

## THE NATURE OF PRE-COLONIAL BENIN AND HER NEIGHBOUR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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### **Abstract**

*The study examined the nature of international relations in Pre-Colonial Benin and her neighbours, before the effective occupation of this region by the European invaders. The work posits that these states had sophisticated inter-state system, that is comparable to contemporary Westphalian narrative on one hand. While, on the other hand, it had a unique international system that was remarkably different from the Euro-centric perspective. Primary and Secondary sources were used to supply historical perspective to the wider debate about pre-colonial Africa international relations. In order to ensure authentication of facts, internal and external criticism of data collected was done and the facts were presented in a clear form involving problem of organization, composition, exposition and interpretation. In addition, Afrocentrism theoretical framework was used to situate pre-colonial Africa's understanding of inter-states relations. The study found that economic reason was a major factor that sustained international relations between Benin and her immediate neighbours in pre-colonial times. Trade and commerce was relatively without conflict, and as a result, there was peace and cordiality among groups. It also, found that treaties played a major part in Benin and her neighbours' inter-state relations, which were most visible in periods of wars and conflicts through the instrumentality of dialogue and negotiations.*

**Keywords:** International Relations, State, Pre-colonial and Benin

### **Introduction**

In scholarly literatures for international relations pre-colonial African experience is scarcely given the attention it deserves, except in a few cases (Smith,1973), and (Pella Jr.,2015). This is partly due to Eurocentric's bias towards this part of the world. However, African historians and political scientists alike have over the years unconsciously exacerbated the reality of inter-state relations. The impact of this misrepresentation of pre-colonial Africa international relations historiography is most obvious in intergroup relations studies (Okpeh,2007/208),

(Okpevra,2014) and (Ajayi,2005/2006). The lacuna in the above understanding is rightly captured by Izuagie, when he noted that; "Undeniably, the concept of "group" could be employed in certain contexts that are particular informal to refer to a 'state'. But the former can never be an adequate replacement for the latter. The reason for this is that the concept is not just less formal but is not also in tandem with the sanctity and prestige of the concept of states"(2018:4). It is imperative to understand that several years before the arrival of the European colonialist and the subsequent arbitrary creation of the Nigerian States, the various nationalities that today make up the Nigerian State were already engaging in sophisticated inter-state relations.

An essential aspect of these intellectual assaults was the denial of the reality of state formation in the pre-colonial period in Africa. This was anchored on the belief that African states boundaries were fluid and lacked the prerequisites of a standard European State. However, it is important to note, that by their historical realities, African states acknowledged the extent of their land boundaries. In some cases, states agreed on certain signs such as the *Irokotree*, an anthill or some other natural landmarks such as rivers, mountains or valleys as defining the limits of political authority(Otoide,2001). It is in this vein, that Anyanwu cited in (Izuagie,2018:4) agreed that: "These polities represented autonomous or sovereign units which served as the platform for legitimate exercise of human activities social, economic, political, ritual, legal, etc both internally and externally"(2018:4).

The above rule was generally applicable in pre-colonial Benin state and her neighbours of the Yoruba peoples on the west and north, Ibo on the east, Ishan and Northern Edo on the north-east, and Urhobo, Itsekiri, and the Ijaw on the south. The coming of the Europeans into the continent of Africa during the colonial era altered the indigenous international relations and in its place the European order of international system was entrenched which was based on Westphalian order. The Westphalian order is essentially on the principle of 'national sovereignty" which gave countries exclusive rights over their territory. Nevertheless, pre-colonial African states system was quite different from their European counterparts because the tasks of African state leaders before the colonial period, was governing the populace, rather than governing a limited area of land(Herbst,2000:55).

Thus, this work has direct implications for a fundamental interpretation and re-periodization of the origin of modern international relations, commonly restricted to the Westphalian peace settlements of 1648. To advance the discussion, this work is segmented into four parts: immediately after this introduction comes the basis of Benin pre-colonial international relations; this aspect put to bear the context and the genesis of pre-colonial Benin inter-state relations, thereafter the theoretical framework of the study, followed by the nature of pre-colonial Benin and her neighbours international relations then the conclusion.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the “Afrocentric theory” as espoused by Molefi Asante. The uniqueness of Afrocentric theory lies in the fact that virtually all other theories reinforces the hegemony of Eurocentric concepts for explaining and solving human and societal phenomenon (Schiele, 1996:284). According to Asante, who is acknowledged to be the most vocal scholar of Afrocentrism, the concept is a philosophical position associated with the discovery, positioning, and actualization of the African heritage within the context of history and culture (2003:37). It places African issues at the center of inquiry, and promotes the African people as subjects rather than objects of Eurocentric views. Asante contends that our way of viewing the universe is just as valid as any; we will achieve the kind of shift that we need to participate fully in a multicultural global society (Asante, 2003:37).

The Westphalian narrative underscores the superiority of Eurocentric perspective of inter-states' relations. This notion holds that Westphalia treaty of 1648 created an international society thereby consolidating a normative divergence between European international relations and the rest of the international system (Kayaoglu,2010). Cheik Anta Diop, another key proponent of Afrocentrism, argued that ‘Afrocentrism is the doctrine to recover the past and systematically turnover Western cultural premise of Africa(1990). Both Asante and Diop thus theorized Afrocentrism as a struggle to readiness of African peoples for liberty from the perimeter of Western domination, and posited that the African culture was at ‘the center, not periphery; as subject, not object’ in the discourse of humanity (Walker,1996). It is in line with the above, that Chukwuokolo stated:

Afrocentrism, which means African centeredness, does not violently confront any person or people, but is a resolute attempt to put the records right. It is about placing African people within their own historical framework. It is a demand that the contributions of Africans in all areas of civilization be reflected in world history (2009:29).

In summary, Afrocentrism places Africa at its center of discourse while emphasizing other people's right to practice and celebrate their own culture as long as it does not interfere with their collective interests(Mazama,2001).

### **The Basis of Benin Pre-colonial International Relations**

Benin empire was one of the oldest and most highly developed states in West Africa, dating back to the 11th century (Koutonin,2016). The *Guinness Book of Records* [1974 edition] described the walls of Benin City and its surrounding kingdom as the world's largest earthwork carried out prior to the mechanical period. Pearce (2020), also acknowledged this when he described the Benin city wall as "four times longer than the Great wall of China, and consumed a hundred a hundred times more material than the Great pyramids of Cheops". By 1485, when the Portuguese first discovered the kingdom they described it as one of the most beautiful and best planned cities in the world. In fact, they recognized the city as "Great City of Benin" when city was hardly used in Africa in particular and the world in general (Koutonin,2016:1). Summarily, from the evidences flowing from above, it could be suggested that pre-colonial Benin state was sophisticated administratively and engaged actively in inter-states relations with her immediate neighbouring states on one hand and "on the world stage" (Aisien and Oriakhi,2013:107).

Unlike the pre-westphalian European states which was described by Nicolson (1942), as primitive in the sense that foreigners were regarded as both dangerous and impure, and was shown in the case of Envoys to the Tarka Khan who were mandated to pass through fire for purification before they are allowed passage.About this same ( Holsinger,2020:1), described the city of London as a place of "thievery, prostitution, murder, bribery...." Contrarily, this was not the case of most pre-colonial African states. The foremost European adventurers claimed that the city of Benin was a "place free of crime and hunger, with large

streets and houses kept clean; a city filled with courteous, honest people, and run by a centralized and highly sophisticated bureaucracy" (Kounonin, 2020:1). It is important to note that while all these were happening in Europe, international relations was being carried on in pre-colonial Benin in a very decent and dignifying manner (Adegbulu,2011:170). Foreigners to Benin were not only welcomed but were equally treated decently. According to Egharevba, pre-colonial Benin Empire maintained a robust diplomatic interactions with her immediate Yoruba states. In order to ensure smooth diplomatic maneuvering, chiefs that were well tutored in oratory were chosen as special envoys to carry messages and bargain with other kings in places such as Ife. He noted that it was one of such voyage that produced the present Royal Dynasty on the ancient throne of Benin (1968:7). It was also noted, that when Affonso d" Aveiro visited Benin as an ambassador from John II of Portugal in year 1486, Oba Ozolua of the Benin kingdom chose the Ohen-Okun of Ughoton as the ambassador from Benin to go along with Aveiro back to Lisbon. Ambassador Ohen-Okun was described as "a man of good speech" (Ryder,1969:3).

Existing literatures have shown that by the fifteenth century, Benin kingdom had established a sophisticated socio-political, economic and cultural links with her immediate neighbours and through these established relationships, there was cross-fertilization of ideals with helped to smoothen diplomatic interactions amongst the people (Oseghale,1990). Bradbury for instance, specifically remarked that, "of the Edo group of peoples, the Ishan are perhaps the most influenced by Benin"(1973:46). Available records have also suggested that this could be as a result of their geographical proximity which facilitated their interactions. For instance, though the Benin and the Esan states were of different geographical entities; there were high level of socio-economic interactions that triggered the "law of interdependence" (Egbefoh,2014:76). Similarly, Oseghale has noted that by 16th century the Benin internal trade had blossomed that trading activities were no longer restricted to domestic affairs but to other Yoruba states, Ibos and western delta states. This to a very large extent impacted on Benin economy and as well as her international image, the resultant effect made the immediate neighbours wanting to be associated with Benin (1990). On the other hand, Fage has examined the underlying factors that dictated it when he said:

Before colonialism, heterogeneous Africa was organized into states, nations ...Each state have its sets rules,

leadership procedures and culture. Due to its large region and population, there is a struggle, for control of power, resources, and land. These natural struggles for nature therefore led to means of inter states relationships. Most of the relations either took the form of alliance, subservient or truce; for economic benefit, political alliance or protection (1996:45).

Despite, the exaggerated peaceful nature of these states' interactions there were other skirmish interactions. The reality of conflicts and the imperative of peace thus compelled the people to devise various social conflict resolution mechanisms in order to foster cooperation in the land (Aka homen,2019). However, this buttressed Fage's point that pre-colonial African states were autonomous, with sovereign authority, self-governing as well as defined juridical limit (Fage,1996). Inter-states interactions were made possible in pre-colonial Benin because of the well laid administrative system.

Traditionally, Benin pre-colonial administration is centrally governed under the leadership of Oba, who was the symbol of authority in the state. He carried out his activities in collaboration with his prominent and powerful family members, the palace organization, and the other crowned heads. His royal residence was the center point around which the Government of the Benin Kingdom is anchored. A council of seven cabinet members, known as Uzama and other chiefs served as the central executive arm that carried out the decisions of the monarch and customarily formed the central council of advisers (Godspower,2020). In addition, Pre-colonial Benin state was also sub-divided into a number of village heads or dukedoms known as the *Enigie*, who acted as the middleman between the villagers and the king. The primary responsibility of the dukes was to collect taxes and levies such as money in this case cowries were used and as well as other items like yam, cattle etc. All these monetary contributions were essentially used for the upkeep of the royal palace.

Essentially, international trade in pre-colonial Benin was done majorly through trade by barter. Barter is done by exchanging goods and commodities. This simply means that a farmer may use his farm produce such as cassava, yam, sorghum to get the services of a fisherman. Although, cowries were used as medium of exchange but comparatively barter was mostly used (Godspower,2020).

Pre-colonial Benin judicial system was such that every household head took responsibility and administered justice in his household but in situation where such acrimonious activities persisted it was the responsibility of village elders to mediate. However, serious cases such as murder, treason, or succession disputes were brought before the king in the royal palace in Benin City (Godspower,2020). In a related development, in Esan land, especially in Uromi according to Butcher's intelligence report crimes were of two types; crime against the *Enogie* [Onojie] and, crimes against the *Edion*. The crime against Onojie was adjudicated by the village *Inotus* [age-grade] and where the suspect was not satisfied with the decision of the *Inotus* appeal was made to the palace for final judgment. Examples of crimes against the Enogie included: murder and manslaughter, abduction of wives, dangerous assault, and all assault on the *Inotus*. While crimes against Edion were tried in *Okogele* by the Edion such crimes includes adulteries, minor assault, small theft etc(1932:19).

Also, in pre-colonial times, because of the exigency of conflict the Benin kingdom pursued a military policy by the warrior kings, and this was carried out through extensive warfare and expansion(Osadolor, 2000). In the same manner, *Inotus* according to Butcher intelligence report inUromi village were responsible for the internal protection or safeguard of the land against external aggressors. In doing this, each group was put under the control of captain known as *Okakuro* [Okakulo] (Butcher,1932). It could be said thus that economic relationships, political treaties and security coalitions existed in pre-colonial Benin that helped in the furtherance of international relations. For example, during the war between Benin and Agba of Uromi, it was said that king Agba sought for the coalition of other kingdoms in Esan land and appealed to the Atta of Idah for military assistance against Benin (Egharevba,1968). The political and military doggedness demonstrated by king Agba could be likened to contemporary forces of NATO strategic military alliances, which today constitutes a major bloc in international political system. It was based on this understanding for example that Huliaras and Magliveras (2016), regarded warfare in pre-colonial Africa as legitimate foreign policy tool, served as means of settling both political and economic scores. Idehen (2020) buttressed this further point when he said that "foreign policy" is a critical aspect of international relations, that determines 'who' 'how' and 'when' a country interacts. He went on to add that though most countries foreign policy statements are clearly written in their constitution but some are conventional. Despite this acrimonious relationships Okpeh Okpeh Jnr, has argued that pre-colonial Nigerian states enjoyed relatively peaceful level of

interactions than their counterparts in post-colonial era that were so bedeviled with discords due to imperialists arbitrary land boundaries. (Okpeh,2008).

Another important point, was the similarities that existed in the administrative organization amongst these neighbouring states around Benin. By the 15th century, the idea of monarchy was already established in many of these states (Oseghale,1990). In Esan land for instance, the Enijie succeeded in establishing a firm control of their various kingdoms. Bradbury cited in Oseghale acknowledged this when he observed that "in general, the size of the chiefdoms and the power of the enijie increased with increasing distance from Benin"(1990:20). Although, Pre-colonial Benin Kingdom was established on the philosophy of communism because they were independent sovereign entities with defined territorial jurisdictions, there was the need to open up more channels of interactions with outside world. Consequently, it could be suggested that international relations was a reality in pre-colonial Benin. As stated by Fage trading activities were the dominant force that shaped pre-colonial Africa international relations (1996). The implication is that, at least there was international relations in pre-colonial Benin.

### **Economic Nature of Pre-Colonial Benin International Relations**

Economic reason was a major factor that sustained international relations between Benin and her immediate neighbours in pre-colonial times. Trade thrived among groups and this was hinged on long distance trade. Additionally, trade and commerce was without conflict, and as a result of this, there was peace and cordiality among groups. This aided the setting up of several markets across neighbouring lands. As noted by Okoduwa, before the advent of the Europeans Esan people had built up a magnificent cotton industry which produced the prominent *Esan Ukpon Ododo*, these materials were produced in Esan land expansive amount were traded to places like Benin and Agbor (Okoduwa and Odigie,2008). The *ododo*-dyed red clothes associated with the Benin royal court, originally supplied by Esan producers, were some of the early products of international trade between Benin and Portugal (Ebhohimen and Agara,2018). Local cloth-knitting industries were dominated by women folks also existed in pre-colonial colonial Esan land. These cotton materials exchanged for salt, iron tools, and beads in Benin (Okoduwa and Odigie,2008).



Also, worthy of note was the issue of migration for greener pasture in international system, which has become a major source of worries in many nations of the world. It is important for us to understand, that this is not a new phenomenon as evidence suggest that the earliest *Ojieogun* (Blacksmith) were said to have migrated from Benin to Esanland when their service became imperative in other societies. They formed guilds and apprenticeship became the norm. Many Esan sons and daughters benefited immensely from their services. A case in point was the blacksmith industry that was established in Ewoyoma village in Uromi where the art of blacksmithing were taught to the princes in Uromi. This helped those trained to establish their own local industries where they produced farm implements such as hoe, cutlass, etc, for home use as well as for commercial purposes (Okoduwa,2006).

Another item of trade between Benin and Esan was Pepper (*capsicum*) which was called *ASIN* in Esan dialect. It was a major source of trade especially during the external trade between Benin and the Portuguese. The discovery of Esan pepper which was later called Benin pepper became a major substitute for Indian pepper (Okoduwa,2006). About the same period, there was ivory trade. In c1486 ivory trade became the mainstay of Benin economy. The Esan people were the main suppliers of this commodity to Benin. Ivory tusk became an important commodity of trade and formed part of the annual tribute payment from the *Enijies* to the Oba of Benin who in turn supplied to Portuguese traders (Okoduwa,2006). This trade with Benin led to the emergence of merchant princes, during the reign of Onojie (king) Agba of Uromi. The flourishing nature of this trade led to the establishment of various wards by the Uromi princes. Ujiagbedion for instance, had his ward in Ukoni, and was recognized as a wealthy prince. Similarly, other princes such as Iyere and Ogor whose trade links went beyond Esanland, to places as far as Agbede, Ora, Abudu and Benin (Okoduwa,2006). Craft and industries were also important economic activities that fostered international trade in pre-colonial Benin. Benin indigenes were organized into occupational groups of craftsmen and professionals that supplied the Oba's palace with specific item in return for monopoly rights from the Oba in their various trade and occupations (Igbafe,1980). Consequently, Benin became a beehive of vibrant economic activities which gradually expanded to meet the challenges provided the Igbo, Ika-Agbor, Igala, Nupe and Afemai people (Oseghale,1990).

It is imperative to understand that increase in commercial activities between Benin-Esan led to rapid accumulation of wealth and the emergence of new class of people. Those were the professional traders. This in turn led to transformation, in the standard of living of the people. Exchanges between these groups were not restricted to essential commodities such as elephant tusks, gold smiting and the likes but even in agricultural produce such as yam. For example, at the beginning of 1900s the trade between Esan and the Benin in yams totaled to 156,888(N.AI,1932). Traders from Benin had trading routes through Esan villages such as Ekekhen (which was a market settlement) and Oria near Illushi also known as Ozigono on the bank of River Niger. Remarkable trade was said to have taken place between Benin and Esan in the 18th century which necessitated the establishment of trading association known as Ekhen-ORIA(Okoduwa,2000). According to Egbefoh, from the late 16th century and the beginning of the 19th century, the West bank of the River Niger, the market at Oria (*Egga-Oria*) became a centre of exchange, for all sort of people from diverse background especially the Benins. In this trade Ehor in Benin axis became the chief terminus of exchange (Egbefoh,2014). Oral source, cited by Egbefoh claimed that Benin to a very large extent, considered the Esan states as a reservoir of wealth and a place where they could have field day in trading activities as well as cheap human labour or these commercial activities got to its zenith when the Binis had contact with the Portuguese and other Europeans (Egbefoh,2015).

Apart from trade, expatriates were also exchanged. A good example was the case of Okpota, the powerful Esan native doctor who migrated to Benin as part of technical aid assistance. The efficacy of Okpota's charm was known beyond his immediate Esan neighboring communities. Okpota became a famous personal physician to Oba Ozolua. He was an honourable member of his kitchen cabinet. He was so honoured and respected by all throughout his days that the entrance to his compound used to be called *Urho-Okpota*, or Okpota's gate (Egharevba,1968). As accounted by Egharevba, "native doctors...were the most popular of all classes in Benin, they were the most feared, honoured and respected by all"(1968:206). Thus, it will not out of place to deduce from the relationship that existed between the Oba and Okpota that some other protégées were produced in Benin during the sojourn of Okpota in the kingdom. Infact, trading activities was so glaring among pre-colonial Benin state and her immediate neighbours that national survival interest which is the core of foreign policy was at the centre of external relations by states.

### **The Legal Nature of Pre-Colonial Benin International Relations**

One major element of pre-colonial Benin international relations was the idea of its law. This indigenous law which was unwritten, displayed extensively comparable qualities over a wide geo-political zone. This was the norm in Pre-colonial Benin and her immediate neighbours. This was made possible by the fact that the greater part of pre-colonial Benin immediate neighbouring states had their lineage to one common ancestor. As a result of this there were of similarities in their belief systems and this in turn helped to foster states cohesion. Despite the fact that African indigenous law was unwritten, there was an avalanche of scholarly literature that point to the proof of interstate relations during the pre-colonial era which gives credence to the utilization of international law (Akeredolu,2016); (Dalglish,2005). Even though there has been doubts as to whether African indigenous law was international law, caution must be applied because what is termed "international law" today was in use in European nations for a long time before it was globally so called. This showed, that no group of people ever existed without rules and regulations that governs them. It was the rules and regulations that molded the relationship of pre-colonial Benin and her immediate states and by extension, their international relations. Treaties were signed by agreed parties, and were often bilateral in nature. Penalties existed against a party that pulled out of the agreement (Ehile,2010). According to Smith, treaties in West Africa were binding and sacred. This was made possible through the administration of oath, which were widely accepted by the people. A case in point, is the planting of tree to demarcate the juridical limit between Oyo and the Benin empires perhaps in the 16th century (Smith,1989). He stated further that in pre-colonial West Africa, there was some level of diplomatic immunities which served as a protection against arbitrary detention of envoys, especially those who carried diplomatic credentials such as cane, a baton, a whistle, a fan or a sword (Smith,1989:12-13). Even if it is conceded, that during pre-colonial era, treaties were most often bilateral in nature, ambassador that were appointed on temporary basis, functioned maximally in their duty post. They symbolized the political and economic interest of the sending states. They sometimes encountered unpalatable experience in the course of their duties in foreign countries. Smith, expressed the suffering of African diplomats thus:

Ibn Fartua, for example, reports two occasions on which the troops of Idris Alooma of Bomo killed envoys from the

pagan So during wars in the late sixteenth century. The alleged imprisonment of ambassadors by a sixteenth - century Oba of Benin has been mentioned ... In 1726, for example, an Asante ambassador sent to ask the Fante to withdraw their protection from king Ntsiful of Wassa, who had taken refuge with them, was pelted with stones... In 1878 an envoy sent by the ruler of Imesi - Igbodo to assure Ibadan that his town would not join the Ekitiparapo was murdered by his own towns people on his return home (Smith,1989:25).

### **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, it could be deduced that pre-colonial Benin showed much evidence in diplomatic maneuvering in comparison to modern day international relations. The study brought to the fore that pre-colonial Benin inter-group interactions was of international dimension since it involved sovereign nations. It also showed that relationships were most often bilateral in nature. This helped to reduce to the barest minimum trading animosity because pre-colonial Benin cherished good neighbourliness. The idea of neighbourliness went beyond people living in a particular community in traditional African societies. It, however, involved inter-state relationships. To pre-colonial African people, kindness was a medium for building understanding and social cohesion(Olaoba,2010). This buttressed the Benin popular saying, "Aghakugbe, UduehiriSeaghae" which simply means "with cooperation and compromise, the ant can be properly dissected and its heart shared among the people"(Ngamen,2016:16). This gave us the understanding that pre-colonial Benin cherished the virtue of good neighbourliness which facilitated the idea of inter-states relations with her immediate neighbours.

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