

## **Great Benin On The World Stage: Re-Assessing Portugal-Benin Diplomacy In The 15<sup>th</sup> And 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

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**Abstract:** *Diplomacy as a tool of International Relations predates the modern state; though those machineries for its conduct have been continuously transformed. And today, due to diplomatic efforts and other enabling factors within the international system, the world has shrunk into a global village. As students of history and politics, we are interested in those forces that succeeded in bringing the peoples of the world together 500 and more years ago despite those horrendous cultural and geographical barriers. Not surprisingly, national interests have always defined such endeavours and these (trade, religion, politics etc) brought the ancient Kingdom of Benin into the orbit of Portugal – the then major World Power. Indeed, the economic and political interactions between these two powers induced lasting changes in the historical and political experiences of both Kingdoms. Even though it was a win-win outcome as each Kingdom forged new foreign policy goals to guide and protect her interests, indeed it was Portugal and as a corollary the whole of Europe that recorded significant gains through those economic dalliances with Benin. That phenomenal discovery that the African continent had a bottom, round which Europe could access Asia revolutionized both the political history and the economy of Europe. The bottom of Africa named the Cape of Good Hope, enabled Europe to outflank the Moslem World in her desire to establish trade relations with the peoples of Asia.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The relevance of the subject of International Relations along with its tools has gradually unfolded, especially over the past few decades. As the twentieth century ended, capitalism seemed to have vanquished its rivals: fascism, communism and socialism (Bhagwati 2002: 2). And globalization encouraged by capitalism has finally created a world community where the whole of the earth has become the playground of the human species. With technological advancements in areas such as transportation and communication etc, the concept of “the global village” which was only a goal in the last century, has become a reality. Communication flow has become so revolutionized that it now takes only a few minutes for any piece of information to get circulated to every nook and cranny of the globe.

Five hundred or more years ago it took a Portuguese envoy travelling in a caravel an average of two months to get to the Bight of Benin, in the present day Nigeria, from the port of Lisbon in Portugal, and another three or four days to trek from the ancient Benin Port of Ughoton to the capital city, Benin city itself, to seek audience with the Oba. But today it takes only a few hours to make the same journey.

A diplomat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century could choose to eat breakfast in Lisbon and then lunch in Benin. Moreover, modern diplomats only travel when they choose to. In the absence of air travel, sea travel, or even road transportation, electronic means of communication, like phones, e-mails, Face Book and Twitter etc have introduced epochal transformations to communication. Diplomats do not have to write letters or send telegrams and wait for ten or more days to receive replies. Contracts, agreements and even treaties can now be negotiated and concluded through phone-conferencing. The younger generations have been the principal beneficiaries of these modern communication break-throughs. Obama was said to have been one American President to have benefitted the most from these modern communication gadgets. Apart from the tele-prompter which provided such needed support system to him with his speeches and debates, his electioneering was able to reach out to millions of young and newly registered voters with unprecedented speed, through modern communication technologies like Twitter (Cable Network News).

Similar revolutions have also occurred in the nature of actors within the International System. New ideologies like Nationalism infused into the world system have gone on to change the nature and roles of actors on the world stage. The force of nationalism worked like a strong acid on the old structures of power and wealth and as they dissolved, actions in the International System shifted from being the affairs of monarchs, emperors and their advisers to being the popular affairs of the people, therefore the state (Cheema, 2009; 15). Nation-States then became the principal actors in the International System. In addition, there are International

Organizations, Trans-National Organizations, and certain individuals who are granted recognition as world figures.

However, we acknowledge the efforts of our ancients (Kings, Queens, Emperors etc), the original actors in the field of International Relations, who were undeterred in their efforts to break those horrendous barriers to travelling and communication, and in the process, lay the foundation for the enhancement of the tool of diplomacy, trade relations and other useful instruments of International Relations.

## **II. Diplomacy**

Diplomacy is both an art and a culture. It is a foreign policy instrument often applied for the attainment of set goals. It is a tool for pursuing projected goals for the protection and promotion of states national interests within the International Community. Without the tool of diplomacy, states within the International System would continuously be involved in armed conflict – similar to what obtained in the Primitive Age. Diplomacy seems therefore to have evolved alongside the social skills of the human species.

Diplomacy has been described as the art of resolving international difficulties peacefully. It is the application of intelligence, skill and tact to the conduct of official relations between governments of different states (Ofogebu 1978; 181). It is statecraft and a highly sophisticated and refined apparatus of interaction amongst nation states; always geared towards the peaceful attainment of set goals. It is a double - edged sword, requiring the body language of hand-shaking, back rubbing, occasional arm twisting and of course general horse trading.

The art and culture of diplomacy date back to ancient states and city state systems (Adeniran 1983; 79). In the Old Testament, the Queen of Sheba was said to have paid a diplomatic visit to King Solomon in the Old Jewish Kingdom of Judea (Holy Bible: King James Version; 1 Kings 10:1-13). Greek city states like Sparta and Athens were concerned about the safety and rights of their merchants who moved from one city state to the other, and so, needed some form of protection and guidance. Through the practice of diplomacy, treaties and agreements were negotiated between these states for the protection and benefit of their traders (Ofogebu 1978; 182). Diplomacy also encourages trade cooperation and protection. Five hundred or more years ago, Portugal sought out the ancient kingdom of Benin in order to promote trade, amongst other goals. Friendship with the ancient empire of Benin was specifically used to gather intelligence about the legendary Prester John in order to promote the regional interests of Europe, reference the struggle against Islam then in that part of the world.

The Italian Republics during the age of the Renaissance introduced the diplomatic practice of oratory. Statesmen who were skilled in oral artistry were despatched to neighbouring Italian Republics to negotiate with those citizens to conclude treaties, end hostilities, restore cooperation etc. We ascribe to them the creation of such diplomatic machineries as arbitration and conciliation in the peaceful resolution of conflict between states (Ofogebu 1978; 182).

In pre-colonial Africa, the Old Benin Empire established and maintained diplomatic relations with neighbouring Yoruba states. In this regard, chiefs who were fine-mannered and skilled in oratory were chosen as emissaries to carry messages and bargain with other monarchs in places like Ife. It was one such effort that produced the present Royal Dynasty on the ancient throne of Benin (Egharevba, 1968; 7).

When Affonso d' Aveiro visited Benin as an envoy from John II of Portugal in 1486, the Benin Monarch, Oba Ozolua, chose the Ohen-Okun of Ughoton as the ambassador from Benin to accompany Aveiro back to Lisbon. Amongst other attributes, the Portuguese Royal Chroniclers described Ambassador Ohen-Okun as "a man of good speech". (Ruy de Pina). Effective diplomacy requires effective communication skills in all social environments.

However, in the contemporary world, the process of diplomacy has become less cumbersome in contrast to the manner of its conduct some centuries back. In 1514 when Oba Ozolua sent some envoys to John II of Portugal, he had to specifically seek out Edo men who had served as interpreters (faladors) in the Island of Sao Tome. He paid for their passage to Lisbon with ten slaves and gave the envoys some other six slaves to sell for their upkeep in Lisbon (Ryder, 1969; 46). But today, diplomats do not have to worry about their travelling costs, as such issues are now handled with more sophistication. Ambassadors and diplomats do not need to carry interpreters along anymore in the course of their diplomatic duties. Apart from the emergence of modern technologies to take care of such issues, many diplomats today are multilingual and are given broad-based education in some of the best universities in the world. Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, speaks at least five languages, apart from his African native tongue (Cable Network News). Both English and French have also become global languages – English being the language of politics and trade and French, the grandiose language for hotels and fashion industries.

As long as actors have to interact in the International System, diplomacy will remain a sine-qua-non because these actors will continuously rely on dialogue and negotiation. It was such modern diplomatic efforts on the part seven European Powers (Britain, France, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Belgium and Italy), under the

leadership of Otto Von Bismarck in 1884, that facilitated the peaceful occupation of Africa by these powers. In this regard, war was avoided in the course of the 'Scramble for Africa'.

However, most of the physical and cultural barriers to diplomacy that existed centuries ago, have been overcome. As a corollary, the modern diplomat is well - placed to negotiate and bargain much more easily than was the case 500 or more years ago when emperors and monarchs were the major actors in the International System.

As the current framework for effective diplomacy gets more refined, the more obvious will the professional essence of the subject itself become, because many institutions will, inevitably, evolve structures exclusively aimed at the better understanding of the subject. As a matter of fact, the choices available to actors in the International System are very limited: force or diplomacy.

### **III. The Benin Empire**

The Benin Kingdom lies in the hinterland of the Bight of Benin. The Binis live outside the Swamp Forest area. The southern limit of their settlement corresponds closely to the division between swamp and rain forest, and there are no grounds for believing that it ever extended nearer to the coast (Ryder 1969; 14).

Before the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great (750 years ago), Benin City, the capital of the Benin Empire, was a straggling collection of villages enclosed by the Oguola moat. (Aisien 2012; 66). But by dint of Ewuare's efforts, Benin City became an impressive city with wide streets and large houses, with two moats demarcating the city into inner and outer parts. Successive monarchs improved on those structures put in place by Oba Ewuare such that 15<sup>th</sup> - century Benin had acquired enough of a reputation to stir the interest and curiosity of early Portuguese explorers. From both oral tradition and history books, the first European to visit Benin was Rui de Sequeira in 1472. But no accurate records exist of this visit (Ling Roth, 1968:04).

But subsequent European visitors to Benin, like the ship's Captain Lorenzo Pinto who visited the city in 1674, had the following to say about Benin:

"Great Benin where the King resides is larger than Lisbon; all the streets run straight 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 to their houses" (Ryder, 1989:113).

The sacred kingship is the focal point of the Benin political system (Bradbury, 1957; 40). Politically, the Benin Kingdom was highly centralized and the Oba (monarch) was a de facto god whose word held the power of life or death. His court was the state's Legislature, Executive and Judiciary. Similar to the Old Roman Empire, the Benin Empire had vassal states and regular and continuous tributes were paid to the Centre which was the seat of the Monarch. The different categories of chiefs, religious rites and rituals ensured a certain degree of balance of power and there was assured peace and security in all of the land where the monarch held sway. The marked uniformity in culture, social organization, language over the whole kingdom, derived in part, no doubt from the overriding centralizing authority of Benin-City (Bradbury, 1957: 18).

The Empire reached its zenith during the reign of Oba Ehengbuda the last of the warrior Obas (Kings). During this period, the empire had extended its hegemony towards the Niger as many more Ibo towns and villages to the West of the Niger had submitted to the Oba. Large areas of Ekiti came under the Oba's suzerainty and tributes were paid to Benin from rulers – of both Akure and Owo. In some directions it reached its natural boundaries: the River Niger to the East and the sea to the South (Ryder 1969: 15).

However, as the adage goes, Empires rise as Empires fall, and there is ample evidence that the Benin Empire was somewhat in decline due to persistent rebellions from a few of its vassal states during the last century and before its subsequent defeat by Britain in 1897 during the reign of Oba Ovonramwen.

The Obas of Benin were known to be illustrious and resourceful. And the people had so much confidence in their Oba and his leadership that they were equally motivated towards the attainment of the goals of the Kingdom in governance, trade or spiritual matters. With a sense of satisfaction and pride, even in modern Benin, every Bini person refers to himself as the Oba's 'slave'.

According to UNESCO, the moat of Benin dug by Oba Oguola 700 years ago and extended by his grandson Oba Ewuare about 500 years ago remains one of the greatest ancient engineering feats undertaken by a people. The ingenuity associated with the digging of these ramparts is in many ways equalled only by that associated with the Chinese walls built by the Qin and Han dynasties in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively. (Wikipedia)

### **IV. Portugal And Benin**

Similar to the position of the US before the USSR achieved the feat of cracking the atom in 1949, in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Portugal with her exceptional sea knowledge, had become the major world power. The Portuguese Prince, Henry the Navigator, encouraged the building of the ocean-going caravels and then Portuguese sailors and explorers began to venture into and explore the trackless Atlantic ocean. It was only after

Spain, through the expedition led by Christopher Columbus, discovered the New World (the Americas) that she (Spain) also became a rival power and a second World Power – like the USSR after 1949.

Islam as at 1487 was in occupation of North Africa and the Middle East. Thirty years earlier in 1453, Islam had achieved the final containment of Europe by her capture of the 1000-year old Christian city of Constantinople, seat of the Byzantine Emperor and the gateway to Asia for Europe.

It became imperative therefore to source for another route to Asia, to encourage trade with those exotic lands of the East. To also curtail further advancement of Islam in Europe, Portugal felt the moral obligation to locate the mythical African Kingdom of Prester John-the African monarch who was said to have dealt hard and severe blows to Islam. He was therefore thought to have possessed a magical wand for the defeat of Islam and this wand was also required in Europe to stop further advancement of Islam even in Europe.

Trade with Africa was also a major incentive. The Sugar Industry in the Island colony of Sao Tome required slave labour and also, slaves and other items (e.g stone beads) were needed to be bartered for gold in the Gold Coast (now Ghana). Rather than deal with the riverine and coastal peoples of the Guinea who were not yet organized into effective political groups, Portugal wanted to evolve links and diplomatic relations with a highly centralized kingdom like Benin, where dialogue and bargaining would be more easily handled through the Oba or Monarch – the main and only source of authority. And indeed, the Portuguese were impressed with the structures in place as well as those apparatuses of governance in Benin, especially when compared with the rather unorganized and segmented tribal groups they had previously encountered on the coast of Guinea (Lloyd, 1957; 13).

With the completion of the Elmina Castle (built by Diogo D' Azambuja-the Portuguese Castle Builder) on the Gold Coast, the colonization and settlement of the virgin island of Sao Tome and later Principe, King John II of Portugal had proclaimed himself Lord of the Guinea. And to give substance to that self assumed title, the monarch felt obliged to encourage trade and further exploration within those territories, thereby establishing and reinforcing his authority (Ryder 1969: 30).

There was also a spiritual angle and a missionary zeal to Portugal's activities in Africa. King John as the monarch and therefore the spiritual Head of his Kingdom just as the monarch of Benin was, had a task to spread Christianity and win more souls to the Christian fold. With this goal, there had been some relative success with the monarch in the Congo. That King had converted to Christianity and got baptized. He went further to change his name from Nzinga Nkuwa to Joao I and Later changed the name of his capital city from Mbanzi to Sao Salvador (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012: 58). King John II therefore reckoned that establishing diplomatic and trade relations with these fellow monarchs (with him as the *primus inter pares*) would promote the goal of evangelism and therefore stimulate more trade. It was assumed that these African Kings, being the fountainheads of their empires, would make Christianity their state religion without obstacles (Ryder, 1969; 34).

Moreover, with Spain having become a second world power in 1492, and to prevent any unhealthy rivalry and possible war between the two world powers, the then Pope Benedict VI had divided the world into two (except Christian Europe) with an imaginary line along the Atlantic. Much of Brazil and the whole of Africa fell to Portugal. With this division, Portugal assumed a right of ownership over the continent of Africa so much so that other European countries had to get licenses (*ascentio*) from Portugal before they could engage in any form of trade along the coasts of Africa (Sharp and Schomp, 2007: 11). Portugal enjoyed this monopoly for centuries until subsequently other European powers broke into the trade in view of its huge profits, flouting all existing rules and conventions.

A year before the expedition of Bartolomew Diaz, King John II of Portugal had sent Affonso d' Aveiro as an ambassador to Benin to gather some intelligence regarding the following:

- (i) The location of the African Kingdom of Prester John.
- (ii) A possible route to Asia probably through the belly of Africa because the map drawn by Ptolemy of Egypt 1000 years earlier depicted Africa as not having a bottom.

Aveiro had been commissioned by John II of Portugal to sail directly to lower Guinea and make contact with the hinterland city of Benin - a city so important and significant to the Portuguese that the name by reputation had been given to that huge expanse of sea that washed the coasts of Africa eastwards to the land of the four rivers: the Benue, Escravos, Forcados and Ramos Rivers (Aisien 2012; 62). This area was named the Bight of Benin by Portuguese sailors.

On men accustomed to the small towns of Europe huddled into the narrow confines of their walls, the spaciousness of the great city of Benin made a powerful impression on Aveiro and confirmed that here was a state of far greater consequence than the petty chiefdoms which they had hitherto encountered in the coast of the Guinea (Ryder 1969; 18).

The Oba was equally impressed with the presence of this 'alien' and took special interest in what he had to say. In the course of their discussion, the Oba decided to send the Ohen-Okun of Ughoton along with another courtier to accompany Aveiro back to Lisbon to see more of both the people and the land. The choice of Ohen-Okun of Ughoton as the ambassador was perhaps informed by the importance of Ughoton as Benin's sea

port and by the fact of his already having become accustomed to interacting with foreigners who visited Benin by sea.

The mission of the Ohen-Okun of Ughoton to Lisbon was a success. The Royal Chronicler of Lisbon reported thus of the Ohen-Okun: "His bearing matched these dignities". Their ambassador (Ohen-Okun) was a man of good speech and natural wisdom" (Ruy de Pina). In the area of trade, the Oba also showed intense interest and agreed to trade not only in slaves but also in other items - stone beads, camwood, pepper and later elephant tusks etc.

As for Ambassador Ohen-Okun, the information gathered from him in Lisbon and in the Court of King John II about the legendary Prester John aroused further interest and motivation in the court. The Ohen-Okun spoke of the 'Oghene' who exercised some kind of suzerainty over Benin. According to him, on the death of an Oba, his successor sent messengers to this overlord bearing valuable gifts – they announced the death of their ruler and asked for royal insignia for the new Oba. By these same messengers, the Oghene sent back gifts/emblems including a cross (maltese-type cross) and they returned to Benin from a journey that took about 20 months. Diligent enquiry further elicited that the realm of the Oghene lay to the East of Benin; and because John II was looking for the sign of the Negus, and as a result of the Maltese cross (similar to the that of the pope of Europe) that the Ohen-Okun made mention of, King John immediately drew the conclusion that the 'Oghene' the Ohen-Okun talked about was Prester John (Ryder, 1965; 27). However, later developments confirmed that this 'Oghene' was the Oni of Ife.

Armed with the information given by the Ambassador from Benin (Ohen-Okun), a year later in August 1487, King John II of Portugal commissioned the exploration led by Bartolomew Diaz, to locate the Emperor Prester John and secondly to source for a sea route to Asia.

As for the Ohen-Okun, he was brought back to Benin accompanied by a number of officials, with gifts for himself, his wife and the Oba. And Aveiro was commanded by John II to set up a trading post at Ughoton. Aveiro remained at Ughoton until his death in the early part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Roth, 1968; 4).

The expedition inspired by the information given by the Ohen-Okun met some of the stipulated goals. Some months after Diaz left the shores of Portugal and after sailing further South beyond the present day Namibian coast where he expected to see the unending African continental coast line, there was nothing waiting for him there but the endless Cold Sea! Africa has a bottom and that discovery changed the world forever. The bottom of Africa was named the Cape of Good Hope and it was so named by Diaz because his voyage ended, not in the accomplishment of the set goals but in the hope of the accomplishment of those goals. The hope that the bottom of Africa held for Europe 500 years ago was the exciting possibility of discovering an untrammelled route to the settled world of the East (Aisien, 2012; 179).

Trade between Benin and Portugal flourished. Manila and other materials were bartered for slaves in Benin and other parts of the Slave Coast. These slaves were then taken to the Gold Coast (Ghana) and bartered for gold at a great profit. It was estimated that this trade yielded a profit of 500 percent to the Portuguese crown (Blake, 1939; 107). This was the era of intra-continental slave trade. But on her part, Benin wanted guns and iron which the Portuguese refused to supply as a result of a Papal Bull barring the sale of guns to non-Christian kingdoms. This was similar to the way both the then USSR and the US tied aid and trade to the acceptance or non-acceptance of either communism or capitalism; so Portugal, through the Pope, tied the sale of guns and iron to the acceptance of Christianity by non-Christian kingdoms/peoples. The monarch in the Congo got guns because he accepted Christianity in its entirety – changing his title to Joao I and the name of his capital to Sao Salvador. The Portuguese foreign policy statement to Benin was: accept Christianity and have both guns and iron. Christianity therefore became a bargaining tool for Portugal in her diplomatic relations with Benin – a cultural foreign policy instrument.

The economic viability of the Ughoton post rested upon the satisfactory development of the pepper trade which was sternly forbidden to all but the royal factors. Ships from Sao Tome and Principe might buy pepper in the rivers but the inhabitants were required to sell to the Benin royal factors all that they did not consume themselves. Royal monopoly was equally strict on the Benin side of the pepper trade, as the Oba permitted none but his own agents to sell pepper to Europeans. And such centralized patterns of trade reinforced political power in the kingdom.

Trade at Ughoton, which depended much on the supply of pepper from Benin, suddenly ceased when, in 1506, a decree was issued by Portugal banning trade in Benin pepper. This ban came as a result of the great quantity of a similar type of pepper that was exported to the Portuguese market from India. The quantity of pepper from Benin was relatively small compared with that from India - making it rather unprofitable to the Portuguese economy, to continue the trade in Benin pepper. Thus, the commerce upon which the profitability of the Ughoton post had rested was deliberately proscribed – and soon afterwards the factor was finally withdrawn (Roth, '68; 5).

The closure of the factory at Ughoton was not the end of the commerce between Portugal and Benin. Sao Tome, where trading rights were granted to private Portuguese merchants, continued to trade with Benin on

behalf of the Portuguese government. It was in Sao Tome that many Edos saw a bit about Portugal and its culture. Most of the interpreters (faladors) the Oba used were drawn from groups of Edos who had served in this Island either as plantation workers or house servants. The trade in slaves also flourished as Portuguese slave ships continued to sail to lower Guinea and the Slave River for slaves (Brasio, 1952: 175).

However Portugal was unable to control all the trade in slaves in Benin as she had expected. The Oba on his part seemed determined to forge new policies as far as the sale of slaves was concerned. He seemed determined to protect the national interest of the state of Benin on the issue of sale of slaves. By 1516 therefore, the Oba had taken a new foreign policy stance by establishing separate markets for male and female slaves and it became far more difficult for Europeans to buy male slaves in Benin. Within a few years, this restriction on the sale of male slaves had developed into a full embargo until the close of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Thus the efforts of the Portuguese government to apportion the Benin trade among various interests was answered by the Oba's determination to trade with whom and at what terms, he pleased (Ryder '69; 42).

As at 1514, trade relations between both Kingdoms was at a very low ebb as there were mounting frictions amongst various European interests or interlopers. This was the background against which the Oba of Benin despatched a second embassy and at this time to King Emmanuel of Portugal. The other goal of the Oba's mission was to re-introduce the subject of Christianity and conversion of the Oba and his people. The ambassadors at this time were Dom Jorge and Dom Antonio – these were baptized Edo Christians.

The monarch on the throne of Benin was still Oba Ozolua, the same Oba who had twenty years earlier rejected suggestions that he should invite missionaries into his Kingdom (Bradbury, 1959; 279). King Emmanuel was therefore suspicious of the sudden shift in the Oba's position regarding the embrace of Christianity. Was the Oba's true motive to gain access to guns, especially as he was facing a multitude of rebellions from the vassal states in Ishan? He probably was seeking guns and priests just for political reasons, to make himself more powerful against his enemies, rather than a genuine desire for conversion or baptism.

However, King Emmanuel continued to use the carrot and stick method of diplomacy. He refused to send guns but instead sent priests and other materials for the Altar, referring to the Oba as a very good friend who should expect to receive all the favours within the realm of the Portuguese Kingdom with all readiness when and if he agrees to confess Christ and prove the sincerity of his professed inclination to Christianity. In the Portuguese foreign policy agenda, guns (similar to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Weapons of Mass Destruction) could only be in the possession and control of Christian kingdoms; just as the non-democratic states of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should not have access to Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). King Emmanuel further referred the Oba to Carneiro (who was de facto the permanent representative of Portugal in the Island of Sao Tome) with regard to local matters, assuring the Oba that Carneiro would always protect the interest of Benin.

The urgency with which the Oba despatched a third Envoy (Pero Barroso), an Edo man and probably one of the faladors or interpreters employed in trade with the Portuguese, was an indication of the Oba's zeal to mend relations with Portugal. It was obvious that the Oba needed guns at all costs and was indeed prepared for a detente and therefore shift grounds viz-a-viz the question of Christianity in order to have guns. The goal had to do with the protection of the national interest of the Benin Kingdom, because the Oba was fighting wars with the vassal states at Uromi in Ishan where he finally died, in late 1516 (Okojie, 1960; 12). States will readily change their foreign policy positions to protect and promote their national interests. It has been so with all world powers. Oba Ozolua was therefore ready to embrace the Christian faith in order to have guns to defeat those 'rebels' in his kingdom - just the way North Korea was prepared to stop enriching uranium in order to receive aid (crucial for her survival) from the US. When the Portuguese envoys and priests got back to Benin with Barroso and another Portuguese named Duarte Pires, Oba Ozolua was already at war, so the question of conversion was put aside during the campaign; but the Oba sent his son (presumably Esigie-the first Christian Oba) and some of his courtiers to get baptised (Ryder 1969; 50).

## **V. Oba Esigie And The Portuguese**

Esigie was the first Christian King of Benin. His embrace of Christianity enhanced diplomatic relations between the Portuguese and Benin. In 1540, Esigie made a crucifix in brass and sent it to Dom Emmanuel of Portugal as a present. Valuable presents were sent back to the Oba in return, including a copy of the Roman Catholic catechism which unfortunately was destroyed when the palace in Benin was burnt down by Prince Ogbedor during the civil war between Osemwende and Ogbedor in 1816 (Egharevba, 1968; 28). Esigie sent some envoys to Portugal in 1540. Their presence in Portugal was attested to by de Barros, though he could not really account for their actual mission (Ryder, 1969; 72).

More Portuguese missionaries were sent to Benin during the reign of Esigie, as churches were built at Ogbelaka, Idunmwunerie and Akpakpava (Ikpoba Road) – all in Benin. These missionaries were seen with Esigie (prototype present-day mercenaries) during the Idah War. Oba Esigie himself learnt to read and write in Portuguese (Egharevba, 1968; 27).

However, Oba Esigie's embrace of the Christian faith did not bring about a foreign policy shift in Portugal regarding the question of guns to Benin. Esigie failed in his bid to make Christianity the state religion of Benin and it only remained a court religion – a religion of the palace. The kings of Portugal had expected that any Oba of Benin becoming a Christian King would by mere pronouncement or palace fiat make Christianity the state religion. But the apparatus of governance/ balance of power in Benin was much more complex than the Portuguese had envisaged. It had taken the people centuries to evolve a rather precarious system of checks and balances whereby the monarch could be a czar (an autocrat) only by acknowledging and refining those structures in the kingdom he had inherited – those structures that made him the monarch and perhaps an autocrat and even a god. The Monarch of Benin remains a god for as long as he recognizes the god elements in all the other deities of the land, including those of his forebears. It was therefore not possible for Esigie to decree a Christian empire for the people in the same manner Henry VIII of England founded the Church of England in 1534 when the Pope refused to annul his marriage to the Spanish princess - Catherine of Aragon.

It is possible therefore that Portugal continued to deny guns to Benin because Oba Esigie could not achieve the feat of making Benin a Christian Kingdom. Chief Oliha and the Uzama nobles (Kingmakers) disagreed with a change in the religion of the land with the resulting side-lining of the ancient gods. They then ostracized the palace of Oba Esigie. The Monarch's continued determination to make Benin a Christian Kingdom triggered off the Attah war (Idah war) as further schism between the Uzama (led by the Oliha) and the Palace compelled the Uzama to invite an outsider (Attah of Igalla) to come over to Benin and remove Esigie, along with his alien religion, from the throne.

However, Oba Esigie won the Attah war through the might of the guns made available to him unofficially either by his Portuguese friends or other European powers, then referred to as interlopers.

This Christian Monarch (Oba Esigie) contrived his own death perhaps as an atonement for the supposed sins of his people who refused to embrace the Christian religion. After all, Christ died for the sins of the Jews and then of Mankind. It was therefore the continuous message of Christianity and the direct message of the Mass that influenced the contrived death of this delicate and sensitive Christian King of Benin and friend of the Portuguese (Aisien, 2002; 121).

However, even though Oba Esigie failed in the internal politics of trying to make Christianity the state religion of the Benin Kingdom, he did succeed in making his son, Orhogbua (the heir apparent to the throne) a Christian prince and, subsequently, a Christian king. Orhogbua, the son of Esigie, was educated either in Lisbon or the Portuguese settled colony of Sao Tome. He was studying to become a priest of the Roman Catholic Church when his father Oba Esigie died (Aisien, 2002: 123). But it is possible that Orhogbua's unconditional embrace of Christianity did encourage his father's (Oba Esigie's) continued alliance with Portugal and, more so, the Portuguese agents and priests who fought alongside him in the Idah war. At length, however, Orhogbua relinquished his priestly duties and ascended the ancient throne of Benin on the death of his father, Oba Esigie.

The Portuguese trade monopoly with Benin had ceased during the reign of Orhogbua. Other European Powers (France, Holland etc) had broken the Portuguese monopoly of the Guinea trade, especially after the emergence of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade which introduced an entirely new and different dimension to the trade in the Guinea Coast.

Christianity, incidentally, also played a role in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The Pope blessed the trade, and leaders of Christian churches often promoted slavery as a "means of saving the souls of these barbarians by introducing them to Christianity" (Sharp and Schomp, 2007).

## **VI. Impact Of Portuguese Diplomacy With Benin**

It was the information gathered from the Ohen-Okun of Ughoton in 1486 about the supposedly legendary Prester John which encouraged the expedition headed by Bartolomew Diaz the following year, August 1487.

All in all, this first contact with Benin had more than fulfilled Portuguese expectations (Ryder, 1969; 32). The discovery that Africa had a bottom – the Cape of Good Hope – gave great hope to Europe and created new access to the exotic lands of the East – India, China etc. This discovery enriched Europe, enhanced her expectations and provided her with a new and more accurate geography of the world. It enabled Europe to break free from her encirclement by Islam.

Interestingly and unknowingly to the Portuguese, it was the Oni of Ife the Ohen-Okun talked about in Lisbon. But his description of the 'Oghene' and the mention of the maltese cross especially, led the officials in the Court of John II of Portugal to believe that the Ohen-Okun was describing the Kingdom of Prester John, the legendary Christian Monarch in Africa. However, history has it that the legendary Kingdom of Prester John was the ancient Kingdom of Abyssinia - modern - day Ethiopia. Ethiopia is the only Christian state in the Horn of Africa. She has practised Coptic Christianity since the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, before the birth of Mohammed. Incidentally, Ethiopia was also one of those two countries (the other being Liberia) in Africa that did not come

under European colonization. She has a rich cultural heritage in her roots in the Aksum civilization and she developed the wheel, the plow and writing (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; 50).

Ife and the Oni are significant to the people of Benin, especially the royal family of Benin. The present dynasty, which took root in Benin in 1200 AD after the Ogiso dynasty, and beginning from Eweka the I, came from Ife (Egharevba, 1968; 7).

The EMEHE clan which remains a guild even in modern-day Benin was a fallout from Oba Orhogbua's Christian education and the Christian principle of forgiveness. The ancestors of this group contravened some of the most important laws of Benin land, and instead of being sentenced to death, which was the penalty the offence warranted, Orhogbua, against the insistence of his Chiefs, exercised a waiver and instead sentenced them (men, women and their children) to perpetual penance for the crime they had committed. The penance which the EMEHE were sentenced to, was that of unremitting labour for them and their offspring throughout their natural lives (Aisien, 2002; 123).

The other advantage of his overseas education and enlightenment which Orhogbua conferred on the Kingdom was his love for the sea and how this love influenced his running of the affairs of Benin. He turned the extensive lagoon system running parallel to the Bight of Benin into a Benin Lake and became the Lord of all the lands bordering this lake. He then founded an Enogie-ship on the Island of Lagos (Aisien, 2001; 124).

The copper manila and later brass manila, introduced to Benin by the Portuguese, encouraged bronze casting. The red silk often sent to the Oba of Benin by the Kings of Portugal became a fabric (especially the colour red) of status in Benin. At a point in time, only the Oba of Benin could wear silk (Roth, 1968; 83). Coral beads, also introduced by the Portuguese, became associated with both wealth and status.

But unfortunately Benin did not get guns or iron from the Portuguese. Most of the articles she got were tinsels, really none of utilitarian value. Since it was evident that none of the articles supplied by Portugal to Benin was vital to the strength and survival of the Kingdom, Benin probably regarded its trade with the Portuguese with some degree of indifference (Ryder, 1969; 41).

## **VII. Conclusion**

Interestingly, the trade relations and diplomacy which occurred between Benin and Portugal over half a millenium ago were nonetheless marked by features of modern International Relations – dialogue, negotiation, trade embargoes, image laundering, trade protectionism etc. The monarchs of both Kingdoms continued to exchange gifts and sometimes ideas, despite those barriers posed then by sea, land, weather and culture. Phenomenal efforts were made to overcome those existing barriers for the promotion of the individual national interests of each kingdom.

Notably, the absence of such modern concepts and structures as Developed world, Third world, NATO, EEC etc seemed to have helped the Obas of Benin in their trade relations and diplomatic efforts with Portugal. Benin seemed uninhibited and therefore undeterred to embrace bold and assertive foreign policy positions all through the history of her interactions with Portugal and indeed other European Powers, despite both the literacy and relative technological advancement of those powers.

In contrast to the timidity often exhibited in the contemporary world by leaders of Third World countries in their interactions with leaders of the developed world, the Obas of Benin felt completely unrestrained in their foreign policy efforts and did not see Portugal as a superior Kingdom to Benin. There were no psychological barriers. The saying then and even now is:

Oba yan Agbon – meaning, the Oba owns the world. In addition, only the Almighty God-the creator was seen to be superior to the Oba.

Oba Ozolua, therefore, definitely saw King John II of Portugal as an equal partner in progress as far as trade and politics were concerned. That was why, despite Portuguese overtures, he was able to put a total embargo on the sale of slaves, as early as the initial part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, casting major doubts on the aspersion that African monarchs and elites sold their loved ones for tinsels.

However, as obtains in all milieus, the Obas of Benin were concerned about their own image as well as that of their Kingdom, even as far back as 500 years ago. So it was no surprise that the Oba (Esigie) in de facto terms, took the second group of missionaries sent to Benin by John III hostage, and would not grant them permission to travel back to Portugal until his own (Esigie's) envoys, earlier sent to Portugal, got back (Ryder; 1969; 71). Oba Esigie probably wanted a fait accompli reference the goals of his own mission to Portugal because he was aware that the Portuguese missionaries in Benin had noticed elements of human sacrifice in the land and that if they were allowed to get to Portugal, before his own envoys accomplished their goals there in Portugal, the unfavourable reports that might follow would frustrate the accomplishment of those set goals (Ryder, 1969; 70).

In many instances, the Oba of Benin found himself in a rather advantageous position as Portugal occasionally tried to bend over backwards to seek the Oba's favour in order to turn the table against French interlopers. When a trade embargo was finally instituted against Benin by Portugal in 1553 to punish the Oba for

not cooperating sufficiently with Portugal on trade-related matters, Benin seemed unperturbed with such an arm-twisting measure, especially as other Europeans such as the French and the Dutch continued to trade with the Kingdom (Blake, 1939; 134). But today a ban in trade by one western nation would in all likelihood, result in a total ban by all Western Powers.

But on the part of Portugal there was increased frustration as the trade embargo against the Oba only seemed to have highlighted the importance of Benin in the scheme of things. They desperately searched for other markets but agreed that none matched the trade with Benin or could adequately replace it (Blake, 1939; 134). Benin, being a highly centralized kingdom, operated a pattern of trade that favoured external trade relations. When, for instance, the trade in elephant tusks began early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Oba immediately instituted a guild for the hunting of elephants (Ryder, 1969; 53). That area of Ikpoba Hill in modern Benin City known as Ore-Ogbeni (meaning the community of elephant hunters) was where the Oba settled this group of hunters, and the trade structure of the state ensured that every single elephant tusk obtained was sold only through the agents of the Oba; this also applied to other commodities of international trade - pepper, stone beads etc.

However, it is uncertain whether it was the difficulties between the Obas and the European meddlers alone that led to the decay of Portuguese trade with Benin in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There was the view that as many more European Powers broke the Portuguese monopoly of the West Coast trade, there emerged a general decline in Portuguese commerce and therefore power in West Africa. Expectedly, the government in Portugal then decided to concentrate its limited resources to the exploitation of its trade and possessions in the Indies and Brazil. This shift in trade relations affected her trade not only in marginal areas like Benin but also in the Island settlements of Principe and Sao Tome (Ryder, 1969; 75).

Furthermore, Portugal did not find the trade with Benin as profitable as she had envisaged. Both the land and weather were also hostile and unhealthy for Europeans (Ling Roth, 1968; 5).

However, since the economic and political intercourse between Portugal and Benin 500 years or more ago, major transformations have evolved in the form of structures and nature of actors in the International System. Monarchs and Emperors have given way to Nation-States as the representatives of their people in International affairs. The monarchy in Portugal has ceased to exist since 1910, has been the case with many others in Europe at different times in their history. However, the Benin monarchy has survived, not as the political and economic entity it was 500 or more years ago, but rather, as a cultural entity – something fairly akin to the monarchy in Britain – her former colonizer.

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