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**Craft Guilds and the Sustenance of Pre-Colonial Benin  
Monarchy**

**Osagie, Joseph I. Ph.D**

Department of History and International Studies  
University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria  
E-mail: [jiosagie@yahoo.com](mailto:jiosagie@yahoo.com)  
G.S.M.: +2348056410713

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**Ikponmwosa, Frank**

Department of History and International Studies  
University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

**Abstract**

*Benin was one of the major kingdoms that thrived in the forest region of West Africa from about c.900 to 1897 when she was conquered by the British expeditionary forces and integrated into the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. The resilience and sustenance of the kingdom and her monarchy for this long period has been attributed to several factors such as the successive line of capable and effective Oba (kings) and her trade with the Europeans – Portuguese, Dutch and British – which enabled her to acquire arms and ammunitions for the defense and expansion of her territories. However, the vital role played by the craft guilds in the sustenance of the monarchy had not been given proper attention. The guilds which were associations of professional or craftsmen were involved in the production of variety of products and*

*other items of utilities. It was in order to maximize the benefit derivable from their products the various Oba ensured that the craftsmen were organized into associations to supply every need of the monarch and the palace. It was in this respect that the various guilds in Benin were affiliated into the three main palace societies – Iwebo, Iweguae and Ibiwe. These societies were responsible for every facet of the needs of the palace. As the basic need of the monarchy was adequately met by the various guilds, the Oba had enough time and resources to devote to the effective administration of the kingdom. It is in this regards that this papers posits that the guilds played vital roles in the sustenance of Benin monarchy throughout the pre-colonial period.*

**Key words:** Guild System, Benin Kingdom, Palace Societies, Oba of Benin.

### **Introduction**

Benin Kingdom was located in the thick equatorial rain forest zone of present-day southern Nigeria with rich vegetation which supports agriculture and provides most materials for craft industries. The kingdom was probably one of the oldest, most remarkable, famous and at one time, one of the most powerful kingdoms of the forest region of West Africa (P.A. Igbafe, 1982, pp. 1-26). Pre-colonial Benin was made up a single and powerful kingdom which was headed by the Oba (king) who was assisted by different categories of chiefs which included the palace chiefs (*eghaevbo n'ogbe*) and town chiefs (*egbaevbo n'ore*). It was one of the oldest and best known kingdoms in the south central Nigeria. Benin City, the metropolitan headquarters of former Benin Kingdom, is now the administrative headquarters of Edo State of Nigeria. The former Benin Kingdom has also now been constituted into seven local government areas of Edo State namely; Egor, Ikpoba-Okha, Oredo, Orhionmwon, Ovia East, Ovia West and Uhumwode.

Benin kingdom was known to the Europeans as early as the second half of the fifteenth century when she was first visited by the Portuguese. The first Europeans are said to have visited Benin during the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great (c.1440). According to Hubbard, “the second half of the century (fifteenth) saw the arrival of the first European in Benin, the Portuguese, Ruy de Sequeira in 1472 in Ewuare’s reign and Alfonso de Avienro in 1485 in Ozolua’s (c.1481) reign” (Hubbard, 1948, p.173). Thereafter, trade and diplomatic contacts were established between the kingdom and Portugal. Later, other Europeans such as the Dutch, French and British also visited and traded with the people. Benin Kingdom however, maintained her independent status until 1897 when, as a result of trade dispute between the Oba and British traders, she was conquered by the British expeditionary forces and incorporated into the protectorate of Southern Nigeria as part of the larger British Empire.

The fame of Benin rested on her early trade and diplomatic contacts with the Europeans especially the Portuguese and the fierce resistance to the nineteenth century British encroachment with the attendant looting of her art treasures which contained exquisite variety of works whose excellence baffled European nationals (P.B. Amos, 1979). In fact, the British invaders were according to Richard W. Hall, astounded by

... the artistic sophistication of the more than two thousand artifacts found in the palace compound of the Oba, or king. They found a dazzling array of objects: snake and rams' heads, cocks and leopard, gongs and ceremonial swords and burred staffs, stools and chests, enchanting pictorial plaques, pendants masks, armlets, combs, trumpets and horns, carved tusks. They were awed by the technological expertise of the bronze-casting and by the intricacy of the ivory carving (1981, p. 9).

In addition, Benin was also famous as a result of her powerful monarchy with the centralized system of government with in-built checks and balances for promoting healthy competition among the political institutions which ensured enduring stability. The monarch regulated the socio-political and economic activities not only for his own benefit but that of the general well-being of the people of the kingdom. In this respect, it is not unimaginable to argue that the strength of the monarchy and its lasting stability was bolstered partly but importantly, by the activities of Benin professionals and craftsmen, who ensured that the needs of the monarchy were adequately and promptly met. Although there is no doubt that some of the crafts that later constituted the guilds in Benin pre-dated the monarchical system, various studies on Benin guilds have revealed that Benin arts or crafts grew and developed under the aegis of the guilds of craftsman (K.A. Agbontaen, 1997, pp.45-58). Therefore, if it is possible to ascribe any one factor for the emergence of the people of pre-colonial Benin as one of the most artistic in West Africa, it is the establishment, growth and development of the guild system (P.A. Igbafe, 1982, pp. 1-26).

The craft guilds (*otu* or groups), refer to the associations of craftsmen and professionals under whose cover Benin artistic products were organized, fashioned and sold with strict royal regulations and patronage. These associations of craftsmen and professionals greatly enhanced the wellbeing of the Oba by ensuring that some of his specific needs; materials or otherwise, were met in return for monopoly rights in their respective trades. Ultimately, under the guild system, various professionals and craftsman were encouraged to form associations with monopoly rights to produce and market their products (*Ibid.*). This ensured regulated markets, regular patronage and high quality of products.

If the guilds through their services contributed to the long survival of Benin kingdom and also through them, the artistic ingenuity of the people exhibited, it is

therefore not out of place to devote a study of this nature to them. It is the objective of this paper therefore, to examine the origin of the guild system and its contributions to the wellbeing of the monarchy and by extension, the survival of the kingdom up to 1897 when it was conquered and integrated into the British Empire.

### Origin of Guild System

The origin of guilds in Benin dates back to the earliest rulers of the kingdom who were referred to as Ogiso (*Ogie* - king; *Iso* - sky). Ogiso (sky kings) were the rulers of the first dynasty in the period before the enthronement of the present dynasty at about the twelve century A.D. (J.U. Egharevba, 1968, p.1). It is instructive to note here that some of the crafts such as iron smith, carpentry and carving existed in Benin long before the enthronement of monarchical rule at about 900 AD. The practitioners of these crafts resided in different independent communities that existed prior to the enthronement of the Ogiso dynasty. Each of these autonomous communities was headed by the oldest man (*odionwere* pl. *edionwere*) who was assisted by a village council which was made up of heads of families which constituted the village. The craftsmen, like other citizens were loyal to the heads of the villages in which they resided. The pre-Ogiso Benin was made up of about thirty different autonomous communities or villages. There was therefore no central government in Benin to which all the villages owed allegiance at that time. To resolve inter-village issues, there was a common council called *iko-edionwere* (council of *edionwere*) which met occasionally and was presided over by the most senior *odionwere*. It was in the course of one of the meetings of this council that one prominent and powerful *odionwere* was said to have organized what could be regarded as *coup d'etat* to assert his authority over the other villages and communities by claiming that his authority came from the sky - God (hence the name *Ogiso* - sky king) (*Ibid.*). The Ogiso thereafter surrounded himself with the paraphernalia of a king or monarch; thus began in Benin a monarchical rule and Ogiso dynasty. The first of the Ogiso is said to be Igodo who was succeeded by Ogiso Ere (c.900-980), who is credited with the formation of guild system in Benin.

The foundation of the monarchical rule entailed the establishment of a centralized system in place of the hitherto numerous autonomous villages or communities. Consequently craftsmen and professionals not abreast with the practice in a 'centralized system' continued in the old tradition of remitting a share of, or royalty, on their products to the *edionwere* of the communities in which they practiced their trade, in total disregard to Ogiso Ere (K.A. Agbontaen, 1997, pp. 45-58). This was an affront to the monarchy and showed that *edionwere* still appeared as the *de facto* rulers of their communities. The guild system therefore, commenced with the desire of Ogiso Ere to make the monarchy the first point of supply of the products

of the craftsmen; thereby diminishing the influence of *edionwere* and ultimately enhancing and securing the newly established monarchical system.

Iron smith (*igunematon*) which was one of the few crafts that were first organized into guilds was the source of political wrangling in the Ogiso era. Before the emergence of Ogiso Ere, iron smith had existed in Benin. The relevance of the craft of smith in a purely agrarian society cannot be overemphasized. It provided the implements for tilling the soil in a thick forest belt in which the kingdom was located. It also provided weapons for defense and facilitated general production of various articles of trade. Ogiso Ere subsequently carried out a coherent organization of the iron smith craft into guild to cater for the diverse, but equally important and mutually related aspects of the social and economic life of the kingdom (P.A. Igbafe, 1982, pp. 1-26). The formation of the guild of iron smith not only signified victory for Ogiso Ere over the *edionwere*, but probably more importantly, paved the way for the establishment of other numerous guilds in Benin. Ogiso Ere is therefore regarded not only as one of the greatest rulers of Benin but the founder of royal institutions and their paraphernalia. In the words of Egharevba,

There are many improvements during the reign of Ere. He founded many villages as Ego and Erua and the groups of craftsmen known as *owina* and *Igbesamwan*. The former are the traditional carpenters and the latter the carvers of wood and ivory. It was Ere who introduced the royal throne (*ekete*), the chief's rectangular stool (*agba*), the round leather fan (*ezuzu*), the round box (*ekpokin*) made of bark and leather, the swords of authority (*ada* and *eben*), and a simple, undecorated form of crown. He also introduced such domestic articles as wooden plates and bowls, mortars and pestles, which were carved by the *owina* and the wooden heads, carved by the *igbesamwan*, which are placed on ancestral shrines (1968, p.1).

Subsequent Ogiso continued with the system created by the Ogiso Ere up to the period of Ogiso Owodo; whose reign ended the Ogiso era - the first period of Benin history. The second period thus began with the emergence of Prince Oranmiyan (c.1100 A.D.) and the eventual coronation of his son as Oba Eweka the first (c.1200 A.D) whose dynasty subsists in Benin till date. In spite this the policies of the various Obas towards the craft guilds remained unchanged up to 1897.

### **Craft Guilds and the Monarchy**

As mentioned above, the essence of the craft guilds in Benin was service to the Oba or monarchy. Each of the guilds was therefore responsible for the supply of the specific needs and requirements of the Oba and his palace. It is plausible to explain that the monarchy understood the advantages derivable from the association of artisans and professionals sharing a common interest or purpose as a pool of

resources from which the monarch (Oba) could tap at the time of need. Therefore, the craft guild must of necessity be numerous since they had to cover several aspects of the socio-political, economic and even spiritual needs of the monarchy and the kingdom at large. In essence, the large number of guilds ensured that the various needs of Oba were promptly met. In some instances, when new needs arose for which there were no existing guilds, such problems were solved by creating new guilds. For example, Oba Ohen (c.1334) is credited with the introduction of the guild of weavers (*owina'nido*) in the fourteenth century. He is said to have organized male and female weavers into a guild and made their products the exclusive preserve of the ruling class (R.W. Hall, 1981, pp. 9-10). His desire to conceal his deformity as a cripple, led to the formation of the guild of weavers to produce patterns to cover his legs (Egharevba, 1968, p.12). It follows therefore, that the needs and ideas of respective monarchs in Benin provided the background for the development of the craft guilds. Consequently, there emerged the guild of wood workers (*Owina*), ivory and wood carvers (*Igbesanmwan*), weavers (*Owina N'do*), pot makers (*Emakhe*), the leather workers (*Isohian*), elephant hunters (*Ogbeni*). Also there were guilds of cattle keepers (*Iriamila*), bronze casters (*Igun Eromwon*), physicians/diviners (*Ebo/Ewaise*), dancers (*Ogbelaka*), town criers (*Avbigbe*), priests and keepers of the shrines of the royal ancestors, court chroniclers (*Ihogbe*) collectors of river taxes (*Iwowa*), bodyguard of the Oba (*Isienwenro*), among others. In all, there were about sixty-eight guilds that existed in Benin. However, about twelve of these guilds produced works of arts and were therefore, the most prominent and lucrative.

It is important to stress that the professionals and craftsmen organized into guilds were not starving while providing for the needs of the monarchy. In other words, while ensuring that the needs of the monarchy were met, members of the craft guilds also took care of their personal and families' needs by producing for members of the society who could afford their products. When therefore they were not producing specifically for the Oba, they took orders from prominent members of Benin society. The common people also bought art objects from members of the craft guilds to meet their spiritual needs and for various cults and masquerade societies to which they belonged (B.O. Obichere, 1981, pp. 48-51). From the fifteenth century, European merchants and officials who visited Benin began to demand for the products of the craftsmen. Early European traders to visit Benin demanded for variety of crafts works such as iron tools, wooden spoons, bowls, cloths (cotton cloths), ornamental beads, soap, among others (P.A. Talbot, 1926, p. 922, A.F.C. Ryder, 1977, pp. 62-68, P.A. Igbafe, 1980, pp.22-26). From the Fifteenth Century, the guild therefore, had a wide spectrum of patronage and in this way they not only acquired fame but fortune. In return for their services to the Oba, the guild members received gifts of kolanuts, beads, landed property and wives from the Oba. In addition to these, some members of the guilds were honoured with chieftaincy titles by the Oba.

On the socio-economic sphere, it is believed that the support rendered to the Oba by the craft guilds was a major reason for the long survival of the monarchy and the kingdom. The Oba was by tradition the fount of honour and giver of titles whose survival depended on the services and supports given to him by his subjects (*ugamwen*) (P.A. Igbafe, 1979, pp. 1, 25-26). For example, the Oba could appropriate labour from the various communities in Benin for the maintenance of the palace (*egua*). In the same vein, the guild of architects and mud sculptors could be mobilized to construct buildings and mud reliefs in the palace as well as maintenance and polishing of its wall and figurines. Similarly, the guild of blacksmiths provided the iron-based materials needed for use in the palace, while the bronze casters guild supported the throne by producing exquisite materials with which the palace was adorned. The bronze casters guild was also recorders of royal events which were depicted in bronze works akin to taking photographs or painting pictures. On the demise of an Oba, a bronze caster was commissioned to produce his bust which was kept in an altar established in his memory within the palace. The tradition of erecting alter made up of craft works to the Oba's ancestors in the palace is said to have helped every generation of artists to improve on the work of earlier generations (P.J.C. Dark, 1973, p.18). The royal art of Benin was therefore, the product of an urban court, unlike most African art which were the product of rural, peasant-based, politically decentralized communities (R. W. Hall, 1981, pp. 9-10). As a result, Benin art was more politically motivated and more secular in intent than most African Arts and was meant to symbolize and to extol or affirm the power, mystique, grandeur, continuity and endurance of the ruling dynasty and its governing institutions (*Ibid.*).

Outside the metropolitan city of Benin, several villages practiced the guild system. The most outstanding being *Idumwovina* and *Oregbeni* where wood workers and elephant hunters respectively organized themselves to supply building items of wood, furniture, and elephant tusks with which the palace of the Oba was maintained and decorated. The Oba received the tusks of every elephant killed in Benin forest from the elephant hunters of Oregbeni, now a quarter in metropolitan Benin City. During the trade with the Europeans from the second half of the fifteenth century, elephant tusks became priced articles of trade which the Oba often had prerogative of and control over (E. Ononemen, 2011, p. 108). Through the trade in tusk, the Oba's economic fortune or prosperity was greatly enhanced.

Whenever the Oba needed a particular product, the head of the concerned guild was contacted and such product was delivered freely for the wellbeing of the palace and royal household. Since the Oba did not pay for goods and services rendered him, they were therefore regarded as the guilds members' contribution towards the wellbeing of the monarch and the monarchy.

In the political sphere, the craft men, especially the blacksmiths (*Ogieogun*), helped to consolidate the power of the Oba over those of the title chiefs. In this regard the blacksmiths' guild (*Igunematon*) produced the monarchical symbols of authority (*Ada* and *Eben*) which were made of iron. *Ada* and *Eben* were produced for the use of the Oba only and were the symbols of his authority over his people. Similarly, members of the guild of blacksmith produced the *Osun*, a tree like iron symbol that featured in shrines and to which sacrifices were offered by the Oba, especially in time of difficulty or ordeal to appease the gods and ancestors. The blacksmiths' guild also specialized in the production of huge lamps for the use of the Oba and his household. In time of war, members of the guild were responsible for the production and repair of weapons and other iron implements used by the royal military (O.B. Osadolor, 2001, p.108). This largely accounted for the numerous exploit of royal army in neighboring territories long before the contact between Benin and the Europeans.

The products of the blacksmith guilds were also means by which the Oba determined the loyalty or otherwise of a vassal states to Benin kingdom. They were also the means by which the Oba legitimized the rulers in the vassal states. The "emblem of authority" or "staff of office" sent by Oba Osemwende (c.1816) to king Akintoye of Lagos in the course of the 1850s symbolized the Oba's hegemony over Lagos and the legitimization of the Akintoye's reign over his people. The acceptance of this emblem implied the King of Lagos' recognition of the over-lordship of the Oba of Benin; with the obligation of annual tributes to Benin (A.F.C. Ryder, 1977, p.14). The blacksmith guild may have been constituted not only of indigenes of Benin but people from outside the kingdom, especially the neighbouring kingdoms. The inhabitants of Ugboha, a ward in Benin Kingdom, trace their origin to Ugboha, one of the kingdoms of Esan, an ethnic group located in the north of Benin. They are said to be the progeny of some blacksmiths from Ugboha kingdom who accompanied the legendary warrior, Enore, who is acclaimed to have assisted Oba Esigie (1504) in his various wars of conquest. The blacksmith guild is also said to have constituted of blacksmiths who were captured in wars, who instead of being executed or sold into slavery, were brought to Benin and absorbed into the blacksmith ward/guild because "you don't kill iron worker" (P.J.C. Dark, 1973, p.31). The importance blacksmiths in an agrarian society like Benin cannot be over-emphasized. Their products (iron tools/weapons) were vital to Farmers, craftsmen and soldiers. So, even when they were captured in wars, they were not harmed or killed but instead integrated into the society and allowed to carry out their trade for the benefit of monarchy and the people (E. Airumwunde, 2012, Omoike Idehen, 2011, T.O. Osemwengie, 2011, Amanyo Ufumwen, 2013). The blacksmiths were organized into four wards in Benin namely; *Igunekhua*, *Eyanugie*, *Ugboha* and *Iguniwegie* also known as *Iguadaha*. The *Igunekhua* blacksmith were specifically responsible for the production of the famous "*Ada* and *Eben*" and other symbol of royalty and authority for the Oba.



The guild of wood workers (*owina*), carvers (*Igbesanmwan*) and leather workers (*Isohian* and *Isekpokin*) were responsible for the production of different symbolic objects that helped to enhance the dignity, royalty and the authority of the Oba. For example, the royal throne (*ekete*) and the rectangular stool (*egba*) produced by the guild of carvers, remained the exclusive use or preserve of the Oba. The famous leather fan (*ezuzu*) and the round box (*ekpokin*) made of bark and leather, produced by the leather workers (*isohian*) were exclusively for the use of the Oba's household.

The guilds were usually the organs or channels through which material gifts of the Oba to other monarchs, with whom Benin desired to establish friendly or diplomatic relationship, were produced. The Benin tradition has it that Oba Esigie (c.1504) sent brass crucifix, a product of the guild of brass casters, as a royal gift to the king of Portugal (J.U. Egharevba, 1968, p.28). The products of the guilds sent as gift items or symbols of authority by the Oba to rulers of friendly or vassal communities or kingdoms where different individuals were competing for supremacy or pre-eminent could be interpreted by the receivers as symbolizing their superiority over the other claimants. For example, in the course of the tussle for political pre-eminence and supremacy among the Ezechine communities in the present-day Aniocha area of Delta State of Nigeria, the Obi (King) of Issele-Uku claimed that the brass mask given his predecessor by the Oba Esigie of Benin symbolized his seniority and dominant position among the other kings in the area. Ubuluku, one of the communities in the area on the other hand, also made a counter claim of superiority as a result of gift of brass mask his predecessor received from the Oba of Benin (P.A. Igbafe, 1982, pp. 1-26). In 1816, Oba Ogbedor, in order to court the friendship of the Enigie (Kings) of Esan Kingdoms to support him in the war of succession between him and his brother, Eredia-uwa, dispatched messengers with two leather boxes (*ekpokin*) – product of leather workers' guild (*isohian*) - full of coral beads to be distributed to them (J.U. Egharevba, 1968, p.108).

In spite of providing means of exercising authority over weaker or vassal states and conveying gifts to friendly monarchs to consolidate good relations, the craft guilds served as avenue for the expression of social relationships within the Benin kingdom. Apart from being an association of professionals and craft men, the guild also had location's connotation in pre-colonial period. It was a common practice for all members of a guild to live in close proximity with one another in a particular street or ward in Benin. In that situation, such streets or quarters were named after the craft guilds. It is in this regard that the quarter where the carver guild lived was called *Igbesanmwan* while that of the weavers' guild was known as *Owina*. *Oregbeni* was named after the elephant hunters' guild, while the guild of blacksmiths (*Igunematon*) lived in three quarters in Benin, *Igun-N'Ekhwa*, *Igun N'Eyaen-Nugie*, and *Idumingun-N Ugboha* (O.B. Osadolor, 2001, p. 108). Once affiliated to any of the

guilds, a man must as a condition take up residence in the appropriate quarter. This ensured easy accessibility of the guild members for timely delivery of their products to the Oba, while their respective locations became known centers for the purchase of their products. A sixteenth century Dutch accounts confirmed the sales of iron wares or goods in some markets and designated locations in Benin (T. Hodgkin, 1960, pp. 121-122).

Each of the craft guilds had a council – ‘the guild council’ - which was responsible for the internal administration of the guild and by extension, the quarters or streets which they lived. The council consisted of the titled holders if any, and elders (*edion*). The title holders were appointed by the Oba within their guilds and the most senior of them presided over the council. However, where there were no title holders, the council was composed mainly of the elders (*edion*) within the guild and the most senior of the elders (*Odionwere*) presided. The council took charge of the day to day administration of the guilds and the quarters in which they resided. In more specific terms, the council was responsible for the settling of disputes between families in the guild and had power to try all disputes and cases except those dealing with witchcraft and homicide which were referred to the Oba’s court. The method of trial of cases was by ordeal and for witchcraft the ordeal had to be administered by the witch diviners’ guilds (*ivbiawo* and *ewaise*). In addition, the councils collected title fees from their members and stipulated tributes from their wards or streets for the Oba. It also organized labour for public works, mobilized men from their quarters for war at the command of the Oba and made laws for the peace and order within their own guilds and wards. According to Igbafe,

Since the guild councils were responsible for the internal administration of the guilds and hence the quarters and since the quarters represented units of administration within Benin Kingdom, it can therefore, be argued that the guilds were administrative units in pre colonial Benin (1982, p.20).

This relieved the Oba of the stress of ward administration in Benin.

It has earlier been stated that the guilds’ activities covered every aspects of the Oba’s needs. As a result the various guilds were associated with each of the three palace societies: *Iwebo*, *Iweguae* and *Ibiwe* (see table) that was responsible for every aspects of the Oba’s household. This arrangement was that “since each of the palace societies took charge of the Oba’s household, and each of the guilds performed special obligations to the Oba, in consequence, the guilds were affiliated to either of the palace societies according to the nature of their services” (P.A. Igbafe, 1980, p.27). For example, since the *iwebo* palace society took charge of the Oba’s regalia, by relevance, all guilds whose products or activities traditionally fit into the Oba’s regalia were affiliated to the society. In this regard the guilds of ivory and wood

carvers, bronze casters, leather workers and bead makers, entertainers (dancers and musicians) who performed at palace ceremonies were all affiliated to the *iwebo* palace society. In the same vein, the guilds which hosted members of the large body of the Oba's personal doctors and diviners were affiliated to the *iweguae* palace society which was in-charge of the physical and spiritual well-being of the monarch and his household. Some other guilds by way of their activities or services belonged to the *Ibiwe* palace society which was in-charge of the Oba's harem. In this category there were keepers of Oba's cattle (*iriamila*), repairer of the walls of the harem (*Ibieriye*), butchers of animals offered for sacrifice (*iwaramwen*) and the blacksmiths to the harem (*ogunimwenfo*) amongst others.

### Palace Societies and Affiliated Guilds

<b>IWEBO: Chamberlains, keepers of the royal wardrobes and regalia</b>	<b>IWEGUAE: in charge of the royal household and of personal services to the Oba</b>	<b>IBIWE: Keepers of the Royal Harem</b>
1. <i>Ogbelaka</i> : Dancers and drummers	1. <i>Isienmwenro</i> : Bodyguard of the Oba	1. <i>Ivbemezi</i> : Responsible for health and fertility rituals of the Oba's wives
2. <i>Ogbesasa</i> : Royal Shield Bearers	2. <i>Eben</i> : Embalmers of deceased Kings.	2. <i>Ogunimwenfo</i> : Ogun Priests
3. <i>Igun Eronmwon</i> : Bronze Casters	3. <i>Ebo/Ewaise</i> : Royal Physicians and Diviners	3. <i>Ibieiye</i> : Servants for the wives
4. <i>Igun Ematon</i> : Blacksmiths	4. <i>Ihogbe</i> : Priests and Keepers of the shrines of the royal ancestors, court Chroniclers	4. <i>Iwehiaze</i> : Responsible for specific prayers
5. <i>Igbesanmwan</i> : Ivory- and woodcarvers	5. <i>Efa</i> : Priests and Diviners	5. <i>Iriemila</i> : Custodians of the Oba's cattle
6. <i>Avbigbe</i> : Town Criers or Heralds	6. <i>Emahe</i> : Performers of tranquility- and peace-forging rituals for the royal harem	6. <i>Iwenoga</i> : Priests
7. <i>Owina n'Ido</i> : Weavers	7. <i>Ahorhan</i> : Ritual Land Purifiers	
8. <i>Odionmwan</i> : Ceremonial Executioners	8. <i>Evbiemwen</i> : Caretakers of the princes	
9. <i>Ikpema</i> : Royal Drummers	9. <i>Ikpokan</i> : Guardians of specific shrines and Dancers	
10. <i>Ivbiosa/Igbiosuan</i> : Priests		
11. <i>Emadase</i> : Oro Dancers		
12. <i>Isekpoki</i> : Leatherworkers		
13. <i>Igbuzebu</i> : Royal Dancers		
14. <i>Iwifemwen</i> : Archers and		

Manufacturers of arrows poison	10. <i>Oguanogbe</i> : Witch Diviners	
15. <i>Iwoki</i> : Astrologists, Meteorologists and Cannonries	11. <i>Iwowa</i> : Collectors of river taxes	
16. <i>Iwogun</i> : Keepers of specific shrines	12. <i>Amufi</i> : Acrobats and Eagle Hunters	
17. <i>Ukhegie</i> : Keepers of specific shrines	13. <i>Uhunwidumwun</i> : Guardians of the original site of Benin City	
18. <i>Iguisi</i> : Secret tasks for the Oba	14. <i>Unueru</i> : Keepers of a medicine shrine	
19. <i>Iviekpen</i> : Leopard Hunters	15. <i>Idumwun</i> <i>Ivbiotor</i> : Keepers of medicine for ritual purification.	
20. <i>Ivekpen</i> : Leopard Butchers and Dividers		
21. Various Guilds: <i>Enisen</i> : Beadmakers and Royal Storekeepers; <i>Igbemaba</i> : Drummers; <i>Ikpeziken</i> : Royal Flute Players; <i>Ikpeakoen</i> : Ivory- Hornblowers; <i>Ifiato</i> : Ritual Path-Cleaners		

Sources: P.A. Igbafe (1979), E.B. Eweka (1992), D. Inneh (2007)

A close examination of the guilds affiliation to the palace societies reveals certain plausible conclusions. First, these palace societies served as the link between the Oba and the respective guilds. When the services of any of the guilds were required by the Oba, the society to which the guild was affiliated contacted the head of the guild concerned for prompt response. Second, the palace society to which any particular guild belonged did not exercise any control or influence over both the internal affairs of the guilds or their wards. The relationship that existed between them was only to the extent of ensuring that the personal requirements of the Oba were met. The palace societies only performed the important task of linking up with the specific guild(s) for the needs of the Oba. In addition, since the members of the palace societies belonged to the noble class (*adesotu*) in Benin and lived in certain part of the town set for them, they therefore, played no part in the internal affairs of the guilds. The pre-colonial Benin society was classified into two classes; the nobility (*adesotu*) and the commoners (*ivbiotu*). While the former were the ruling class of

courtiers relying on the prerequisites of office for their livelihood, the latter were the peasant and artisan class. The three palace societies of *iwebo*, *iweguae* and *ibiwe*, belonged to the noble class. However, there was fluidity or mobility from the lower (*ivbiotu*) to the higher (*adesotu*) classes in the society, especially for artisans groups who were associated with the guilds. Therefore, apart from materials gifts from the Oba as stated above, the guilds members' affiliation to the respective palace societies afforded the members the privilege of upward movement in the social ladder in pre colonial Benin society. Similarly, slaves could be emancipated to form new guilds that took care of new needs of the Oba or injected into waning guilds to revive their productive capacity and relevance. When this happened, such emancipated slaves whether as member of new guilds or revival of waning ones became gradually integrated into the society of free persons and gained general acceptance (P.A. Igbafe, 1975, pp. 409-429). There is no doubt that some of the guilds were not viable and therefore, not attractive to freeborn. To save such guilds from dying, especially when they had important ceremonial functions to perform for the Oba, slaves were emancipated and injected into such guilds to ensure their survivals. The emancipated slaves received from the Oba gift of wives to enable them raise their families, land for agriculture and tools for their craft.

Apart from the above, there were other methods by which individuals became members of guilds. One of such was children learning under their fathers from very early age and subsequently becoming members of their fathers' guilds on the completion of their training. Another method was by parents enrolling their children as apprentice to particular craftsmen on the payment of token fees. On the completion of their training which lasted for between three to seven years, such individuals became members of the guilds of their masters (E. Airumwunde, 2012, Amanyo Udumwen, 2012, O. Unuigbe, 2013). It is important to state that craft guilds whether formed by freeborn or emancipated slaves, catered for the various needs of the Oba and thus contributed to the well-being of the monarchy and the kingdom in general.

The desire to centralize and control the various craft guilds in Benin by the Oba should not be a surprise to those who are abreast with the history of Benin and the authority of the Oba. The Oba had enormous power and could interfere in every aspect of the life of the people. He was the pivot on which the political, social and economic systems of Benin revolved (Igbafe, 1979). He therefore, did not tolerate any opposition of his authority. The Oba could manipulate the various institutions in the Kingdom to suit his whim and caprices. He thus commanded enormous and absolute authority. According to Hubbard, "the Oba was not only the civil head of the state; he was also the religious base as well. He was in fact, regarded as a divine person who in himself summed up the whole of the race.... In him dwelt the divine spirit passed on to him from his forebears" (1948, p.174). Any challenge to the authority of the Oba was met with ruthlessness. For example, Eken, a powerful

Enogie (duke) at Uselu, a village in the outskirt of Benin opposed the authority of the Oba Ewuare and imitated him in every respect. In order to curb his excesses, the Oba dispatched him with a large army to confront the rebellious people of Owo in Yoruba land and ensured that he did not return alive. In his stead, the Oba placed his first son and heir apparent as the regent of Uselu (*Edaiken of Uselu*) thus perpetually abolishing Eken's dynasty at Uselu (J.U. Egharevba, 1968, pp.13-19). Udo, a dukedom under Benin also had a taste of the enormous powers of the Oba when Aruanran, the Enogie (duke) of Udo challenged the authority of Oba Esigie (1504). In the war that ensued, Udo was defeated by Benin forces and the Oba subsequently abolished the Enogie institution in the dukedom and till date, Udo does not have Enogie (Ibid., pp.26-28). It was also the desire to ensure effective control over every facet of economic activities in Benin as they did in the political life of the people that the various Obas over the centuries established various craft guilds to control craftsmen and their products. This process effectively removed the power to produce and trade in lucrative articles from the common people. The products of members of the craft guilds thus remained royal property and production only took place by royal permission and commission (D. Inneh, 2007, p.103). The same way the Oba enjoyed absolute control over the political realm, he also had royal monopoly in the most lucrative aspect of the economic life of the people in the kingdom. He could take possession of the property of any of his nobles and other subjects without question. Oba Ewuare is said to have murdered Ekobe, the richest woman in the south of Benin and carted away her treasures including her slaves (J.U. Egharevba, 1968, p.14). Long distant trade and the trade between Benin and the Europeans were highly controlled by the Oba. Long distant or up-country trade was controlled by the Oba through trading associations known as *Ekhen*. The most important of these associations were known as the *Ekhen-Egbo* (traders of the forest) and *Ekhen Oria*. While the former operated in the Yoruba country, the former traded with the kingdoms of Esan up to Ilushi on the River Niger. Commercial activities with European traders at the port of Ughoton and along the Benin River were also controlled by the Oba using two senior title holders of the Iwebo palace society – the Uwangué and Eribo.

The contributions of the craft guilds to the sustenance of the Oba and the monarchy were thus reflection of the enormous powers which he wielded over his people. As their basic necessities were met by the craft guilds, the various Obas of Benin had sufficient time and energy to devote to the running of the affairs of state during the time of peace or crisis. It is on record that throughout the pre-colonial period, Benin witnessed a lot of crises ranging from wars of conquest, suppression of revolt and succession disputes (P. Ben-Amos Girshick & J. Thornton, 2001, pp. 353-376 and C.G. Okojie, 1996, pp. 34, 80,210-211). These crises and wars led at times, to loss of territories, some of which were vital sources of taxes and tributes (revenue) to the Oba. This situation would have weakened the monarchy or led to her collapse

had there been no back-up sources of revenue provided by the craft guilds. With the assured supply of revenue and other basic necessities, Benin monarchy was able to survive all the socio-political and economic crises that the Kingdom witnessed throughout the pre-colonial period.

### Conclusion

That Benin art and crafts flourished under the craft guilds system is in no doubt. The craft guilds developed to the extent that its products and activities adequately responded to all aspects of the Oba's needs. There is therefore, no aspect of the Oba's needs that was not effectively catered for by the craft guilds; being it social, political and economic. It is not unimaginable therefore, to argue that the support rendered by the guilds to the monarchy was one of the major reasons for the survival of the monarchy and the kingdom for several centuries. This was due to the fact that the craft guilds ensured the regular supply of the all the needs of the monarchy even in time of crises, some of which threatened her revenue base. The financial and material security provided by the craft guilds thus contributed to the sustenance of Benin monarchy up to the time of her conquest by the British in 1897.

The 1897 British punitive expedition in Benin thus had serious implications for the monarchy and the craft guilds. It weakened the power of the Oba and led to the dispersal of the members of the guilds to different parts of Benin Kingdom. The deposition Oba Ovonramwen (the last independent Oba of Benin) and his eventual deportation to Calabar where he died in 1914, led to the destruction of the social fabric on which the guilds stood. Henceforth, the guild system in Benin began to wane both in activities and relevance. The subsequent imposition of colonial rule and the attendant importation of cheap European merchandise further weakened the activities of the guilds in Benin as the people began to patronize the imported merchandise as against those hitherto produced by the craft guilds. Thus the patronage of the products of some of the guilds gradually declined considerably as the people cultivated taste for imported products. As a result the guild of blacksmiths, leather workers, weavers, pot makers and bead makers gradually faded away.

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### **INTERVIEWS**

Interview with Airumwunde, E., 78 years, Farmer, Obayantor (Benin), 20/03/12.

Interview with Idehen Omoike (Mrs), 72 years, Farmer, Benin City, 06/05/11.

Interview with Osemwengie, T.O., 84 years, Rtd Civil Servant, Benin City, 24/08/11.

Interview with Ufumwen, Amanyo, 67 years, Farmer, Odiguetue, 07/07/12.

Interview with Unuigbe, O. 72 years, Farmer, Odighi, 26/07/13.