

OBA AKENZUA II AND THE MODERNIZATION OF BENIN, 1933-1963

**Dr. Victor Osaro Edo*

Introduction

Oko Godfrey Basimi Edoparhogbuyunmwun Eweka, the heir to Eweka II, was born in 1899.¹ He attended the Government School, Benin City, where he attained the highest standard available and left the impression of high moral culture and discipline befitting his royal birth in the minds of the teachers and others who associated with him. In 1918, he was sent to Lagos to further his studies at the King's College, and all through his stay in College, he was a gentle and brilliant Youngman. He left the college in 1921.

Between 1922 and 1923, he worked with the Benin Native administration as a transport clerk. He was confidential secretary to his father, *Oba* Eweka II, from 1924 to 1925. From 1926 to 1927, Godfrey began his political training when he was sent to Abeokuta to study the system of administration there.² By July 1931 he had completed his initiation in the palace, but his taking up of the title of the *Edaiken* of Uselu (crown prince) could not take place until 10 February 1933, two days after his father's death.³ The delay was because the incumbent *Oba* usually invested his heir with his title when he felt his own reign was coming to an end. By the time *Oba* Eweka II passed away, Prince Godfrey was well groomed to govern within a modern colonial context.

His Accession to the Throne

When the great pillar of chalk broke the effect of Western education on Godfrey, the first educated monarch in Benin was conspicuous.⁴ The extent to which the Benin monarchy has been able to modify its traditions was highlighted by the burial ceremonies of *Oba* Eweka II.

* *Department of History, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.*

In ancient times, the burial of a dead *Oba* was supposed to have been accompanied by many human sacrifices. However, the burial of Eweka II was different and events reflected the image of the monarch who would succeed to the throne. Instead of the usual human beings, livestock were used; two hundred goats, cows, rams, dogs and fowls each. On the question of supervision of the sacrifices, the chiefs requested that the Nigerian police be present throughout and witness all ceremonies. This invitation was made in order to show the general public that no human beings would be used for sacrifices. Furthermore, all ceremonies and sacrifices were to be performed during the day.⁵ These arrangements were innovations in the history of the monarchy, since in the olden days only senior chiefs were allowed to be present at the burial of any *Oba* of Benin.

As the Edaiken of Urelu, Prince Godfrey Eweka was crowned *Oba* Akenzua II on the 5 April, 1933. He was installed by His Honour, the Lieutenant Governor, Mr. Buchaman Smith, in front of the Native Court House, in the presence of a crowd of over ten thousand people. The new *Oba* then took an oath of allegiance to His Majesty, the British king, and he was given a staff of office as a First Class African king.⁶ The impact of western education, which Akenzua had acquired, showed vividly when he embarked upon restructuring some palace institutions in Benin.

Re-organization

The first reform carried out in the kingdom had to do with the Benin chiefs. The *Oba* designed new dresses that covered the chest (cassocks) for the Benin Chiefs; this was to support the existing regalia (Eyon, Uhunwogho, Iyenhwan etc).⁷ Hitherto, the Benin chiefs used to appear in the palace and even in public gatherings with their chest bare. Also, Akenzua II decided that he did not need a big harem; therefore, he disbanded his father's harem that was at Ughkekun, and remodelled it. In ancient times, the *Oba's* male children were not allowed to enter the harem once they had been circumcised or had reached the age of puberty. Akenzua II discontinued this tradition; the young princes were now allowed to

meet their mothers. But they could only talk to them from behind a cloth screen without seeing or touching them.⁸

Oba Akenzua II also designed a uniform for the *Emada* or *Omada*, (royal scimitar bearers), who used to be naked from the earliest times of Benin history to the reign of *Oba* Eweka II. He allowed these *Omada* to attend school and always released them whenever he felt they were ready to start fresh lives as young men. In the past, these *Omada* usually served the *Oba* for life. These *Omada* were also allowed to grow hair on their heads, armpits and private parts. This was not allowed in the past.⁹

During the same year of his coronation, *Oba* Akenzua II created over thirteen new titles, in conformity with certain Benin traditions, which allowed the *Oba* to honour Benin citizens who had distinguished themselves in the society, although *Oba* Eweka II had not been allowed to do this.¹⁰ The British believed that Eweka II would use this to gain unnecessary popularity among the people. The British allowed Akenzua II to create more chieftaincies because they believed that any popularity gained by *Oba* Akenzua II would not be misused, and that he would always be ready to cooperate with the British authorities.¹¹

On 14 January, 1934, Akenzua II presented his first son Oko (Prince) Solomon Igbinoghodua Aisiokuoba Akenzua – the incumbent *Oba* of Benin, to the council of Chiefs as the heir apparent to the Benin throne and *Edaiken* of Urelu.¹² This act by *Oba* Akenzua II was a clear break from tradition, in the sense that the *Edaiken* of Urelu title was never conferred on the heir apparent at such an early stage of an incumbent's reign. *Oba* Akenzua II himself was only conferred with the title after the death of his father, Eweka II. Akenzua II decided to set this precedence because he did not want any form of succession disputes, as was in the case of his father.¹³ Thus, Akenzua II, from the beginning of his reign, showed himself as adapting to western civilisation and modifying as much as possible, the old customs and traditions to fit in with the modern age. The fact that he was a Christian influenced the steps that were taken towards the realisation of his modernisation policies.

Although *Oba* Akenzua II was a monarch who strongly believed in the need for modernisation, he nevertheless realised that there were attributes of the monarchy, which could not be changed. For instance, the *UGIE-ORO* and the *UGIE-IGUN* festivals were important aspects of the monarchy, and an *Oba* had to perform them every year. These festivals were in honour of the departed *Obas*.¹⁴ The *Ugie-Oro* festival was performed during the second half of the year, and it was supposed to invoke the spirits of the departed *Obas* from the guidance of the people. The striking thing about these festivals was that every reigning *Oba* in the past had a separate shrine, and all these shrines had to be visited during each festival.

Each shrine was adorned by the *Oba's* staff of office, and the reigning *Oba* would have to wear the regalia of any *Oba* whose shrine was to be visited. The bone of contention here was that, a large number of art-works and beaded crowns were stolen from the palace during the "Benin punitive Expedition of 1897", and most of the shrines could not be visited without these beaded crowns. The British authorities could not account for most of these things, since most of them must have been stolen by private collectors of artworks. But the British officials were able to return the crown of *Oba* Ovonramwen (1888-1897) and some other artworks that were in their possession in 1935. *Oba* Akenzua II received it with great joy and burst into a song "*Obi gb'Eni, sage lemayo*" (poison has killed the elephant), to which he danced with the crown resting on his head.¹⁵ As would have been expected, the agitation to get these artworks back was a very subtle one, and *Oba* Akenzua brought out the diplomatic qualities in him.¹⁶

Oba Akenzua II did not stop at getting back some of the lost artworks from the British; he also decided to re-organise the old guild system, so that it would fit into a modern framework. In the olden days, the brass workers, leather workers (*Isekpoki*), Ivory workers, weavers, blacksmiths etc. were organised into different guilds. These guilds were rigidly controlled by the monarchy. Indeed, certain works, like the royal scimitar, could not be fashioned for just any individual except the monarchy. Some members of these guilds were not allowed to engage in free enterprise, they could only work for the

monarchy. Akenzua II removed all the restrictions and he encouraged all the guilds to improve the standard of their works.¹⁷

The brass workers and the carvers were commissioned by the *Oba* to help preserve the remaining artworks of ancient Benin, and they were also asked to help reproduce some of the lost or destroyed artworks. Notable among the works reproduced were the statue of *Oba* Ozolua, which stands at the Ozolua shrine in the palace of the *Oba* of Benin, and a relief sculpture of *Oba* Ovonramwen on a wall in the palace. These works were made by Chief Idah, a Benin artist.¹⁸

Furthermore, through the influence of Akenzua II, Pa J. U. Egharevha was commissioned to help collect artefacts in and around Benin for safe-keeping in a museum. Most of the antiquities that were collected came from the *Iwebo* (Regalia) apartments in the royal palace, but many other articles were also collected from around Benin Divisional. Pa Egharevba himself was made the first curator of the Benin Divisional Council Museum.¹⁹ To top all these innovations that were carried out by Akenzua II, he was a devout Christian and he attended St. Matthew's Church regularly. He encouraged missionary work and St. Peter's Church Iyarho was built on a land he allocated to the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.).²⁰

Economic Activities

The British, with the co-operation of *Oba* Akenzua II, were able to introduce some economic measures in the Benin Division. Timber concessions, the payment of royalties to chiefs and villages or communal rubber plantations made investments in family estates possible. By the middle of the 1930s, these investments were already yielding dividends in the production of a virile commercial elite in Benin.²¹ Akenzua II encouraged agriculture and the people were allowed to farm on lands that were not in use.

The *Oba* himself later went into the transportation business, although not on a very large scale. His vehicles were in most cases used for transporting goods from the rural areas to the urban centres. Akenzua II persuaded the British to re-organise the markets in Benin. Markets that used to be held by the roadsides were shifted to vacant plots. This saw the growth of markets at Agbado, Ekiosa, New Benin

etc. Akenzua II made part of the palace grounds available for the extension of the *Oba* market.²² Many more roads were constructed in and around Benin City, and those that were made during Eweka II's reign were re-surfaced. This saw the construction of Mission, Akpapava and Forestry roads.

Education

Education also received the attention of Akenzua II. In fact, it must be pointed out that it occupied a prominent position among the ventures that he undertook. With the *Oba*'s active involvement, primary schools were built all over Benin City. The C.M.S. Baptist and Catholic missions were involved in the establishment of these primary schools. These included, St. Peter's Primary School, Iyaro, St. Stephen's Primary School along Igun Street and the Benin Baptist Primary School along Mission road. Also, Akenzua's reign saw the establishment of Edo College at its old site in Iyaro.²³ The College had since been relocated to its permanent site on Murtala Muhammed way, Benin City.

From the foregoing, we have seen how the beginning of *Oba* Akenzua II portrayed himself as a monarch who saw the essence of modifying traditional institutions to suit changing times. Thus, it looked as if the British gamble in promoting the education of the monarch from early childhood, had started to pay good dividends. However, the *Oba* soon gradually headed for a showdown with the emerging intelligentsia and commercial *elite* in Benin. The years immediately after his accession witnessed conflict between him and the new generation of educated youngmen. Moreover, the *Oba*'s unpleasant task of promoting unpopular, though modern, government measures, and regulation, nourished the conflicts.²⁴

Akenzua II and the Creation of the Mid-West State

Oba Akenzua II was equally involved in politics, especially with respect to the creation of the Mid-West state. Indeed, as early as 1950, the *Oba* was already fully involved in partisan politics as he strongly supported the *Otu Edo* party, a party that was pro-monarchy.²⁵ Little wonder, the Tax payers' Association, which the *Otu Edo* party defeated in 1951, argued that the *Oba* was deviating from the role of a

traditional ruler by supporting one faction of his people against the other. However, the *Oba's* involvement in partisan politics was an indication of his ability to marry tradition with modernism. Thus, in spite of criticisms, the *Oba* continued his involvement in politics and lent his active support to the movement for the creation of a Mid-west state. In fact, it was suspected that he was instigating the movement. Indeed, in 1953, as a result of the crisis in the *Otu Edo* party, the *Oba* left the party to form and lead the Benin Delta peoples' party (B.D.P.P). This was significant because the creation of a Mid-west state would mean the breaking up of the western region and would once again bring together those areas, which used to be under the influence of the Benin kingdom.

However, in the 1954 federal parliamentary election, the Benin Delta peoples' party failed. In 1955, *Oba Akenzua II* joined the Action Group and in October that year accepted an appointment as minister without portfolio in the government of the western region. It has been pointed out that if *Oba Akenzua II* was not enticed away from the *Otu Edo* party, which was in alliance with the N.C.N.C., the Action Group would have lost that area to the opposition.²⁶ It is evident that the *Oba's* appointment re-shaped his political activities, because in 1956, he ceased entirely to be the patron of the *Otu Edo* party on the grounds that it was unreasonable for one to be opposing a government he was a part of.²⁷

Consequently, the *Oba* had to adapt to the changing political developments in Benin during the decolonisation era as he had done in the period before 1950 since that was the only option open to the institution, which he represented to continue to maintain its relevance. This was the era of politics and the educated *elite* had emerged as heir to the position to be soon vacated by the colonial officials. The monarchy was also set to find its feet in the new dispensation. Under the colonial dispensation, the monarchy had been made to play a major role even if the *Oba* was made to serve as an instrument of British rule, now that self-rule was being put in place, the institution of the monarchy also had to adjust and adapt to the new political dispensation or changes and make itself relevant.

However, the appointment of *Oba* Akenzua II as a minister was used to the best interest of the Bini people. Some previous studies have suggested that the *Oba* joined the Action Group because of the promise (by the Action Group) that the Mid-west region would be created.²⁸ This suggestion does not seem plausible, as the state creation exercise did not take place until much later. It was the position of the Action Group that state creation exercise should also be carried out in the remaining two regions – the northern and eastern parts of Nigeria where other minority groups were also clamouring or calling for separation from the majority ethnic groups.

Moreover, the failure of *Oba* Akenzua II to make a case for the creation of the Mid-west region before the Willinks Minorities' commission in 1957 attested to his level of commitment or non-commitment to the creation of the Mid-west region after joining the Action Group. However, the *Oba's* desire for the creation of the Mid-west region led him to found and finance the Benin Delta peoples' party. The *Oba* could not make a case before the Willinks minorities' commission because of the often suggested fear of deposition if he continued to remain in opposition to the Action Group regional government.²⁹ This argument, which seems more plausible, is corroborated by the threat from the Governor of the western region, who had "advised" him in a private meeting to disentangle himself from politics when the *Oba* disagreed with him over the state creation movement.³⁰

It is worth mentioning that the *Oba's* involvement in politics at that time was as a result of the fact that his finances did not seem to be in good shape. The *Otu Edo* – N.C.N.C. administration in the Benin division had withdrawn its patronages to the *Oba* who was now compelled to make do with his private business ventures that could not support his large family.³¹ Worse still, his personal financial involvement in the sponsoring of the Benin Delta peoples' party during the 1954 election had eaten deep into his finances. In such a situation, a ministerial salary, coupled with other patronages would have been an attraction for him to join the Action Group. But his explanation was "I did this to hasten the creation of the Mid-west

region which was long over due”.³² By this act, the *Oba* showed a great quality of resilience. From this time onward, he did not relent in his efforts until the referendum to create the Mid-west region took place on 23 July 1963.³³ With the creation of the Mid-west region on 10 August, 1963, the *Oba* became the president of the House of Chiefs until 1966 when, through a coup de’tat, the military took over the reins of government in the country.³⁴

Conclusion

It is worth mentioning that during the formative years of political development in Nigeria, Oba Akenzua II contributed tremendously to the politics and policies that were to guide the nation through its infancy to its emergence into the comity of nations.³⁵ *Oba* Akenzua II, for instance, had good working relationship with Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe – two major nationalists that worked for the independence of Nigeria under the banner of their party, the National Council for Nigerian Citizens (N.C.N.C.) from 1944 – 1966. When Nigeria became independent in 1960, *Oba* Akenzua II was one of the political giants to reckon with in government, and indeed up till the time when the military took over the administration of the country. As a result of the military take over of administration in Nigeria, political parties were dissolved and all political office holders were relieved of their offices. But it suffices to state that during the decolonisation or nationalist era between 1951 and 1966, the *Oba* adapted to the political developments of the period, which led to the change from colonial to partisan politics taking place in Nigeria.

Finally, it can be asserted that *Oba* Akenzua II ensured continuity within the Benin society, despite the great winds of change blowing against traditionalism. Indeed, the most notable bridge of continuity between tradition and modernity in the *elite* outlook was provided by the emergence of *Oba* Akenzua II.³⁶ He became the monarch as a product of western education and subsequently got integrated into the traditional *elite* structure. He thus effected a balance between tradition and modernity within the *elite* category, but he also protected and defended tradition. Indeed, the reign of *Oba*

Akenzua II was full of events (even beyond 1963); no wonder, his era had been described as one of re-organisation and modernisation in the history of Benin.

References

1. J. U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 3rd ed. (Ibadan. I.U.P., 1960) p. 63.
2. N. A. I. File B. P. 10/21 'A', Correspondence with the *Oba* of Benin.
3. O. Ebohon, *Eguae Oba N'Edo* (Benin City: Eribo Printers, 1979) p. 58.
4. When an *Oba* dies in Benin, it is not announced as such, statements like this are made.
5. N. A. I. File B. D 167, the *Oba* of Benin, personal papers.
6. N. A. I. File B. P. 280, Vol. III, Installation of the New *Oba* of Benin.
7. O. Ebohon, *Eguae Oba N'Edo* (Benin City: Eribo Printers, 1979) p. 60.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 34.
10. E. B. Eweka, *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles* (Benin City: Uniben Press, 1992) pp. 42-43.
11. A. A. Igunbor, "Oba Akenzua II of Benin and the Colonial Government, 1933-1960: An Era of Re-organisation" (Unpublished B. A. Long Essay, University of Ibadan, 1986) p. 24
12. O. Ebohon, *Eguae Oba N'Edo*, (Benin City: Eribo Printers, 1979) p. 59.
13. See V. O. Edo, "The Benin Monocracy, 1897-1978: A Study in Institutional Adaptation to Change" (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Ibadan, 2001) pp. 39-45.
14. Ibid., p. 78.
15. O. Ebohon, *Eguae Oba N'Edo*, (Benin City: Eribo Printers, 1979) p.60.
16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 62.
19. J. U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* 3rd ed (Ibadan: I.U.P. 1960) p. 65.
20. Ibid.
21. P. A. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration, 1897-1939: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom*, (London: Longman, 1979) p. 299.
22. V. O. Edo, "The Benin Monocracy, 1897-1978: A Study in Institutional Adaptation to Change"(Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, 2001) p. 78.
23. Ibid.
24. P. A. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration, 1897-1939: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom*, (London: Longman, 1979) p. 375-376.
25. By 1950, there were two major political groups in Benin, the Tax payers' Association and the *Otu Edo* Party. While the Tax payers' Association was regarded as the party of the masses and educated men who were in constant opposition to the government, the *Otu Edo* Party was said to be supported by the *Oba*.
26. *N. A. I.* Annual Report, 1955.
27. J. U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* 4th ed (Ibadan: I.U.P. 1968) p. 67.
28. See V. O. Edo, 'The Benin Monocracy' p. 121.
29. R. L. Sklar *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation*, (New York: Nok Publishers International, 1983) pp. 201-207.
30. *N. A. I.* B. P. 215 Governor of Western Region through private secretary to Resident (B.P.) 21/3/1955.
31. Ibid. Barrister Osayande Akenzua to Local Government Inspector. 12/2/1955.
32. J.U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 4th ed. (Ibadan I.U.P. 1968) p. 68.
33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.
35. *The Nigerian Observer*, December 5, 1978, pp. 1-2.
36. For more details, see Donald Cameron, *Principles of Native Administration and their Application*, Lagos, 1934 Para 13, See also P. A. Igbafe, *Benin under British Administration; the Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom, 1897-1938*, (London: Longman, 1979) p. 298.