

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Igue festival and the British invasion of Benin 1897: The violation of a people's culture and sovereignty

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**The Benin Kingdom was a sovereign state in pre-colonial West Africa. Sovereign in the sense that the Kingdom conducted and coordinated its internal and external affairs with its well structured political, social-cultural and economic institutions. One remarkable aspect of the Benin culture was the Igue festival. The festival was unique in the sense that it was a period when the Oba embarks on spiritual cleansing and prayers to departed ancestors for continued protection and growth of the land. The period of the festival was uncompromising and was spiritually adhered to. It was during this period that the British attempted to visit the Oba. This attempted visit to the land was declined by the Oba. An imposition of the visit by the British Crown resulted in the ambushed and killing of British officers. This incident marked the road map to the British invasion of the Kingdom in 1897. This study presents the sovereign nature of the Benin Kingdom, its social-cultural and economic uniqueness rooted in the belief and respect of deities. The paper further argues that the event of 1897 was a clear cut violation of the sovereignty, culture and territorial rights of the Benin Kingdom under a crooked agreement called the Gallwey Treaty of 1892. The Gallwey Treaty was a treaty entered into between the sovereigns of Benin and Britain for trade relations.**

**Key words:** Igue festival, British invasion, violation, culture and sovereignty

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## INTRODUCTION

Of all the West African societies, the Kingdom of Benin is the one most mentioned in contemporary European literature. Since the end of the 15th century, a great deal of material about Benin has been supplied by sailors, and traders, returning to Europe (Dmitri et al., 1999).

This information about the kingdom of Benin brought the Kingdom to European limelight for the eventual commencement of trade and commerce with the people at the coast of West Africa. The desire for trade and commerce by the European led to the signing of treaties with the indigenous people and the subsequent invasion and violation of the people's territorial sovereignty and culture in a bid to actualizing their economic quest.

This paper is aimed at discussing the British invasion of Benin in 1897 as a violation of the people's culture and territorial sovereignty from the view of the yearly traditional festival known as the Igue festival. The period of the Igue festival in Benin, is a period when the Oba and the people of Benin embarked on spiritual cleansing of the kingdom by offering varied sacrifice to the ancestors. It is also a well established custom that during the period when the festival is held, strangers or aliens are not allowed to visit the Oba. It was on these circumstances and various others which this paper will discuss that the British delegates attempted to visit the Oba and where ambushed and killed as against the

Oba's instructions. This incident eventually set the pace for British military expedition of 1897 under the cover of what is called a lopsided Treaty (Gallwey Treaty of 1892). The question is does the violation of a treaty that was not well communicated to the Oba, or a treaty that contained secrecy and deceit geared toward stealing the people's freedom warrant such violation of the people's culture and territorial sovereignty during the Igue festival? The aim of this article is to explore British expedition against the Benin under the cover of a crooked treaty and to establish the fact that the invasion was a clear violation of the people's culture and territorial sovereignty. For a clear conceptual mode of analysis, this paper will start by looking at the location and peoples of Benin Kingdom to have a grass root understanding of the people's location and the people's political and economic activities. The paper will also examine the Benin contact with the European, Portuguese and the British, the Gallwey Treaty and the eventual invasion of the Kingdom by the British in 1897. Benin kingdom is located South-west on Nigeria map and it is on the high tropical region of the rainforests. This makes the people to be very good agriculturalists even up till today. The Kingdom is remarkable for its size and it is well developed political system. The Oba also known as the King is the custodian of political, economic and social activities of the people. The Kingdom has had various great kings according to historical testimonies. Several centuries ago, at the time when Benin was called "Igodomingodo", the geographical area now known as Benin, was the hob of a conglomeration of little towns that developed or spread into most of the areas of modern state. Benin Kingdom is strategically located, economically and culturally endowed. Benin kingdom did not begin as a kingdom but grew from a small numbers of villages with the aid of territorial expansion and conquest as a result of its military strength. According to O.B. Osadolor, from the mid-fifteenth century, up to 1897, one of the determinants of the foreign policy of Benin was a proper assessment of its resources and particularly of its military strength and potential (Akenzua and Alonge, 1979, p7). At the height of its power in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Benin Empire had stretched from Lagos to the Niger and from the north to the coast. The vastness of the Benin Empire and its political structure was described by Lorenzo Pinto, a Portuguese who was on a visit to deliver a letter to the Oba from the Roman Catholic Priest, asserted thus:

*Great Benin, where the king resides, is larger than LISBON; all the streets run straight and as far as the eye can see. The houses are large, especially that of the King which is richly decorated and has fine columns. The city is wealthy and industrious. It is so well governed that theft is unknown, and the people live in such security that they have no doors in their houses (Ibid).*

Van Nyendaël, a Dutchman also gives account of the

inhabitants of Benin to be generally good-natured and very civil as well as generous in their treatment of strangers... (Osadolor, 2001). The kingdom developed a centralized system of government which revolves round the Oba. The Oba was the head and supreme military command in chief of the Benin kingdom. Apart from the political system which the Oba assumed paramount, he was also the custodian of traditions and customs of the people. This explained the fact that any decisions reached by the Oba have grave impact on the people. It appears from tradition that Benin has had kings and some forms of centralized government since earliest times (Benin City: The Edo State Capital, Annual Newspaper Publication, 2001. p. 57).

The economic activities of the people at the start of the century largely depended on coastal trade of which slaves was the paramount commodity at the period. With the abolition of the slave trade, legitimate trade became the paramount important commodity. Agricultural activities are the major economic activities of the Benin people. Yam, cassava, cocoyam, etc., are the basic crops and it is mainly cultivated by the men, although women usually assist in weeding and planting, and the whole labour supply is mobilized for the harvest (Davison and Buah, 1972). Trade in these commodities created an avenue for trade relations between its neighbours and the Europeans. Ryder's work *Benin and the European*, dealt extensively on Benin trade with the European countries and, in the process, the local trade between Benin and her neighbors (Stride and Ifeka, 1971, p.306).

The Benin kingdom developed an advanced artistic culture especially in its renowned artifacts of Bronze, Iron and Ivory. Execution Group from Benin asserted that the kingdom of Benin, located in Mid-western Nigeria, flourished from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries, and was renowned for the excellence of its bronze casting (Onwuejeogwu, 2007, p197). Another remarkable cultural aspect of the Benin people was the Igue festival. It takes place during the last two weeks of every year at the palace of the Oba, the custodian of the Benin culture and traditions. The festival always attracts thousands of people from the city. Those who watch it are taken back some hundreds of years into Benin history. Oral history supports the theory that the festival was first celebrated during the reign of Oba (King) Ewuare (1440) (A.F.C. Ryder, 1969, p.71). One significant aspect of the festival is that visitors are not allowed to visit the Oba and all routes leading to the kingdom are closed to foreigners. The cultural excellence of the Benins could rightly be traced during Igue festival than any other festival in Benin kingdom (Hutchinson, 1997, p.87).

The kingdom was politically, socio-culturally and economically organized, that the early European visitors have to testify of the kingdom well governed structure and institutions. During this period, the concept of state

has become paramount of the Benin kingdom, sovereign state as such. The kingdom was sovereign in the sense that during the fifteenth to the late eighteenth centuries, it had absolutely maintained internal and external sovereignty. Internal sovereignty connotes the ability and capability for a state to conduct its internal affairs without the interference of the external. The external sovereignty of the kingdom was its conduct of relations with other states in the international relations. The Kingdom under Oba Esigie sent a representative, the Chief of Ughoton (Olokun Prince) as an Ambassador to the king of Portugal. Looking at what sovereignty connotes, Benin kingdom was a sovereign state. The kingdom was ruled by the Oba, territorially defined, inhabited by the people and maintained a formidable military apparatus. All these were the features of the Benin kingdom before the British invasion.

### **Benin contact with the European**

Before the European economic and territorial quest that was formally given recognition in the Berlin conference of 1884, the kingdom of Benin has had contact and diplomatic relations with Portugal. Benin as it appears in documents of the seventeenth century was a wealthy and centralized kingdom. The natural reflection of centralized wealth was its magnificent capital city, one whose archeology has only begun to be explored (Ojehomon and Aveni, 1979, p.3). The Portuguese who the Benins have had early trade and diplomatic contacts with compared the city with Lisbon, the Dutch with Amsterdam or Antwerp, the Italian with Florence, and Spaniards with Madrid (Obadigie, 1979).

The Portuguese preceded all the other European countries in West Africa; they maintained trade and commercial relations with some states in Africa before the Scramble for Africa began in 1885. Historical evidence have shown that the Portuguese agent, Afonso d' Aveiro visited Benin kingdom in 1485 during the reign of Oba Ozoula, and established commercial and diplomatic relations between both countries. Aveiro returned to Lisbon with the Chief of Ughoton, who acted as the Obas's Ambassador (Connah, 1972) which eventually led to the establishment of a trading factory by the Chief of Ughoton. Subsequent interactions between Portugal and Benin kingdom continued even up to the reign of Oba Esigie who later was converted to a Christian by the missionaries.

Besides, before the Benin contact with the British, the kingdom has had mutual and reciprocal relations with Portugal. They both acknowledged and respected each other sovereignty. Portugal put into consideration and respected the territorial sovereignty, customs and traditions of the people of Benin by requesting at every interval and seeking the consent of the Oba before any

trade or diplomatic relations were carried out between both countries. For example, d' Aveiro did not force the Christian religion on the Oba, but begged or advice the Oba. But in the case of the British activities in the Benin kingdom, the sovereignty, customs and traditions of the people were violated under the guise of a "cooked" treaty for self economic interests.

This article raises and answers some critical questions that will reveal the inordinate ambitions of the British to dominate and colonize the kingdom of Benin for self interests under a crooked treaty of 1892. The questions are what necessitated the British interests in Africa? At what point did the British come in contact with the kingdom? What was the driving force of British invasion of Benin? Answers to these questions will reveal the injustice done to the kingdom by the British Government in 1897, which manifested in the outright violation of the people's culture and territorial sovereignty.

### **The British interest in Africa**

After the abolition of slave trade in 1807, the introduction of legitimate trade and the emerging industrialization in Europe, there arose the need for the European countries to quest for outlets and territories for the purchase of legitimate products for the benefits of the mother land. The period marked another milestone in the history of both the African countries and of the Europeans. The struggle for trade and colonies became a serious desire among the European countries most especially Britain and France. This period necessitated British interests in Africa. Although British interest in Africa and the kingdom of Benin was not a bad presence, its disrespect for the culture, traditions and territorial sovereignty of the people was a major problem which eventually caused social and political crises in African after their departure.

In 1874, states in West Africa were annexed by the British, creating her first major colony in West Africa. Further down the coast in the Niger Delta region, a Consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra interfered frequently in the affairs of the palm-oil exporting states in the interests of both Britain commerce and the suppression of the slave trade, but there was no attempt to acquire a territorial base from which he could operate (A.P.F: SOCG, 1598). Britain inordinate desire to secure full control of the trades in West Africa most especially in the Niger Delta region brought her in contact with the Benin kingdom. Few recorded statements had indicated that the Oba of Benin at the period, Oba Ovonramwen, had sought to avoid conflict with the British by first refusing to enter into any formal relations with them. However, relations had become strained in the preceding decades as the British established permanent trading stations and consulates along the coast and sought to

interfere in the internal affairs of African kingdoms (Stride and Ifeka, 1971, p.315).

At this point, it was obvious that the motivating factor behind British interference in the internal affairs of African states was trade and territorial aggrandizement which eventually led to the invasion of Benin kingdom by the British under a treaty. Treaty is an agreement entered into by parties to their understanding. The conceptual question is does the Oba and British officials had the same knowledge or understanding of the Gallwey Treaty? Certainly not, the British had comprehensive understanding of the Treaty more than the Oba. The treaty was cooked to tie the hands of the Oba and the people. It was full of deceit for self interests and above all a crooked treaty to the detriment of the kingdom. The treaty lacked proper communication to the understanding of the Oba and its officials. When the Oba realized the deceptive nature of the treaty, he declines the obligation.

As aforementioned, a treaty is an agreement entered into by parties to their understanding. Another fundamental question is does the signing of a treaty that was not well communicated to the Oba, a treaty full of deceit and secrecy amounted to the outright invasion and violation of a people's customs, tradition and territorial sovereignty? Is there any part of the treaty that states that in the event of breach invasion becomes an instrument of state policy? Certainly not! The fundamental truth about the treaty is that it was cooked to attain perceived goals by the British crown. This finally played itself out after the killings of British trade and political officials led by Philips who attempted to visit the Oba during the Igue festival.

### **The Gallwey Treaty 1892: An Arm Twisting Treaty**

The Gallwey Treaty of 1892 was the height of Britain desire to secure trade outlet in West Africa and subsequent colonization of the Benin River and the interior. By 1840, the Benin River had become a large scale centre of palm-oil trade. As the desire for trade and territories intensified, the British Government was more interested in protecting the trade and commercial interests of her citizens and companies by entering into various treaties with African kings. In 1849, John Beecroft, an arch advocate of British imperialism, was appointed the first British Consul of the Bights of Benin and Biafra. Located in the hinterland, Benin had been relatively unaffected by the increasing pressure brought about by British gun Diplomacy in the coastal region during the Mid-century (Crowder, 1968, p.45).

The report about the Benin kingdom by early European traders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who painted an horrible picture about the kingdom as uncivilized and barbaric and subsequent reports about the oil rich and economically endowed region of the Niger Delta, aroused Gallwey's

visit to Benin to enter into a treaty that would formally established Britain control and influence in the Benin kingdom. Gallwey's unending desire negotiated a ground visit to the Oba of Benin, Oba Ovonramwen. On 21 March, 1892, he left for Benin and arrived in the city on 23 March, 1892. He could not have an audience with the Oba until 26 March that same year (Ibid).

On the 26 March, 1892, Gallwey presented to the Oba a treaty which stole the freedom and sovereignty of the Benin people. He maneuvered the Oba and his chiefs into agreeing to terms of a treaty with the British government. In 1892, the British government made a treaty with the Oba at Benin City, which was for the opening of free trade of the European and the granting of welfares and facilities to his subjects (Otoide, 2005, p.526). The treaty was in nine parts. Article one to the last article contained an acts of secrecy and British inordinate desire to manipulate and subject the Benin kingdom to the Imperial Majesty. The treaty and all that it stood for marked the beginning of the end of the independence of Benin not only on account of its theoretical claims, which bordered on the fictitious, but also gave the British the pretext, if not the legal basis, for the subsequent invasion of Benin. The Gallwey Treaty was arm twisting because of its deceptiveness and its lopsided nature to drive home the British government's ambitions to control Benin kingdom.

A treaty is said to be binding when both parties understand in a clear terms the content of the treaty. The fact that the Oba signed what is referred to as an arm twisting agreement that was imposed on him by the British government does not automatically give to the British the right to invasion and violation of the people's culture and territorial sovereignty at the peak of Igue festival, a period of spiritual cleansing of the land and a period when the Oba goes into spiritual consultation with the ancestors. There is no part in the Gallwey treaty that states that in any event of default, invasion or military campaign becomes an instrument of policy.

During the Igue festival, foreigners are not allowed into kingdom to see the Oba. It was during this period that a political and trade mission headed by Acting Consul General Phillips and other European officers was sent to Benin kingdom by the British government to induce the Oba to implement the terms of the Gallwey treaty of 1892. At their arrival, the Oba was observing the ceremony called Igue, during which he must not be seen by strangers (Ryder, 1969, p.274). They demanded to see the Oba against all odds. It was clear that the driving force to see the Oba, against the customs and traditions of the people was the "cooked treaty" forced on the Oba. The Oba granted to receive the delegates and sent some chiefs to lead them to Benin City. The chiefs defiled the Oba's order ambushed and killed the European delegates in 1897, owing to the fear of uncertainty of the British mission. The Oba was furious and regarded the

actions of the chiefs uncalled for. The killings necessitated British military against the kingdom, but this move was unjustifiable because the Oba was not offered opportunity to tender explanation or apology to the British Government.

### **British invasion of Benin: A violation of the peoples' culture and territorial sovereignty**

It is true to say here that the British invasion of Benin in 1897 found credence in the killings of the British political and economic mission headed by General Phillips, by the Benin chiefs. But the British have before the incident, nursed an inordinate desire and ambition to occupy the Benin kingdom which was contained in the Gallwey treaty of 1892. The incident was an opportunity for the British to actualize their perceived objectives in the kingdom.

On January 12, 1897, Real-Admiral Harry Rawson, heading the squadron at the Cape of Good Hope in modern South Africa, was appointed to lead an expedition to invade Benin kingdom, destroy and capture the Oba. The operation to invade kingdom was named *British Expedition of 1897*. On February 9 1897, British began the invasion of Benin kingdom. Towns and villages were sacked and burnt down; the invasion force was about 1200 British Marines, sailors and Niger Coast Protectorate Forces, and composed of three columns: the 'Sapoba, Gwato and Main' Columns (Egharevba, 1968). After days of fierce fighting, the kingdom was finally captured by British who began looting the monuments and artworks in the Benin palace and set the whole city ablaze. Religious artifacts, Benin visual history, mnemonics and artworks were taken to England. It can also be seen from this perspective that the carting away of Benin artifacts and artworks violate the culture and sovereignty of the Benin kingdom.

### **Conclusion**

The British invasion of Benin in 1897 was a total violation of the people's culture and territorial sovereignty because the British showed no respect for the traditions and customs of the people at the peak of the Igue festival. Oba Ovonramwen never rejected the visitor; he refused at that moment and at that period because of the traditional festival. The British violated the culture and sovereignty of the people by trying to justify the invasion of Benin kingdom from two perspectives: the killings of British trade missionaries and Gallwey treaty signed between the Oba and the British government in 1892.

British military campaign against the Benin kingdom and the eventual deportation of Oba Ovonramwen to

exile in Calabar, without first sending a message to the Oba to explain or tender an apology for the killings amounted to a clear violation of the people's custom and territorial sovereignty. The Gallwey Treaty which the British government was compelling the Oba to enforce was not only deceitful but lopsided in favour of the British Government to the detriment of the Benin kingdom. What befell the kingdom in 1897 was clearly not because the Oba refused to keep his own part and responsibility of the treaty. Rather, it was because the treaty was lopsided to advance the interests of the Imperial Majesty at the detriment of the sovereignty of the Benin kingdom.

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