded that influence into an important imperial foothold in the Western Niger Delta and the Niger basin. Benin therefore played a significant role in the development of the Niger Delta and Niger basin during the centuries of the European trade.

The primary purpose of this paper is to sort out the larger role played by Benin kingdom and its empire in the beginning phases of the evolution of the Atlantic World. I also seek to indicate that during the formation of the Atlantic World, new trading relationships and the exchange of cultural artifacts reshaped the indigenous cultures of Benin and the Western Niger Delta, prompting the emergence of common dress and food subcultures as a consequence of the region's participation in the development of the Atlantic World. Finally, I will assess how Benin's complex reaction to the Atlantic slave trade complicates the history of the Niger Delta.

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## What Is the Atlantic World?

Up until the 1440s, inhabitants of the Old World of Europe, Africa, and Asia knew very little of the populations and land masses beyond their respective spheres. Apart from the familiar lands of the old Roman Empire—which included North Africa, much of western Europe, and Asia Minor (that is, the region now called the Middle East)—not a great deal else of Africa or Asia was known to the Mediterranean<sup>2</sup> world. In the 1440s, sailors and navigators of the seafaring Iberian nation of Portugal began a series of explorations southward, from their Mediterranean neighborhood, into the turbulent Atlantic Ocean. These voyages eventually opened up sub-Saharan African regions of the Atlantic Ocean to European contacts in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. And in a daring venture, Christopher Columbus, an Italian who worked for the king of Spain, dashed westward into the unknown Atlantic, leading to his contact with lands in the Caribbean and in North and South America. The latter lands, opened up by the unexpected encounters of Christopher Columbus in 1492 and in later voyages, made up what western Europeans fondly named the New World.

For about five centuries, contacts among European nations of the North Atlantic, the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa in the Middle and South Atlantic, and the territories and peoples of the New World in the Western Atlantic led to a vast array of trade and other forms of exchange. These regimes of trade and exchange—which brought together the people and cultures of Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas, from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century—constitute the Atlantic World.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Mediterranean* is formed from two Latin words: *media*, “middle,” and *terra*, “earth.” For the ancient people of southern Europe, North Africa, and Asia Minor, the Mediterranean Sea was the middle of their world.

<sup>3</sup> Given its size and its variety of enabling cultures, the Atlantic World is inevitably seen from numerous perspectives. Thus, consider the following definition of the Atlantic World from an African American viewpoint: “What is the Atlantic World? An interrelated set of sustained human interaction mediated—with the assistance of developing technologies of transportation and communication—by the Atlantic Ocean. Or, to put it more simply, it is people encountering one another, on a regular basis, by traveling long distances by ship on the Atlantic Ocean. Out of these encounters, a new social world develops. New patterns of trade. New combinations of people. New social institutions. African-American religion is one of the new developments that gradually emerged in the early history of the Atlantic World.” (‘Atlantic World,’ *African-American Religion: A Documentary History Project*, 2003. [http://www3.amherst.edu/~aardoc/Atlantic\\_World.html](http://www3.amherst.edu/~aardoc/Atlantic_World.html).) For an early consideration of the Atlantic World that focuses on the role that Africans played in its evolution, see John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

In this huge segment of human history, the arrival of Portuguese sailors in the Western Niger Delta<sup>4</sup> may justifiably be considered the beginning point in the development of the Atlantic World. The Portuguese explorers took some four demanding decades to move along the African Atlantic coast from their northern abode, off the tip of North Africa, before they reached the Niger Delta in the African mid-Atlantic in the 1480s. That event was momentous for two important reasons that deserve a full statement.

First, the geography of the Niger Delta<sup>5</sup> was challenging to the Portuguese sailors; but it was also potentially rewarding to explorers in a seafaring age. Its abundant rivers, which flowed into the Atlantic, offered a sharp contrast to other regions on the northern and middle African Atlantic coasts that the Portuguese had visited. Second, the Western Niger Delta was the gateway to one of the prominent West African forest states, whose civilizations were hidden from the Arab Maghreb of North Africa and whose human populations were almost entirely unknown to western Europeans.<sup>6</sup> Immediately upon their arrival in the Niger Delta, the Portuguese made a point of searching out the famed kingdom of Benin, the headquarters of which lay inland some twenty treacherous miles from the Atlantic

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<sup>4</sup> The Western Niger Delta is a deltaic region of West Africa, mostly in the modern Delta State of Nigeria, which is drained by four main riverine tributaries of the River Niger—namely, Benin River, Escravos River, Forcados River, and Ramos River—that discharge their waters into the easternmost segment of the Bight of Benin in the Atlantic Ocean. Geographically, the Western Niger Delta has two subregions of (a) swampy Atlantic coast, originally covered by mangrove forests (with several harbors, including Benin’s historic port at Ughoton on the Benin River), and (b) higher grounds, originally covered by tropical rain forests through which the region’s numerous rivers, streams, and creeks flow. Ethnologically, the Western Niger Delta is peopled by Ijaw and Itsekiri in the Atlantic coastal region and by Ukwuani, Isoko, and Urhobo in the Western Niger Delta’s drier hinterland.

<sup>5</sup> The Niger Delta has two distinguishable regions: (a) the Western Niger Delta, whose rivers discharge their waters into the Bight of Benin, and (b) the Eastern Niger Delta, whose rivers drain into the Bight of Bonny (formerly known as the Bight of Biafra). The main rivers of the Eastern Niger Delta are Bonny, Imo, and Cross. Geographically and historically, Benin Kingdom and the Benin Empire were more closely related to the Western Niger Delta than to the Eastern.

<sup>6</sup> Before the arrival of the Portuguese in the Niger Delta, Europe’s knowledge of sub-Saharan Africa was extremely limited. Even after the Portuguese contact, European acquaintance with Africa was sketchy. Leo Africanus’s (1600) *Geographical Historie of Africa*, which was the most extensive documentation of the geography of Africa available in Europe, extended to Hausaland (see Thomas Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology*, London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 101–105) but not to more southern forest belt areas of West Africa, such as the Niger Delta. Note the following encyclopedia entry on Leo Africanus, originally named as Hasan al-Wazzan: “Leo Africanus (c. 1494–c. 1552) was a Berber traveller and geographer, born in the kingdom of Granada, southern Spain. He travelled extensively in northern and central Africa and Asia Minor (Turkey). While returning from Egypt he was captured at sea by Venetian pirates and taken to Rome, where he converted to Christianity [baptized as Leo] and lived for many years. His account of his journeys was published in Italian by Ramusio as *Descrittione dell’Africa* (1550; published in English as *A Geographical Historie of Africa* in 1600).”

coast.<sup>7</sup> From the beginning and for decades afterward, Benin's kings received the Portuguese with considerable enthusiasm in commercial and diplomatic matters but were reluctant about Portuguese attempts to convert them to the Christian religion.

Although the premier and motivating goal of the Portuguese voyages on the African Atlantic coast was to find a seaward route to India and Far East Asia, Portuguese sailors and navigators invested considerable resources and time in the waterways of the Niger Delta, once they arrived in its rivers. Their journeys in sub-Saharan Atlantic seas took them along the forested coasts, and in 1482 they arrived in Kongo, another well-organized kingdom whose king, baptized as João in 1491, proved much more accommodating to Portuguese Christian evangelization<sup>8</sup> than the kings of Benin had. The voyaging labors of the Portuguese took them to Angola and eventually to the end of Africa in whose southernmost tip, at which the Indian and Atlantic Oceans touch, they landed in 1488. This is the Cape of Good Hope, although the Portuguese captain of that voyage, Bartolomeu Dias, named it the Cape of Storms. In 1498, another captain, Vasco da Gama, successfully entered the Indian Ocean and went to India and East Asia.

Although the Portuguese thus moved far along the African Atlantic coast in a half century of pioneering voyages of discovery, the Niger Delta turned out to be one of the most important points of European contact in Africa. The value of the Niger Delta became greatly enhanced by a distant factor. Six or seven years after

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<sup>7</sup> The Portuguese were fully attracted to Benin's coastal port city of Ughoton and the City of Benin. Pereira's early description is instructive: "A league up this river [that is, Benin River, which Portuguese explorers had named Formoso] on the left two tributaries enter the main stream; if you ascend the second of these for twelve leagues you find a town called Huguatoo [Ughoton], of some 2,000 inhabitants; this is the harbour of the great City of Beny, which lies nine leagues in the interior with a good road [between them] . . . The city is about a league from gate to gate; it has no wall but it is surrounded by a large moat, very wide and deep, which suffices for its defence. I was there four times" (Pereira ca.1518: 123). Thomas Hodgkin corrects Pereira, saying: "Benin actually lies about twenty miles from Gwato." He also adds another explanatory footnote: "A Portuguese league is about 4 English statute miles." Thomas Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspective: An Historical Anthology*, 92 n.

<sup>8</sup> The following excerpt is from a chapter titled "The Diocese of São Salvador: Congo and Angola" "An embassy accompanied by Fr. João then went on to the Congo capital, later named São Salvador, which resulted in the baptism on 3 May 1491 of the [King] Mani-Congo, Nzinga Nkuwu, who took the name João, and later his wife, who took the name Leonor, after the king and queen of Portugal respectively. Shortly afterwards the King's son Mvemba Nainga, who was the Mani of Nsundi, was baptized and took the name Alfonso." See Joseph Kenny *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa, 1445-1850*: (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1983), 15.

the arrival of the Portuguese in the City of Benin, a Spanish voyage westward into the Atlantic struck land in 1492. Christopher Columbus's encounters with the Caribbean and the Americas opened up vast new territories of the New World. Soon, the Old World of Africa and Europe were joined with the New World of the Caribbean and the Americas in various forms of exchanges involving human beings and tropical raw products from Africa and industrial goods from western Europe. Exchange of tropical plants between Africa and the Americas was another remarkable development of this new era. Because the rivers of the Niger Delta were the gateway to a huge human population and because Niger Delta's tropical climate and vegetation were receptive to tropical plants from the Americas, this region of Africa became a pivotal point in the exchanges that helped to develop the Atlantic World.

These vast transatlantic contacts involving Benin and the Niger Delta may be divided into four phases. First was the initial but critical phase, from about 1486 to the turn of the century, in which Portugal cultivated the contacts that it had established in the Niger Delta. During this period, commercial and diplomatic interests were strongly pursued, particularly with the Kingdom of Benin. The Portuguese also emphasized their self-imposed obligations to evangelize, bringing Christianity to the region, with mixed results.

Second, once the New World was opened up by Spanish and Portuguese explorations, seafaring western European nations—including Holland, England, France, and others—entered into this new venture of trade in the three continents that lay in various regions of the Atlantic. The European trade in African, Caribbean, and American raw products, as well as European industrial goods, expanded rapidly. It then extended to the infamous Atlantic slave trade, in which captive Africans were shipped to the Caribbean and the Americas. This phase of the development of the Atlantic World spanned from the beginning decades of the sixteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. The Niger Delta was central to this development of the Atlantic World. This phase also included the exchange of agricultural plants in which the Niger Delta received a number of plants from the Americas.

A third phase was opened up with the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and the thinning down of trade between the Americas and the Niger Delta. From about the middle of the nineteenth century to the late 1880s, western European

nations (especially Great Britain, which had suppressed the Atlantic slave trade) opened up an active regime of so-called legitimate trade with West Africa. The emphasis in this phase was the expansion of the region's raw products, which England and other western European nations needed for the consolidation of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>9</sup> The Niger Delta was a primary corridor for this trade in African raw products, a sizable portion of which came from its hinterland.

Finally, fourthly, from the beginning of the 1890s, following the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 and in the course of the so-called European Scramble for Africa, Great Britain conquered and colonized the Niger Delta, first as Niger Coast Protectorate (1891–1900), then as part of the British Protectorate of Southern Nigeria (1900–1914), and finally as part of the British Protectorate of Nigeria (1914–1960).

Each of these four phases of the involvement of the Niger Delta with the development of the Atlantic World had shades of momentous impact on the history, cultures, societies, and natural vegetation of the Niger Delta. All four phases of the Niger Delta's involvement with the Atlantic World—spanning almost five centuries, from the 1480s to the middle decades of the twentieth century—resulted in a transformation of the Niger Delta. These changes endowed the region with a common cultural profile that is remarkably distinct from the rest of West African societies and cultures, which experienced the European contact differently than did the Niger Delta.

## **Benin's Pivotal Role in the Early Phases of the Atlantic World**

The beginnings of Portuguese-Benin relations in about 1486<sup>10</sup> predated the ventures of the flotilla led by Christopher Columbus<sup>11</sup> that brought the lands of the

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<sup>9</sup> Caribbean scholar Eric Williams argues in his classic *Capitalism and Slavery* that the British campaign to abolish the Atlantic slave trade was calculated primarily to maintain the availability of West African raw products for British industries. Williams asserts that although the slave trade had helped to create mercantile capitalism, the profits of which had helped to develop industrial capitalism, the trade in humans threatened the source and producers of raw products in tropical West Africa. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1944).

<sup>10</sup> See Deborah Vess's interesting note: "Primary sources suggest various possibilities for the date of the Portuguese arrival in Benin. Deborah Vess 'The Mudfish and the European: An African Record on the Age of Discovery' *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 22:2 (1997), 80. Antonio Galvão claims that Ruy de Sequeira first reached Benin in 1472(Antonio Galvão's *Tratado dos descobrimentos* (Porto, 1944), while

Americas under the purview of the Atlantic World in 1492. When Portuguese explorers arrived in the African mid-Atlantic, in the region of the Niger Delta in the 1480s, they needed to contact an organized power that would serve as an anchor in the complicated Niger Delta. It so happened that Benin had reorganized its affairs some forty years before the arrival of the Portuguese explorers. Benin was sufficiently attractive to the newcomers to enable the Portuguese explorers to breach their customary adherence to coastal harbors in the Niger Delta and to risk going inland to meet the king of Benin. They were well received, resulting in tales of the new African kingdom spreading far and wide in a curious Europe, eager to learn about unfamiliar lands.<sup>12</sup>

The Portuguese had two missions in their search for an African partner in upper mid-Atlantic Africa. First, they needed tropical African products that they would exchange for European wares. The most valuable of these was pepper, which the Portuguese called *de rabo*.<sup>13</sup> This food item turned out to be enormously popular in Europe and initially served as a satisfactory form of spice, which had prompted Europeans' craving for commerce with India. The Portuguese experimented with other food and agricultural items, and they (Portuguese traders) had a great deal of fascination with Benin objects of decoration as well. Ivory wares, which were fashioned from elephant tusks, were trendy in well-to-do circles of Europe in that age. Benin carvings became a staple of aristocratic possessions in affluent segments of western Europe.<sup>14</sup>

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Chief Egharevba's record of the oral tradition of Benin, found in *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1960) 18, states only that de Sequeira reached the general vicinity of Benin. Ruy De Pina's *Chronica del Rey Dom Joao II*, trans. J. W. Blake, in *Europeans in West Africa* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1942) and João de Barros's *Da Asia*, trans. G. R. Crone, in *Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1937), 124–125 and Thomas Hodgkin, assert that João Affonso d'Aveiro's journey to the court of Benin in 1486 was the first visit of the Portuguese to Benin." Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives*, 112–113.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Kenny reports (from *Monumenta Missionaria Africana*, ed. Brasio, Vol. 1, 1952, 49) that in 1485, Christopher Columbus visited the Portuguese fort at Elmina in West Africa (situated in what is now Ghana). Kenny, *The Catholic Church in Africa*, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Olfert Dapper, *Description of Benin: 1688*, Adam Jones ed., (Madison: African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> See the following interesting entry on the reception of Benin pepper in Europe in the 1480s: "This emissary of the king of Beny came with João Affonso d'Aveiro, who had been sent to explore this coast by the King [of Portugal], and who brought back the first pepper from these parts of Guinea to the Kingdom. This pepper is called by us *de rabo* (long tailed) because the stem on which it grows comes away with it to distinguish it from that obtained from India. The King sent some to Flanders, but it was never held in as high esteem as the Indian." G. R. Crone, *The Voyages of Cadamosto*, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1937), 124.

<sup>14</sup> Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992).

Commercially, Benin profited handsomely from these initial contacts with the Portuguese. The opportunity to export various agricultural goods dramatically expanded Benin's economy, which was further strengthened by a variety of European imports, such as iron bars that enhanced its manufacturing base. This commercial relationship between Portugal and Benin was the prime work and commitment of Affonso d'Aveiro, the Portuguese pioneer in commerce in the Western Niger Delta. In matters of commerce—that is, in the realm of the Portuguese premier mission in Atlantic Africa—Benin initially served well as the pivotal headquarters of the Portuguese presence in the Western Niger Delta.<sup>15</sup>

However, Portugal's second mission in Benin was at odds with its first mission and eventually proved deadly to the new enterprise of international relations between Benin and the first Europeans who reached West Africa. The Portuguese insisted that Christian evangelization must grow along with commerce. Otherwise, Portugal regarded any commercial advances a failure, no matter how economically profitable they might have been. What complicated this second mission was the further insistence that its measure of success was the conversion of the king of the realm. In the case of Benin, the Portuguese were not satisfied with the conversion of lower chieftains. They wanted the king (Oba) to become a Christian king and to be baptized as a converted Catholic with a Portuguese name, as indeed the king of Kongo was so baptized as João and his son as Alfonso in 1491. Frustration soon set in as layers of protective bureaucracy and aristocracy blocked Portuguese missionaries from making contact with the king of Benin, who appeared willing to be available to the Portuguese only in matters of commerce.

The late Father Joseph Kenny of the University of Ibadan, who studied this area of Benin-Portuguese relations in great detail, tells us that these differences were ultimately irreconcilable, leading to the collapse of valuable international

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<sup>15</sup> See the following ancient entry on Benin-Portuguese commercial relations: "In this year [1486] the land of Benin beyond Mina in the Rios dos Escravos was first discovered by Joham Affom da Aveiro, who died there. The first Guinee pepper came to Europe from that land, where it grows in great abundance. Samples of it were sent to Flanders and other places, and it was soon popular and selling for a high price . . . New commercial agents of King João [of Portugal] went with the [Benin] ambassador to reside in that land and buy pepper and other things of interest to the King's business. But because the land was later found to be very dangerous from sickness and not so profitable as had been hoped, the trade was abandoned." From Ruy de Pina, *Discovery of Benin*—Tr. J. W. Blake, *Europeans in West Africa*, Vol. 1 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1942), 78–79.

relations in 1539. Before then, other European nations had picked up the trail of commercial transactions with Benin without the Christian missionary component that the Portuguese demanded. In the course of the relationship between Benin and Portugal that spanned more than fifty years (1486–1539), a great deal had transpired in other areas of Benin culture and society that deserve to be analyzed.

## Impact of Portuguese-Benin Relations on Benin and Edoid<sup>16</sup> High Culture

A central point of view of this paper is that the Portuguese contact helped Benin to expand its fledging realm of the fifteenth century into a buoyant kingdom and empire of later centuries. In fact, the institution of kingship appropriated considerable mystique and power from the Portuguese contact and from Portugal's management of Benin's high culture.<sup>17</sup> That is to say, Benin's royal institutions took advantage of the opportunities and resources offered by Benin's European trading partners not only to grow but also to consolidate the king's power. This means, of course, that Benin royal institutions were already mature before the arrival of the Portuguese and were sophisticated enough to bend the new opportunities to the king's advantage.

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<sup>16</sup> See the following definition of *Edoid* in Peter P. Ekeh et al. *Olomu and Development of Urhoboland and West Niger-Delta: Ancient and Modern Versions* (Lagos: Urhobo Historical Society, 2012), 16. "Edoid" is a term coined in linguistics to group together some twenty-five languages of southernmost-western Nigeria which are similar in their word forms, sounds and meanings, although they are mutually unintelligible (see Ben O. Elugbe "A Comparative Edo Phonology" Doctoral Thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1973, Ben O. Elugbe, Ben O. Elugbe, 'Some Tentative Historical Inferences from Comparative Edoid Studies' *Kiabara: Journal of Humanities*, 2 (Rain 1979) and Ben O. Elugbe, "Edoid" in John Bendor-Samuel (ed.) *The Niger-Congo Languages* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989). Its two most influential and largest members are Benin and Urhobo languages. It is entirely possible that Benin and Urhobo are also the oldest members of the Edoid family of languages, having been estimated to have separated from Proto-Edoid and from each other about 2000 years ago [thus see Kay Williamson, *Linguistic Evidence for the Pre-history of the Niger-Delta* *Mimeo*, 1979; also see Ben O. Elugbe, 'Some Tentative Historical Inferences from Comparative Edoid Studies', R.G. Armstrong, *The Study of West African Languages* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1964), 12–13, and Onigu Otite, *The Urhobo People*, (Ibadan: C.I. Shaneson Ltd, 2003), 30. Ben Elugbe (1973) has grouped members of the Edoid languages (now dominant in the whole of Edo State, all of Urhobo and Isoko local governments in Delta State, and two communities in Rivers State) into four clusters: (a) Northwestern: ten languages; (b) North-Central: Benin, Ishan and 11 other languages; (c) Southwestern: Urhobo, Isoko, Erohwa, Okpe, Uvwie; and (d) Delta: Degema, Epie, Egene (Engenni)." Ben O. Elugbe "A Comparative Edo Phonology" Doctoral Thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1972.

<sup>17</sup> Thus see "Although the Oba struggled to assert his authority over the palace and village chiefs in the early days after the fall of the Rulers of the Sky, the arrival of the Portuguese and the wealth they brought helped to consolidate his power to form a stronger centralized state" Vess, 'The Mudfish and the European', 88.

Nowhere is such gain by royal institutions clearer than in the Portuguese exportation of coral beads to Benin, probably quite early in Benin-Portuguese relations in the late fifteenth century. Coral used to make beads are mined from the sea—predominantly in the Mediterranean in those centuries—in an occupation and locale that were not available to Africans. Commercial gold<sup>18</sup> was probably brought to Benin kingdom by the Portuguese at the same time as coral beads were introduced into Benin culture. However, gold was not monopolized nor ritualized in the way that coral beads were absorbed into royal practices. Coral beads became an emblem of high culture, which the kings of Benin presided over in several ways. First, the elaborate royal paraphernalia consisting of fine coral beads has become a unique hallmark of Benin royalty.<sup>19</sup> Second, by controlling and monopolizing the aristocratic use of coral beads, the kings of Benin have defined the boundaries and ethics of Benin's high culture.<sup>20</sup>

The use of beads for demarcating aristocratic distinctions was ancient in the West African cultural region and might have even been practiced in some form in ancient Benin before the arrival of the Portuguese. Ogundiran claims its widespread practice in ancient Yorubaland, with which Benin had some cultural ties, thus:

The use of bone, shell, metal, and other beads has a very long history in West Africa, reaching far back to about 6,000 years ago. Direct archaeological evidence for the use of certain exotic stone and glass beads as status objects in Yorubaland date only to ca. 800–1000 A.D.,

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<sup>18</sup> The probability that gold was among early Portuguese imports to the Kingdom of Benin is suggested from the linguistic fact that gold bears a common name in the Portuguese and Benin languages. The term for gold in Benin, Urhobo, and several other languages in the Edoid complex of cultures is *oro*, which is also the Portuguese (and Spanish) word for “gold,” although modern Portuguese has *ouro* for “gold.” Gold was most probably introduced into these cultures from Portugal through Benin, early in Benin-Portuguese relations.

<sup>19</sup> Thus, consider Ben-Amos's views on this point: “The abundance of coral regalia [in the king's treasury] reflects the fact that these beads are the defining mark of Benin kingship. When the right of succession is in dispute, it is the possession of the coral beads (as well as other royal relics) that can determine who ultimately sits on the throne. These beads are not viewed as merely ornamental, but are considered to have effective power (*ase*), that is, the power to have any vow or curse to come to pass. Wearing of these beads is a crucial component of what gives an Oba divine powers.” Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, *Art Innovation and Politics in Eighteenth Century Benin* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 83.

<sup>20</sup> Thus compare the following description offered by Vess: “Even the coral beads brought by the Portuguese increased the mystique surrounding the Oba. Although legend traces the coral bead costume of the Oba to Ife, it was the Oba Ewuare who introduced the costume in the fifteenth century. The coral beads brought by the Portuguese contributed to this custom, and the Oba still wears the coral bead regalia in the annual rites. The Oba controlled all crafts and trade, and he alone owned all coral and stone beads in Benin. The Oba distributed them to titleholders and chiefs, whose heirs returned them to the Oba upon the recipient's death. The Portuguese also brought hats to Benin, which became part of the court regalia.” Vess, “The Mudfish and the European”, 88.

with the emergence of a new form of political system in Ile-Ife . . . This institution later reached its maturation and was adopted in different parts of Yoruba region during the thirteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

Whatever cultural exposure and experience Benin might have had with the use of beads as aristocratic symbols, the Portuguese arrival in Benin kingdom and the resulting inflow of precious coral beads, in enough quantity and in glaringly high quality, enabled the kings of Benin to seek their control. The kings' success in so doing was clearly one of the highest points of the redefinition of Benin's high culture that resulted from Benin kingdom's encounter with the Portuguese and other Europeans in the making of the Atlantic World.

In the course of centuries, such ritualization of coral beads has spread from Benin to other Edoid cultures. Three points of definition and clarification on the spread of coral beads need to be made. First, a common term, *ivie*, is applied to such coral beads in these Edoid cultures. Second, coral beads come in two grades: (a) the popular *ivie*, which are pink and red, and (b) the aristocratic grade (*ekan* in Benin, *aghigho* in Urhobo), which are ruby red. Use of the popular *ivie* is now widespread among those who can afford it as part of appropriate dressing for important occasions. The source of *ivie* importation is no longer limited to the Mediterranean; a good amount of the coral beads that come to Edoid cultures are from the Indian Ocean and the Sea of Japan. What is remarkable is that the use of the more refined ruby-red *ekan/aghigho* is still restricted to aristocratic circles. Those who do not bear a title conferred by a king are not allowed to wear them. The central point, though, is that both types of coral beads—the popular *ivie* and the more aristocratic *ekan/aghigho*, harvested from seas far removed from Benin and Edoid lands—have become domesticated and are now essential elements of popular as well as aristocratic dressing modes and fashions in Benin and large segments of the Western Niger Delta.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Akinwumi Ogundiran "Of Small Things Remembered: Beads, Cowries and Cultural translations in Yorubaland," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 32:2/3 (2002), 432.

<sup>22</sup> Prince Ademola Iyi-Eweka, who is a serious student of Benin royal practices, adds the following informative remarks: "The use of *Ivie* and *Ekan* is controlled by the Oba of Benin. There are some shapes [of these precious beads that] you cannot wear without being a chief. Corals beads used in Edo speaking areas are very different from those got from the North of Nigeria, in Yoruba land and the Eastern part of Nigeria" (see Ademola Iyi-Eweka "*Ivie* and *Ekan*" <http://www.edofolks.com/html/pub8.htm>).

## Was There a Portuguese-Benin Military Alliance?

Such benefits as did accrue to Benin institutions, particularly institutions controlled by the kings of Benin, in the course of Benin-Portuguese relations were indirect rather than direct. In other words, the Portuguese did not participate directly in Benin institutions, nor did they direct Benin affairs. Contrary to this interpretation of Benin-Portuguese relations is the view of a number of Benin scholars who have recently added another layer of interpretation suggesting that there was indeed direct Portuguese participation in Benin public affairs. It appears to me that several Benin historians have exaggerated a supposed alliance between Benin and Portugal well beyond what the written Portuguese records can bear. For instance, Ademola Iyi-Eweka makes far-reaching claims about what Benin achieved as a result of an alleged military alliance with the Portuguese in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. First, in the introduction to his essay “Benin (Edo) Influence before the British Invasion”, Iyi-Eweka virtually credits the Portuguese with motivating Benin’s foreign policy, at least with regard to Benin’s establishment of Eko, that is, Lagos:

According to Benin/Edo history recorded in artifacts . . . songs and stories, Lagos (EKO) was established as a WAR CAMP by Oba ORHOGBUA in the 1500’s . . . Oba Orhogbua had been trained in Portugal in one of their naval schools. He understood the power of navigation and sea power, because Portuguese power was based on naval power then. On his assumption to the throne, he organised either independently or with the help of the Portuguese, an expedition to establish control over the present day coastline of Nigeria about 600 years ago—extending from Togo, the present day Republic of Benin down to the borders of modern Gabon. He signed treaties of friendship with many of the local rulers. Garrisons made of Edo/Benin soldiers were established.<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere, Iyi-Eweka makes a more direct claim of Benin’s military alliance with the Portuguese: “about 1500’s A.D. Idah soldiers invaded Benin City. Oba Esigie and his queen mother IDIA led the Edo soldiers to victory. The Portuguese soldiers fought on the side of Benin”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ademola Iyi-Eweka “Benin (Edo) influence before the British invasion”

<http://www.edo-nation.net/beneko.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Ademola Iyi-Eweka “Ivie and Ekan”

Even more seemingly compelling is the recent support given to this point of oral tradition by Osarhieme Benson Osadolor. In his impressive doctoral thesis on Benin kingdom's military systems, Osadolor (2001) tells us that he relied on credible living informants in adopting a folk view that is widespread in Benin elite society; this view holds that the kings of Benin recruited Portuguese mercenary soldiers to help win a foreign war against Idah and a domestic civil war against Udo, wars that were fought almost five centuries ago.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Osadolor goes on to affirm that there was indeed contemporaneous documentary evidence supporting this oral tradition:

During the field work for this research, my informants gave evidence of the use of Portuguese visitors by Oba Esigie in his wars. The evidence of Duarte Pires in his report published in 1516 and Alessandro Zorzi confirm Portuguese military assistance to Oba Esigie in his wars against Idah and Udo. This Portuguese military assistance was also documented in Benin art works, as evidence that gives insight into the lives of the Benin people. Other information from European travellers' accounts dealing with the seventeenth to the nineteenth century add some evidence to Benin oral traditions that suggest their trustworthiness.<sup>26</sup>

Osadolor repeats this conventional point of view throughout his dissertation.<sup>27</sup> A pungent footnote on this point is worth quoting: "Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, a Consultant Surgeon and local historian of Benin, interviewed in Benin City on 20 June, 1993 suggests that although Oba Esigie was a warrior king, he was preoccupied with establishing diplomatic relations with the Portuguese. He further suggests that the Benin-Idah War influenced the military ideas of Oba Esigie."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The original statement to the effect that Portuguese accompanied Oba Esigie to the Idah War was made by Jacob Egharevba and his key sentence on this point is this: "The Missionaries went with Esigie to the Idah war which took place in 1515–1516." Egharevba's statement has become an immutable "historical fact" in Benin historiography, although it is contradicted by evidence from Portuguese records on three accounts: (i) The priests who were sent to wartime Benin in 1515 were received by Oba Ozolua, who stayed with them during the war, probably at Idah. (ii) Esigie did not ascend the throne until 1516, following the death of Oba Ozolua. (iii) When Esigie ascended the throne in 1516, the Portuguese thought he was underage and claimed that "the boy Oba" was being guided by military officers who were running the affairs of the nation on his behalf. The Portuguese did not report that Esigie was accompanied to Idah by any Portuguese personnel, clerical or military. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Osarieme B. Osadolor, "The Military System of Benin Kingdom, 1440-1897" Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, University of Hamburg, Germany, 2001, 36–37.

<sup>27</sup> Osadolor, "The Military System of Benin Kingdom, 1440-1897", 87, 92, 114, and 117.

<sup>28</sup> Osadolor, "The Military System of Benin Kingdom, 1440-1897 1, 92.

There are good reasons—important to the integrity of Benin historiography and of great significance for a comparative study of Portuguese behaviors in Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—why these claims of Portuguese participation in Benin domestic and foreign affairs should be closely examined. First, many of these claims are not supported by available Portuguese contemporaneous records. The most-cited evidence of Portuguese participation in the Idah War was a wartime letter written by the Portuguese representative in Benin, Duarte Pires, dated October 20, 1516, to the king of Portugal, his employer. The letter is reproduced in full by Thomas Hodgkin's *Nigerian Perspectives* and the letter's relevant sentences touching on the urgency of the Idah War for Oba Esigie, the reigning king, were as follows:

“When these priests [whom the king of Portugal sent to Benin] arrived the delight of the king of Benin was so great that I do not know how to describe it, and likewise that of his people; and he sent for them at once and they remained with him for one whole year in war. The priests and we reminded him of the embassy of your highness [a message concerning the need for the king of Benin's conversion by way of Christian baptism], he replied to us that he was very satisfied with it; but since he was at war, that he would do nothing until he returned to Benin, because he needed leisure for such a deep mystery as this” (Duarte Pires to King Manuel [of Portugal] on reaction of Oba to mission 1516).<sup>29</sup>

Nothing in the text or context of the letter from the Portuguese ambassador to his king suggests that the skeletal Portuguese personnel at the Portuguese ambassador's disposal were assisting Benin in military matters. (please see Kenny, 1983:46 for his description of the three missionaries whom the King of Portugal sent to Benin). It would be reckless scholarship to surmise from the ambassador's letter that the presence of three Portuguese priests with the king of Benin at Idah amounted to military assistance from Portugal. The facts speak for themselves: Portugal had sent the priests to instruct the king of Benin in matters of the Christian faith. On arrival at Benin City, they discovered that the king was at Idah. The king requested that the priests come to him at his location in Idah, and that was what happened. It is noteworthy that the deployment of Portuguese military personnel or even clergy in the theaters of war elsewhere in Africa in the

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<sup>29</sup>Hodgkins, *Nigerian Perspectives*, 99-100.

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—in Kongo, Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia—was always carefully documented, sometimes celebrated.<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, Portuguese documents on this subject would seem to deny the premise of any military alliance between Benin and Portugal. In his letter dated November 20, 1514, King Manuel of Portugal told Oba Ozolua, king of Benin, his reason for agreeing to send the priests that Benin requested and his grounds for rejecting the king of Benin's requests for arms from Portugal:

Therefore with much good will we send you the priests that you sent for. They are bringing all the things that are necessary to teach you and your people the knowledge of our Faith. We hope that our Lord will give you his grace to understand it and be saved by it for the things of this world all pass away, while those of the other world last forever. I urge you strongly to continue to receive the teachings of the Faith of Christians, as we count on you to do as a king who is our dear friend. For when we see that in the affairs of Christianity you act as a good and faithful Christian, there is nothing in our realms that we will not continue to put at your disposition, whether arms or canons or other instruments of war against your enemies, since we have so many such things, as your ambassador Dom Jorge will tell you. We are not sending them now, although he requested them, because the law of God forbids giving them as long as you are [an unbeliever].<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the most detailed account of Benin-Portuguese relations in existence is that provided by the Dominican priest who taught and researched for decades in the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Ibadan. Relying on written documents, but also including sources from Jacob Egharevba's *Short History of Benin*, Kenny<sup>32</sup> writes of Benin-Portuguese relations at the time of Benin's war with Idah as follows:

João Afonso de Aveiro died at Gwato before 1504, but commerce continued and in 1514 Benin sent to Lisbon two ambassadors bearing the

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<sup>30</sup> (Thus, compare Girma Beshah and Merid Wolde Aregay, *The Question of the union of Churches in Luso-Ethiopian Relations, 1500-1630*, (Lisbon: Junta de Investigações de Ultramar, 1964) and Eric Axelson, *Portuguese in South-East Africa*, (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1960); and David Birmingham, *Trade and Conquest in Angola*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Kenny, *The Catholic Church in Nigeria: A Documentary History* 2001, <http://www.dhspriory.org/kenny/DHdefault.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> It is striking that Joseph Kenny's thoroughgoing documentation of Portuguese-Benin relationships has not attracted the attention of scholars of Benin history. He is not even mentioned in Charles Gore's formidable bibliography on Benin studies. What Kenny's analysis uniquely offers is a comparative perspective that allows us to examine Portuguese behavior in other African nations at the same time as they were engaged with Benin.

Portuguese names Jorge Correa and António. A third ambassador, Pero Barroso, was sent the next year. Their request for arms was turned down because the Oba was not a Christian, but their request for priests was granted. The Oba was in fact at war with Idah and must have been disappointed that the Portuguese representative Duarte Pires brought only priests and no arms [italics added]. These priests, the first we know of to have reached Benin, arrived in August 1515. They were received royally and, contrary to custom, allowed to see every part of the Oba's palace and to dine with his son. As for the faith, the Oba said he needed time to think about such a "deep mystery"; moreover he was occupied with the [Idah] war and could not do anything until he returned. In August 1516, during a lull in the war, the Oba had a church built and allowed his son and some other prominent men to become Christian. The priest also taught them to read Portuguese.<sup>33</sup>

The documentary evidence as well as Kenny's narration cast severe doubt on any possibility of a Portuguese-Benin military or political alliance, especially in the matter of the war between Benin and Idah. Kenny's close reconstruction of documents on Benin-Portuguese relations reveals to us that the most active years were between 1514 and 1539. It seems clear from Kenny's narration that as commerce between Benin and Portugal grew, so did suspicions of each other. Especially dubious was Portugal's insistence that the king of Benin must become a baptized Christian, as was the cautious approach of Oba Ozolua and Oba Esigie to Portugal's invitation to them to become Christian monarchs, obviously under the requirement that they would bear Portuguese names and be subject to tutelage of Portuguese priests. By mid-century, Portugal had turned away from Benin as its primary partner in the Niger Delta, and Benin had found new European trading partners in France and Holland as well as other European nations who, unlike the Portuguese, were not insistent on religious matters. With respect to the claim that a king of Benin was trained in a naval school in Portugal, this important "fact" of history must have escaped the eagle-eyed Dominican priest. Kenny has reported on various Africans, especially from Kongo and Angola, who were trained in Portuguese schools in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Indeed, Kenny) gives a detailed report on the Itsekiri prince, from the Western Niger Delta in Benin's neighborhood, who was taken to Portugal for training.<sup>34</sup> As far as I can see, there is no mention of the training of the king of

<sup>33</sup> Kenny, *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa, 1445-1850*, 45-46.

<sup>34</sup> Kenny, *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa, 1445-1850*, 48-49.

Benin in Portugal's naval schools in Kenny's substantial reporting on Benin-Portuguese relations.

Because Oba Esigie has been so clearly mentioned as a promoter of diplomatic relations with the Portuguese by those who espouse the notion of special Portuguese-Benin relationships, it is important to report here what the Portuguese records say about Oba Ozolua and Oba Esigie, the two Benin kings who prosecuted the war with Idah and the domestic civil conflict with Udo. Kenny notes the following:

By August 1517 the first group of priests, referred to as clerigos (diocesan priests) in the letters of King Manuel but called padres (religious) by Duarte Pires, had left Benin and Oba Ozolua was dead, possibly killed in the war. Some army officers were running the country on behalf of the boy Oba named Esigie. Although he may have been the same as the former Oba's son who was baptized the previous year, a new group of priests left Sao Tomé for Benin at this time "to make the king Christian." The group consisted of "Friar" Diogo Belo, vicar of the island of Sao Tomé (possibly an Augustinian), and three other priests, one of them named Jerónimo Pires, a chaplain at Sao Tomé, and another named Jeanes, a "cleric" who had come from Benin.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this beefing up of the clerical aspect of Portugal's mission in Benin, Benin-Portuguese relations were headed for rough waters under King Esigie.<sup>36</sup> By 1539, the relations between the two nations had so deteriorated that three Portuguese missionaries in Benin pleaded with the king of Portugal for help because they were under house arrest on the orders of the king of Benin.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Kenny, *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa, 1445-1850*, 46.

<sup>36</sup> The year of Esigie's ascension to the throne has been the subject of some misunderstanding. Egharevba (*A Short History of Benin*, 27) originally set it at 1504. Like many dates suggested by Egharevba, that date has stuck, despite A.F.C. Ryder's (*Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897*, New York: Humanities Press, 1969) 50 correction of the year of Esigie's ascension to the throne as 1516, and not 1504. Portuguese records claim that they were dealing with Oba Ozolua until 1516 but that by 1517, the "boy King" (Esigie) had succeeded his father. If the Portuguese records are correct, then the Idah War broke out under the reign of Oba Ozolua. From the deferential references to the king of Benin in the text of Duarte Pires's letter of 1516, and from the nasty text of the complaining letter of 1539 from the two Franciscan priests Antonio and Francisco (who claimed to be under house arrest), it seems clear that the Portuguese were much more at ease with what they regarded as the seasoned high diplomacy of Oba Ozolua than with the perceived high-handed manners of a youthful Oba Esigie, whom the two priests accused of contemptuously casting aside the king of Portugal's letter because it was not accompanied by the customary gifts (see Kenny *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa*, 46-47; the letters are reproduced in Joseph Kenny, *The Catholic Church in Nigeria: A Documentary History* 2001, <http://www.dhspriory.org/kenny/DHdefault.htm>).

<sup>37</sup> Before the collapse of Benin-Portuguese relations in 1539, the affected missionaries wrote to the king of Portugal as follows: "He [the king of Benin] did not receive us with much satisfaction . . . The favour that your Highness did in sending him your letter . . . he did not receive as he should have, but threw it into a basket or box which he had on his left and did not open it until three months later, and he then called us. He

There is a second reason—beyond the internal demands of Benin historiography—why assertions of direct Portuguese help to Benin should be closely questioned. The claim by Iyi-Eweka and Osadolor of good relations, allowing military alliances, between Benin and Portugal presumes that Portugal had a good or decent record in dealing with African nations that it came in contact with in the centuries of its operations in Africa. On the contrary, Portugal had abusive relationships with other African nations in the same years it was dealing with Benin. In Kongo, King Nzinga a Nkuwu yielded to Portuguese pressure in 1491 as he, his wife, and his son were baptized with Portuguese names. The name of the capital of Kongo was changed to São Salvador, in honor of a Portuguese patron saint. The result of Kongo’s interaction with the Portuguese was that the king of Kongo and his descendants lost control of their affairs as Portuguese-empowered slave trade ravaged their once-thriving state and empire.<sup>38</sup>

The fate of Angola was much worse than that of Kongo. Like the Oba of Benin, the Ngola (king) of Angola had resisted Portuguese pressures for conversion (from the 1520s to 1560). This diplomatic standoff involved many of the kings of Angola who feared that they would be reduced to mere vassals as the

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keeps us under guard as guests in houses of gentiles with many idols and fetishes, where all pass over us night and day. Because of the many disturbances, noise and lack of peace we cannot recite our daily office. All we had has been stolen and we have been badly treated and insulted by his men . . . Since the said Fathers request of your Highness, by the wounds of Christ, to help them and to send an armada . . . to rescue us from here, or by way of the island, if it can be done faster, since we are afraid”(Missionaries to João III, 1539 Cited in Kenny, *The Catholic Church in Nigeria: A Documentary History* 2001 <http://www.dhspriory.org/kenny/DH01E.htm>. Available on 04/11/2015).

<sup>38</sup> John Thornton has characterized the view represented here of the subversion and ruination of Kongo kingdom and its empire by Portuguese alliances and relationships as “one of the most durable myths of the history of central Africa” John Thornton, ‘Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation’ (1981) 8 *History in Africa: A Journal of Methods*, 183. Thornton blames the invention of this “myth” on the influential works of James Duffy (*Portuguese Africa*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 49–58) and Basil Davidson (*Black Mother: Years of the African Slave Trade*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1961), 116–150), whom he accuses of mistakenly superimposing, retrospectively, bad Portuguese colonial policies of later centuries on Portuguese good intentions of the fifteenth century. Thornton clearly favors the “Africanist” views of Jan Vansina (*Kingdoms of the Savanna*, (Madison, WI: Wisconsin University Press, 1965), 37–70) and David Birmingham (*Trade and Conquest in Angola*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 23–32), who contend in their works that Kongo was still intact when the Portuguese left it for Angola. Remarkably, Thornton belittles the significance and the cultural impact of changing titles of a nation’s royal institutions. Thornton, Vansina, and Birmingham do not seem to grasp the essential truth that the imposition of alien royal titles and the change of the name of a nation’s capital to the name of an alien Portuguese patron saint were acts of great cultural violence that were liable to bear ill consequences. Add to these the fact that what Kongo kingdom gained in return was the slave trade. Yes, at the very least, the Portuguese sowed the seeds of Kongo’s destruction.

kings of Kongo had. Tired of verbal persuasion, Portuguese Jesuit priests throughout the 1560s recommended a policy of “conquest before conversion.” In 1575, Portugal invaded Angola and encountered no resistance from the Ngola. The consequence was terrifying. As Kenny (1983: 19) presents it in his heavily documented report, after about two years, the same Jesuit priests who had recommended conquest were complaining bitterly about its consequences:

The same Jesuit was writing that the colonial government was fatal for evangelization, that the Portuguese were becoming more violent and in one year they had killed 4,000 and enslaved 14,000 . . . In Angola the Portuguese not only bought slaves but also made war and captured their own slaves on a vast scale and turned them into an international medium of exchange, since the property of Portuguese who died in Angola was sold for slaves who were then sent to Brazil to be resold as compensation for the heirs.<sup>39</sup>

In East Africa, beyond the Atlantic coast, the records of Portuguese relations with established African nations were no less horrendous. The following entry by Kenny about the Portuguese in Mozambique describes typical Portuguese behavior in the region:

In 1571 the Portuguese sent an expedition to Mwanamutapa to avenge the death of Fr. Gonçalo and capture the gold mines, but the soldiers had to turn back because of hunger and sickness. Some Jesuits who accompanied this expedition found the people whom their predecessors had baptized completely disinterested in Christianity. In 1573 the Portuguese succeeded in extracting from King Nogomo of Mwanamutapa the concession of a number of gold mines and possession of a strip of territory on the south bank of the Zambezi from Tete to the ocean. More and more Portuguese settlers came to take advantage of African land, resources and labour.<sup>40</sup>

Farther to the north, the Portuguese loss of Ethiopian friendship reveals a great deal about their difficulties with Africans. The Portuguese had established relations with the Ethiopians, having commendably helped them with military assistance against invading Arab Muslims. But the Portuguese were not satisfied with the tenets of age-old Ethiopian Christianity, and they insisted that Ethiopia should change to Portuguese-style Christianity. Kenny summarizes well: “In 1634

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<sup>39</sup> For more information and different perspectives on Portugal’s colonization of Angola, see Davidson *Black Mother: Years of the African Slave Trade*, Thornton ‘Early Kongo-Portuguese Relations: A New Interpretation’, and Birmingham, *Trade and Conquest in Angola*.

<sup>40</sup> Kenny, *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa*, 8–9.

relations were broken with Portugal, the Jesuits were expelled, and the Ethiopians sought the help of Muslim powers to keep the Portuguese out. For 100 years the Portuguese had searched for the legendary Prester John, for 100 years they tried to convert him, then separated in failure.”<sup>41</sup>

The above comparative notes are both relevant and significant to the evaluation of Benin’s conduct in its half-century relationship with Portugal at a key point in the development of the Atlantic World. Unlike the other established African states and empires with which Portugal had relationships in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, Benin emerged stronger at the end of its relations with the Portuguese. Benin did so by profiting from the commerce that the Portuguese brought with them while being cautious about Portuguese intentions of religious evangelization and the colonial subjugation that came with it. Benin kings did not have to give up their names for Portuguese ones that came with baptism. Unlike Kongo, which changed the name of its capital city to São Salvador in order to accommodate Portuguese desires, Benin retained its old names of Edo and Benin City. It is fair to credit these achievements to the Benin leadership during these testy decades. It is unfair to attribute them to military and political alliance with Portugal, which in any case the kings of Benin adroitly avoided.

Paradoxically, the Portuguese had more success with the African nations occurred with those states which they helped to construct elsewhere in the Niger Delta, most probably in reaction to the souring of Benin-Portuguese relations in the 1540s through the 1560s. According to Itsekiri historian William Moore (1936), the Portuguese in about 1516 came across Ginuwa, a Benin nobleman who was hiding in Ijaw creeks to escape prosecution by Benin officials. This chance encounter occurred during a Portuguese exploration in the waterways of the Niger Delta. Ginuwa died sometime later in his hiding place in the island of Ijalla. His two surviving sons fled to another island, where they continued to hide from Benin authorities. Following the difficulties that developed between Benin and the Portuguese, Portuguese officials sought out Ginuwa’s sons, probably in the 1540s, on the island that has since been renamed Ode Itsekiri. The Portuguese then helped these two young men to build an Itsekiri nation from Yoruba fishing

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<sup>41</sup> Kenny, *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa*, 6, and also see I. Boavida and M. J. Ramos, *The Indigenous and the Foreign in Ethiopian Art*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004) and Saheed Adejumo, *The History of Ethiopia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006)

communities in the creeks and on the banks of the rivers of Western Niger Delta. The Portuguese further helped Ginuwa's sons and their descendants to develop a thriving trading state, posing competition to Benin. Two early kings of the Itsekiri were baptized bearing the Portuguese names of Sebastião and Domingos. I daresay that if any African people have any bragging rights to alliance and friendship with the Portuguese, it would be the Itsekiri,<sup>42</sup> not Benin. In moves similar to the creation of Itsekiri, the Portuguese also helped fishing communities in the Cross River estuary, with notable concentration in the trading city of Calabar,<sup>43</sup> as well as Bonny and Opobo in the Eastern Niger Delta, to become trading states.<sup>44</sup>

## **Impact of the Atlantic World on the General Culture of Benin and Western Niger Delta Societies**

In important ways, the thrust of the impact of Portuguese trading and diplomatic activities in Benin and the Western Niger Delta was on the region's high culture. The effects of these activities were most manifest at kings' palaces and in other aristocratic institutions. Whether the items of exchange were coral beads or bars of iron and whether the points of diplomacy concerned requests for priestly tutors or arms for warfare, the ordinary man or woman of Benin and the Western Niger

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<sup>42</sup> See Peter Lloyd "The Itsekiri are extremely proud of their connection with the Portuguese. They ascribe many heirlooms to this source, even when obviously incorrect . . . Ryder's [1969] research has shown that Portuguese influence [among the Itsekiri] was strong at the end of the sixteenth century and that the reigning Olu sent a son to Portugal to be educated; this youth Domingos, returned ten years later with a noble Portuguese wife and later reigned. He was succeeded by a mullato, probably his son. Subsequent rulers were also baptized, although Christianity seemed to have remained a court religion." Peter Lloyd "Introduction" in William A. Moore, *History of Itsekiri*, (London: Franck Cass & Co, London, 1970), viii.

<sup>43</sup> *Calabar* is a Portuguese name. There is a town in Brazil of the same name. What is unclear is whether both the Nigerian and Brazilian Calabars are named after a Portuguese ship of that name or a historic Brazilian personality, namely, the deserter of mixed African and European ancestry who betrayed Portuguese Brazil by joining invading Dutch forces (1630–1654). Since the Nigerian Calabar already bore that name before the date of Calabar's treason, it is more likely that the ship is the source of the name. In the early sixteenth century, the whole region from the Opobo River to the Cross River bore the nickname of Calabar. *Kalabari* was a corruption of that *Calabar*.

<sup>44</sup> Peter P. Ekeh, *Warri City and British Colonial Rule in Western Niger Delta*, (Buffalo, NY and Lagos: Urhobo Historical Society, 2004), 1-16, Cyril D. Forde, *Efik Traders of Old Calabar: Containing the Diary of Antera Duke, an Efik Slave Trading Chief of the Eighteenth Century Together with an Ethnographic Sketch and Notes*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1956) and Robin Horton, 'From Fishing Village to City- State: A Social History of New Calabar' in M. Douglas and P. M. Karberry ed. *Man in Africa*, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1969).

Delta would probably regard the strange new European merchants as of little consequence to their daily lives.

In time, probably up to one century from the beginnings of the new Atlantic World in the Western Niger Delta, the daily lives of ordinary men and women came to be ruled by the consequences of the Atlantic World in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most dramatic of these ways was in the dress culture of the region. As the Dutch and the English especially entered the commerce of the region, industrially produced cotton goods replaced locally produced clothing for ordinary men and women. For centuries before the onset of the Atlantic World, there were thriving local textile artisans clothing manufacturing that produced a variety of wares for all classes of people in the Western Niger Delta. Such areas of the Benin Empire as Ukwuani, in the upper Western Niger Delta, produced cotton pods and had cotton looms that crafted a variety of clothing wares. However, compared to the industrially produced clothing from England and Holland, the locally produced traditional cloth was coarse to the touch. Eventually, probably gradually, imported textiles replaced the locally produced ones as “traditional” wares. In modern times, the population of the Western Niger Delta has become wholly dependent on imported clothing for both “traditional” and foreign dressing modes.

In this area of imported clothing dating back to the small beginnings of the Atlantic World in the Niger Delta, a longstanding distinction exists between Dutch “wax” cloth for the masses of the people and a more expensive grade of “George” from Manchester, England, that is often donned on ceremonial occasions. In more modern times, silk material from Austria has joined this “traditional” pool of clothing items. Yet Dutch “wax” cloth has remained the core of “traditional” clothing for centuries now. A smart writer recently characterized this phenomenon as follows:

What is it, then, that makes RDW [“Real Dutch Wax”] such a unique product? What makes it so different from the other African textiles? . . . The technique by which the cottons are dyed—not printed—has old roots, and it gives the RDW its style and quality. And the “old roots” go a long way back. Manufacturers from Holland learned the art of dying clothes using wax in the former Dutch colonies in Asia. They learned it from the natives of Java and the other Dutch Asian colonies. Soon the process was copied and industrialised in factories in Holland, and the textiles exported back to the Asian colonies. As the ships transporting the bulks to Asia passed by the

African continent, the textiles (sometimes called Java prints) soon became popular in Africa too. Before long, the [Dutch were] designing special prints exclusively for the African market. Today, these textiles have become the main product of the Vlisco group of companies, with subsidiaries in Cote d'Ivoire (Uniwax and Woodin), Ghana (GTP), Benin<sup>45</sup> and many other African countries. Yet the African consumer still loves to pay three times or more for the “real” thing from Holland.<sup>46</sup>

Several other industrial products have become domesticated, sometimes ritualized, in the general culture of Benin and the Western Niger Delta as a consequence of the region's participation in the exchange protocols of the Atlantic World. Two examples will help illustrate the degree to which Atlantic World products have affected the region's general culture. First, in wedding and burial ceremonies—two of the most serious affairs in traditional communities of the Western Niger Delta—English whiskey and Dutch schnapps are allowed or sometimes demanded as part of traditional ritual offering to ancestors.<sup>47</sup>

A second example is the importation of industrially manufactured steel cutlasses and files that replaced Urhobo's traditional cutlasses, which were hewed from iron bars produced in local furnaces. This replacement vastly improved the productivity of Urhobo men's traditional palm-nut collection. For the four centuries of the European trade with the Western Niger Delta, Urhobo men were thus able to supply palm oil and palm kernels for domestic use as well as for foreign export. In order to collect bunches of the palm nuts from which palm oil and palm kernels are extracted, three tools were needed. First was a pair of locally manufactured ropes with which men climbed the wild palm trees that bore the nuts. Second were manufactured steel cutlasses. Produced by factories in England, these replaced the brittle traditional cutlasses that came from local furnaces. Third were files, also usually imported from England, with which to render the cutlasses sensitively sharp. (These files replaced stone edges that were customarily used to

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<sup>45</sup> “Benin” here refers to the country to the immediate southwest of Nigeria in West Africa. Formerly known as Dahomey, it changed its name in the 1970s to Benin, a new appellation in honor of Benin kingdom and empire. See Peter P. Ekeh ‘Contesting the History of Benin Kingdom’ (2000) 33 (3) *Research in African Literatures*, and Peter P. Ekeh, *Ogiso Times and Eweka Times: A Preliminary History of the Edoid Complex of Cultures, Monograph 3*, (Benin City: Institute for Benin Studies, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> Wyger Wentholt, ‘The Real Dutch Wax... the Company that Cloths Africa’ *New African*, IC Publications Ltd (1 March, 2000).

<sup>47</sup> For the domestication and ritualization of schnapps, see Dimitri Van den Bersselaar *The Drink of Kings: Schnapps Gin from Modernity to Tradition*, African Social Studies Series, No 18, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007).

sharpen the locally hewed traditional cutlasses.) These two imported items—manufactured steel cutlasses and files—became everyday tools in Urhobo households. Without these two industrial tools that came with the Atlantic World to the Western Niger Delta, those working in the palm-collecting occupation in Urhoboland would have been unlikely to meet the increased demands for palm oil and palm kernels in these centuries.

## **The Role of Benin and the Western Niger Delta in the Exchange of Tropical Agricultural Plants between Tropical Lands of the African Atlantic and American Atlantic**

There is a different realm of culture in which participation in the Atlantic World exercised major bearing on the everyday lives of the people of Benin and the Western Niger Delta. The region's food culture has undergone a major transformation as a consequence of the exchanges of the Atlantic World. A key development of an early phase of the development of the Atlantic World was the exchange of agricultural plants from one side of the Equatorial Atlantic with the other. From the African side the Portuguese transferred plantain and yam seedlings, which did quite well in the Caribbean and equatorial zones of the South American mainland. From the American side to the Niger Delta and the African side of the Atlantic, the Portuguese brought cassava and a number of such other crops as corn (maize) and groundnuts (known as peanuts in American English). Today, a great proportion of people in West Africa, rich and poor, depend on the food products of cassava and maize for their daily nutrition. The Portuguese are usually credited with this development in the agricultural expansion of the Atlantic World.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> These exchanges of food crops and other plants are a subset of a larger environmental phenomenon more broadly known as the Columbian Exchange (Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qrjan 'The Colombian Exchange: A History of Disease, Food and Ideas', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 24:2 (2010) , 163-188) involving the cross transfer of species of animals, plants, and diseases between the Old World (Africa, Asia, and Europe) and the New World (the Caribbean, North America, South America, and Australasia) following the voyages of Christopher Columbus in 1492. Also for perspectives on these exchanges, see John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Such exchanges appear to have been transacted quite early in the course of the development of the Atlantic World (thus, see Moore 1936: 88). Therefore, the exchanges would have taken place when Benin-Portuguese relations were still relatively cordial. Less clear is what role Benin played in receiving native American crop seedlings into the Niger Delta and whether indeed Benin was the source of any principal crop seedlings that left Atlantic Africa for the Americas. Two factors suggest that Benin was instrumental with regard to these exchanges.

First, linguistic analysis indicates that Benin was the probable entry point for the two principal native American crops that the Portuguese brought to the Western Niger Delta, namely, cassava and corn. For cassava, the possibility of a Benin point of entry into Edoid food culture is suggested by what Urhobo call cassava: *imid' aka*, which translates as “imidi from Benin.”<sup>49</sup> However, the problem with this rendition is that the word *imidi* has no meaning in the Urhobo language. Malachy Akoroda, a well-known agronomist of the University of Ibadan, has a different and more plausible explanation for the Urhobo term for “cassava,” *imid' aka*. He postulates that it originated from difficulties that the Urhobo language had in handling *mandioca*, a Portuguese term for “cassava,” which came to Urhoboland with cassava stems from which the cassava crop is cultivated.<sup>50</sup> As for corn, Benin and Urhobo have a common linguistic term, *oka*, for this crop that the Portuguese also imported into the Western Niger Delta—suggesting in this case a central point of entry into the region from which a common name spread. This was likely to be Benin and its imperial routes.

A second ground for suspecting that Benin had a role in the exchange of agricultural plants that ensued from the Atlantic World is decidedly more speculative, but by no means less probable. It concerns one of the species of yams that the Portuguese introduced into Equatorial America from Africa. Called *ikpen*, it is a species of yam that is unique to Benin's reddish soil and that rarely grows well elsewhere in West Africa. Today *ikpen* is one of the many varieties of yams that grow well with good yields in tropical America. Most likely, the

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<sup>49</sup> The Urhobo word for “Benin” is *Aka*.

<sup>50</sup> Professor Malachy Akoroda's rendition is probable. Urhobo language normally inserts a vowel (mostly “i”) before any foreign word that begins with a consonant. For instance, the Urhobo word for “shoe” is *isabato*, obviously corrupted from the Portuguese word *sapato*.

Portuguese obtained this yellowish variety of yam from Benin and transported it to the New World.

## **Benin's Role in the Atlantic Slave Trade**

The exchange of productive agricultural crops, an uplifting aspect of the Atlantic World, contrasts sharply with the moral scourge of the new international conglomeration: the Atlantic slave trade. Portugal and many of its African partners contributed to the evil trade that drained millions of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean and the Americas. I need not retell the various roles played by European slave traders and African chieftains who supplied them with their human captives in this international tragedy that dragged on for centuries, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth. The assessment here will be limited to the role that Benin was deemed to have played in the international trade in humans and the international relations that allowed that trade to ensue.

The general facts and behavior patterns of African states and empires in those dreadful centuries appear to heavily implicate Benin in the Atlantic slave trade, as many historians like Bondarenko have indeed intimated.<sup>51</sup> First, the institution of slavery was well established in Benin culture. The status of *ovien*, "slave," was not a delightful one in traditional Benin society, even before the arrival of the Portuguese traders and missionaries. Certainly, if Benin had refrained from the slave trade, it would not have been on account of humanitarian considerations inherent in its culture. Second, empires and states with status and power comparable to that of Benin, such as Oyo and the Fulani's Sokoto Caliphate, built their fortunes on slave raids and the slave trade. It would be only a slight jump to conclude that Benin might have been like other slave-trading empires.

Despite such seemingly plausible considerations, Benin was in fact one of a small number of African states that were hesitant about the slave trade and that may legitimately be judged to be historically averse to the Atlantic slave trade. Because there are no internal records of Benin's policies on the slave trade, historical scholarship is compelled to rely on inferences and measures of

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<sup>51</sup> Dimitri Bondarendko 'Benin and the Slave Trade' in Toyin Falola and Amanda Wanocks (eds.) *Encyclopedia of the Middle Passage*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 56-58.

probabilities of consequences in order to elicit evidence of Benin's policies on and attitudes toward the slave trade. The first class of evidence is counterfactual in its approach. As the most influential kingdom in the region of the Niger Delta, Benin could easily have chosen its port as a principal venue of the slave trade. Ughoton, Benin's traditional seaport, in fact never became a major slave-trading venue. Indeed, it would have been more likely for the Western Niger Delta to be the main axis of the slave trade if Benin had been well disposed toward it. Instead, new ports in the Eastern Niger Delta were developed as principal slave-trading centers. Calabar, in the Cross River estuary, and Bonny and Opobo were fishing communities that were upgraded into prime trading posts in the Eastern Niger Delta following the arrival of the Portuguese and other European traders. They became important trading posts, well ahead of the Western Niger Delta, in the trafficking of human captives.<sup>52</sup>

Why would Benin be reluctant to participate in the Atlantic slave trade? Two reasons may be given for this apparent historical paradox. First, during the era of the slave trade, many African states understood that the trade in humans was not in their best interest. However, these African states did not have the strength to refrain from participating in it. Caribbean scholar Walter Rodney gives an example of a king of Dahomey who preferred trade in palm oil to the slave trade but was threatened by his European partners with a trade boycott. He had to retreat to trading in slaves for sheer survival.<sup>53</sup> African kingdoms would have

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<sup>52</sup> Onwuka K. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885: An Introduction to the Political and Economic History of Nigeria*, (London: Clarendon Press, 1956); Forde, *Efik Traders of Old Calabar: Containing the Diary of Antera Duke, an Efik Slave Trading Chief of the Eighteenth Century Together with an Ethnographic Sketch and Notes*; G.I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers: A Study of Political Development of Eastern Nigeria*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963) and Robin Horton, 'From Fishing Village to City- State: A Social History of New Calabar'.

<sup>53</sup> "In the 1720s, Dahomey opposed European slave traders, and was deprived of European imports—some of which had become necessary by that time. Agaja Trudo, Dahomey's greatest king, appreciated that European demand for slaves and the pursuit of slaving in and around Dahomey was in conflict with Dahomey's development. Between 1724 and 1726, he looted and burnt European forts and slave camps; and he reduced the trade from the 'Slave Coast' to a mere trickle, by blocking the paths leading to sources of supply in the interior. European slave dealers were very bitter, and they tried to sponsor some African collaborators against Agaja Trudo. They failed to unseat him or to crush the Dahomean state, but in turn Agaja failed to persuade them to develop new lines of economic activity, such as local plantation agriculture; and, being anxious to acquire firearms and cowries through the Europeans, he had to agree to the resumption of slave trading in 1730. After 1730, Dahomean slaving was placed under royal control and was much more restricted than previously. Yet, the failure of this determined effort demonstrated that a single African state at that time could not emancipate itself from European control. The small size of African states and the numerous political divisions made it so much easier for Europe to make the decisions as to Africa's

needed considerable strength to refuse to deal in slave trading. Benin had shown the Portuguese that it had its own ways of doing things. If Benin's kings believed that the slave trade was not in the kingdom's best interest or that alternative forms of trade were more beneficial, they probably had the strength to so declare to their European trading partners, whereas leaders of weaker African states might not so dare.

There is a second reason that Benin might have preferred not to engage in the Atlantic slave trade. We can gain a sense of this attribute of Benin history by referring to another West African state that did not rely on the slave trade for its might and that indeed showed reluctance regarding the slave trade. Songhai and Benin managed two extensive empires whose periods of influence endured into the age of the slave trade in West Africa. Both of these nations had small populations to serve their large empires. Indeed, chronic under population was a problem that Benin policy makers had to contend with from time to time. The same problem faced Songhai. In these circumstances, it would be imprudent to bargain away persons, particularly males, who were needed to fight in wars, to serve in the empire's bureaucracy, or else to engage in public works construction. It was therefore not by accident that neither Songhai nor Benin was reputed for any enthusiastic participation in the international slave trade that besieged their spheres of influence.<sup>54</sup>

Two leading historians of Benin international relations have correctly concluded that Benin did not engage in any large-scale slave trading during the period of the Atlantic slave trade. Don Ohadike (1964: 42) summarizes Ryder's presentation as well as his own point of view quite effectively, as follows:

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role in world production and trade." Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1972), 80–81.

<sup>54</sup> The following excerpt on the slave trade in Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Nigeria: A Country Study* (<http://countrystudies.us/nigeria/>) offers a controversial interpretation of Benin-Portuguese relations; however, it gives a good hint about Benin's strength to chart its own course on the matter of the slave trade and slavery: "Benin profited from its close ties with the Portuguese and exploited the firearms bought from them to tighten its hold on the lower Niger area. Two factors checked the spread of Portuguese influence and the continued expansion of Benin, however. First, Portugal stopped buying pepper because of the availability of other spices in the Indian Ocean region. Second, Benin placed an embargo on the export of slaves, thereby isolating itself from the growth of what was to become the major export from the Nigerian coast for 300 years. Benin continued to capture slaves and to employ them in its domestic economy, but the Edo state remained unique among Nigerian polities in refusing to participate in the transatlantic trade." <http://countrystudies.us/nigeria/7.htm> (Retrieved from the Internet July 17, 2015).

Slavery was neither an economic necessity nor a vital component of the entire political and social life of [Benin] society . . . even after the rise of Benin as a large kingdom, its involvement in slavery was limited. Ryder [1969] has demonstrated that Benin's participation in the Atlantic slave trade . . . was minimal. Ryder's thesis is confirmed by the fact that the Edo political structures were not particularly affected by the European trade as was the case with Dahomey and the Gold Coast.<sup>55</sup>

Another way to assess the role of the Benin Empire during the era of the slave trade is to contrast it with that played by another empire in the region. During the last century of their existence, namely, the nineteenth, the Fulani's Sokoto Caliphate and Benin faced pressures that they handled differently. Kenneth Dike describes the contrasting ways in which the policies of Benin Empire and those of the Sokoto Caliphate affected the Igbo people in the nineteenth century. Elsewhere I have summarized Dike's argument, which I reproduce below, as follows:

Kenneth Dike's masterful *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* introduced the conceptual distinction between the slave trade and legitimate trade which has since become central in studies of West African economic history . . . The slave trade was destructive, not simply of human beings but of whole social structures. Legitimate trade was expansionist in a positive direction, enhancing the prospects of bringing peoples together instead of poisoning inter-ethnic relationships.

Dike offered the first wholesome peep into Igbo history and culture in his celebrated opus. His distinction between legitimate trade and the slave trade was not an idle one in his study of Igbo historical origins. He tells us that human population in the Igbo heartland increased many-fold in the [eighteenth and nineteenth] centuries. This tremendous increase in Igbo population was due to the dynamics of legitimate trade and the slave trade from two different directions. From the West and Benin came legitimate trade that served as a magnet for fresh populations to move into Igboland. From the north came the drama of Fulani slave raids of the nineteenth century that ravaged whole regions of the Benue valley whose populations moved into protected Igboland.<sup>56</sup>

Dike further explains his point as follows:

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<sup>55</sup> Also see James Graham's judicious pronouncement on Benin's role in the slave trade, after a thoughtful review of the evidence: "An overall view of the period, between 1486–1897, yields the conclusion that the European slave trade was seldom, if ever, of considerable importance to Benin" James D. Graham 'The Slave Trade, Depopulation and Human Sacrifice in Benin History: The General Approach' *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaine*, 5:18 (1965), 323.

<sup>56</sup> Ekeh 'Contesting the History of Benin Kingdom', 159.

The eastward movement into Iboland from the Benin area, stimulated by trade in the Niger valley, was paralleled by a comparable movement from the north. The northern branch was a direct result of the slave trade. The indigenous home of the Ibos, which lies mainly to the east of the Niger valley, is within the forest belt where the cavalry used by the Fulani in their annual slave-raids could not operate. These raids were conducted mainly in the plains north of the forest region, and were organized from Kano, Sokoto, Bida, and Ilorin. They inevitably led to the movement of tribes, south of the Benue, to inaccessible areas and places of safety such as the Ibo forest area provided.<sup>57</sup>

We all should be instructed by this powerful suggestion from Dike's work, namely, that the dynamics of legitimate trade in the Niger valley under the sway of Benin Empire was a feature of the peace and stability in the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, unlike the Sokoto Caliphate, which was essentially a slave-raiding empire that wrought destruction and mayhem in the Benue valley in the nineteenth century.

## **Some Concluding Thoughts: From Isolated Forest States to Theater of the Atlantic World**

The portion of Benin historiography that has been the subject of this investigation spans two large epochs in West African history. Benin kingdom and the early stages of its empire were developed within the parameters of a civilization that the insulated environment of the West African forest belt provided. This region's thick forests<sup>58</sup> (see Connah 2001: 144–176) shielded it from Arab influence, conquests, and occupation, which had subdued North Africa, the Sahara, and much of the savanna territories of West Africa. The forest belt and its state formations were also shielded from the earlier developments of Christianity that held so much sway in pre-Arab North Africa, up to the seventh century C.E. Therefore, this region of West Africa, in which Benin was implicated, carried out its own pristine development of states and societies without the benefits of any world religions. Specifically, the so-called forest states of Benin, Asante, Kongo, Angola, Oyo,

<sup>57</sup> Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885*, 27.

<sup>58</sup> Graham Connah, *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective*, Second Edition, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Dahomey, and so on were developed outside the civilizational influences and benefits of Christianity and Islam.

Despite many worthy attributes that could be credited to these forest states, they lacked certain critical intellectual properties that were already well developed in states and societies of Christian Europe and the Muslim world. Foremost among these was literacy. The capacity to write and read—and therefore record events of one’s life—was a key European cultural asset that was lacking in the forest states of West Africa.<sup>59</sup> A property associated with literacy was also missing from West African forest states; this was the development of scales for weights and measures along with a monetary system for organizing the exchange of goods and services.

When Portuguese sailors reached the shores and then cities of West Africa’s forest states and then engaged in diplomacy and economic exchanges with the region’s leaders and citizens, they prized open the gates of an ancient system that was developed on levels different from those of European states and societies. From the beginning, western European nations were engaged in a gross form of unequal exchange with the governments and peoples of the forest states.<sup>60</sup> The agencies that facilitated the development of the new Atlantic World were European. European literacy informed the exchanges that were transacted, and the currency of exchange was provided mostly by European means.<sup>61</sup> The ships that empowered the transportation system that ruled the Atlantic World were

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<sup>59</sup> Compare the following paragraph in Kenny’s preface to *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa*: “The sources at my disposal for the most part were written by Europeans. One would like to know better the reactions and thinking of the people who received the missionaries. That information, unfortunately, will never be available to our satisfaction.”

<sup>60</sup> For an exploration of the concept of unequal exchange, see Arghiri Emmanuel, *Unequal Exchange: A Study of Imperialism of Trade*, Trans. Brian Pearce, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972) and Samir Amin *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment*, Trans. Brian Pearce, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974). It must be added that the exchanges in which the Portuguese engaged with the forest states of West Africa in the fifteenth century occurred before theories of international trade were formulated and cannot be said to be subject to any theories of international trade that were formulated in later centuries.

<sup>61</sup> Ogundiran hints at this pattern thus: “Of all the imports to the Bight of Benin, cowries were by far the most dominant during the 1650–1880 period, and throughout the region, cowries were established as local currency for commercial and social payments. Inferences from the published figures of cowry imports by different European companies . . . indicate that at least 30 billion cowries must have been shipped to the Bight of Benin from the early 1500s to the third quarter of the nineteenth century.” Ogundiran, ‘Of Small Things Remembered’ 429. Also see Marion Johnson ‘The Cowrie Currencies of West Africa Part I’ *Journal of African History*, 11:1 (1970) and Marion Johnson, ‘The Cowrie Currencies of West Africa Part II,’ *Journal of African History*, 11:3 (1970).

European. In other words, the Europeans dictated the terms of the exchange protocols of the Atlantic World.

In these unfavorable circumstances, the forest states were liable to experience considerable difficulties in maintaining their status quo ante—the privileged position and independence they enjoyed before the onset of the Atlantic World. The opportunity to grow stronger from the exchanges of the Atlantic World was well beyond the reach of most of these West African forest states.

It is against such definitions that the performances of the forest states and empires in their encounter with the Atlantic World must be weighed. The first signal that the forest states of West Africa were severely disadvantaged was enforcement of the Portuguese demand for human captives in exchange for industrial goods from Europe. Other Portuguese demands that demoralized many of the forest states included the insistence that the kings and chiefly hierarchies of African nations receive Christian baptism using Portuguese names. Even the names of their principal cities and rivers were changed to new Portuguese names. Many of these early Portuguese practices were not enforced by other European nations that entered the West African commercial forum. However, the slave trade was expanded and became a staple of the Atlantic World, with the forest states supplying captives who were shipped to the western side of the Atlantic.

Consequently, one by one, most of the West African forest states lost their independence to their new European partners; the forest states became dependent on the Europeans in order to stay in power. Before the onset of the Atlantic World, rulers of such states as Kongo in central West Africa and Oyo in Yoruba country depended on internal legitimacy and approval to attain and retain power. With the expansion of the slave trade, these rulers and many others no longer needed internal legitimacy to capture and stay in power, as arms and other means of violence flowed from Europe with the slave trade.

The exceptionality of Benin among the forest states may be illustrated from a remarkable interpretation of the Benin Civil War of 1689–1721 by Paula Ben-Amos Girshick and John Thornton.<sup>62</sup> They assembled compelling data to advance their thesis that the outcome of that war was transformational of Benin's institutions of government. In any deliberate comparative history of West African

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<sup>62</sup> Paula Ben-Amos Girshick and John Thornton 'Civil War in the Kingdom of Benin, 1689-1721: Continuity or Political Change?' (2001) 42 (3) *Journal of African History*, 42:3 (2001), 353–376.

forest states in the centuries of their initial contact with European nations and traders, Girshick and Thornton's conclusion would score two points of uniqueness for Benin history. First, Benin was able to keep the war internal, without giving any opportunities to Europeans to intervene, as in other instances of civil wars in the region. The sociological implication of this fact is that Benin's rulers continued to rely on internal sources for legitimacy, instead of resting on overt support from foreign authorities in order to retain power at home. Second, it is impressive that the subject of dispute in that war was not related to the slave trade, as so many other instances of civil disputes in the forest states had become entangled in the evil trade that weakened their moral capabilities to govern.

Benin's performance in the midst of these failures by the indigenous states of West Africa should thus be graded as a comparative exercise. Although Benin was one of the earliest forest states to be contacted by Portugal and to engage in profitable commerce with that European nation, it nonetheless retained its independence despite threatening pressures. It certainly did not change the name of its capital city nor did its rulers assume Portuguese names, as happened elsewhere in the forest states. Similarly, although Benin was one of the earliest states to engage in the exchange of human captives for industrial goods with Portugal, it was able to pull back from full participation in the slave trade. All in all, the Benin Empire grew in the four centuries following the onset of the Atlantic World. This outcome contrasts sharply with the fate of such other major states and empires as Oyo and Angola—which, like Benin, were developed before the arrival of the Europeans. Internally, Benin's political structure became more sophisticated and refined in these centuries. Certainly, the king of Benin did not become less dependent on internal legitimacy and approval, as was the case in many other forest states of West Africa. It is a fair conclusion to say that Benin took advantage of the Atlantic World, was able to protect its assets against its European trading partners, and survived where many other African states collapsed. Or rather, it may be more historically correct to say that Benin was the last major forest state left standing, until it too was taken down by the British in 1897.

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