



“The Marginalization Of Women In Governance In Edo State Nigeria, With A Focus On The Coronation Ceremony Of An Oba In The Benin Kingdom”

Etim Ekpenyong Mfon

Etim Ekpenyong Mfon.: Part-time Lecturer, Department of Fine Art, Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos.

Department of Fine Art, Yaba College of Technology, Yaba Lagos.

Email : etimopaint@gmail.com

Abstract

Coronation is a complex and sacred ritual, a process that warrants an assemblage of both physical and spiritual components. It involves a set of rites performed by a select few; hence, parts of it are not public knowledge. Women have also been exempted or restricted from partaking in some activities during the coronation of an Oba because of actual or potential ritual pollution occasioned by their monthly flow. Many African cultures have relegated women to the background for this reason. Even in present day politics in Nigeria and indeed Africa, women are still being marginalized in the political arena at all levels. However, women have been pivotal to the success of many great kingdoms and nations. In Benin’s rich historical traditions, women such as Queen Idia and Emotan rendered selfless services towards the peace, progress, and sustainability of the Kingdom. This paper seeks to highlight the roles women play in the coronation of an Oba in Benin Kingdom despite their gender-based marginalization.

Introduction

History is a scribe who chronologically documents events in order to empower man with the information needed to build a healthier and more sustainable society. And history has it that though women are often times regarded the weaker vessels, they have been pivotal to the success of great kingdoms the world over. Even in Africa where most traditions seem not to favour women, women have been seen playing “manly” roles—delivering people and kingdoms from annihilation. The great Benin Kingdom is no exception. The great Emotan of today was just a peasant woman who sold condiments at Oba’s market in Benin City. However, when the need came for the heroine in her to be activated, Emotan became an internationally acclaimed (www.edoworld.com). So also did Queen Idia stand out amongst other queens and King’s mothers in Benin because of her great exploits. She played a significant role in the rise and reign of her son. She was a warrior who fought relentlessly before and during her son’s reign as the Oba. It is pertinent to note that if a woman had led the Benin army to war, then it can be presumed that other women who were loyal to Idia

would have gone with her to fight against the enemy of their queen, shedding their blood for the resuscitation and sustainability of the great Benin Kingdom. Despite this acts of heroism and patriotism, women are being marginalized because of their menstrual flow. Idumwonyi (2011 ; p.3) writes that the conception of power as a resource of social function is currently unequally distributed amongst women and men in Benin kingdom and there is no doubt that cultural beliefs and practices have helped in sustaining the unequalness. Exclusion based on women's physiological makeup is a good example as women are declared "unclean" being judged incapable of fulfilling the esoteric need of the cosmic and spiritual that guide human affairs. The politics of rituals and taboos are tied to women's menstrual flow and ancestral veneration; an important component of religion/culture used as a tool to control, construct and order the society to continually sustain its patriarchal stance. This tradition thus illuminates the consequences ritual components have on the broader spectrum of social, institutional and structural contexts which shape individual relations to power.

Nevadomsky (1993) defines coronations as a *rite of passage: a set of rituals that mark the transformation of the social person from one status to another*. The coronation of an Oba in the Benin kingdom is a ten day process of sacred ceremonies. Jim Rex-Lawson Moses of Vanguard online News paper Nigeria,

(2016), raises the question as to whether there any significant roles played by women in the Coronation, since women like Queen Idia and Emotan are part of the success story of the great Benin kingdom. Moses (2016), explains further that

the Uselu chiefs in the procession take leave of the Edaiken and return to Uselu while the Edaiken is thereafter escorted into the City by Oredo Chiefs. Are there female chiefs among this grand procession? If not, was it a design by Mother Nature or man (through customs and tradition) that disqualifies women from being active partakers of such historic events, or was it both?

It is pertinent to note that sourcing for information during the course of carrying out this research was indeed a challenge, as most people who seem to be well informed on the coronation rites of the Benin kingdom would not divulge information. As Nevadomsky (1993; p. 68) rightfully says: "Throughout the period of fieldwork I was frustrated in my efforts to collect even the most mundane information. The Bini adage, 'When you reach Benin, Benin is still very far away,' surely refers not only to the unique elaboration of ritual symbolism and court complexity but also to the difficulty of an outsider getting past the door."

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the theory of the marginalization and relegation of women to the political periphery in the Benin Kingdom. Osukwu (2016) states that in very many respects, African communities see

women as unequal with men; and that in community meetings, traditional settings, marriage negotiations, rights to the positions of leadership/rulership, rights to child ownership, headship of families, and so on, women often do not share the same spaces with men. She further states that with patriarchy in operation, women have always been relegated to the background. Leadership occurs within a given indigenous configuration of power, authority and legitimacy. Moreover, she asserts that in leadership, women are inconsequential simply because the configuration is shaped by culture, institutions, history, goals and context, all inconsonance with a patriarchal set up that male politicians aim to perpetuate. This despite the facts that in pre-colonial times and during the colonial period, some women exerted political influence and power, leading armies to battle, and engaging in statecraft. In Edo State, the homeland of the Benin Kingdom, the political scene is characterised by inadequate representation of women. Irrespective of women mobilization of voters, the contributions of women are often trivialized.

Chieftaincy Titles and Women of Benin Kingdom

There are speculations that no chieftaincy title is conferred on any woman in the Benin kingdom because of the potential ritual pollution occasioned by their monthly flow. *Women are not given titles in the Benin kingdom, but the Oba can give*

royal beads as recognition for heroic services performed by women (Idahosa, 2016). Kennedy Eweka (2016), a lecturer in the ceramics unit of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin, and a member of Benin royal family by birth corroborates that women are not installed as chiefs as women's natural order of monthly cycles prohibits them from performing important traditional roles. However, he noted that the Iye-oba n'uselu is a chieftaincy title given to the mother of the Oba. Hence, in that respect, women are given titles. Nevadomsky (1993) also writes that during Erediauwa's coronation, he created *chieftaincy titles for his wives...* (P.69)

Eweka (2016) further states that the concept of women as second class citizens is not correct, giving Queen Idia, and Emotan as examples of women honoured by the entire Benin kingdom for their heroic exploits. Moreover, according to Eweka, the Iyoba at Uselu is one of the three principal authorities in Benin along with the Oba and the Crown Prince. She is also vested with the authority to confer chieftaincy titles on deserving citizen and make laws. When asked if the laws made by the Iyoba are meant only for women, Eweka said the *Iyeoba confers chieftaincy titles on men, hence, the laws she makes are binding on both the men and women of Benin Kingdom.*

Heroines of Benin Kingdom

According to Oronsaye-Salami (2005),

women are marginal to national politics, and more generally, to the public and private life of our nation. One of the greatest challenges of the Edo woman today, as with all Nigerian women, is her exclusion from the political space and her invisibility in political affairs. In situations of wars, conflict and extreme oppression, many women have risen to deliver their lands. These women were unique in their times as they tried to subvert male hegemony which was dominant in their period. Our foremothers were known to have accomplished great things; displayed exceptional skill and talent; stood up against oppression, injustice and contributed much to the society. Moreover, they had difficult challenges, which they surmounted and were still able to participate.

Amongst these great women was Emotan of Benin, a patriotic woman who traded in foodstuffs in the 15th century at the very spot where her statue stands. Oba Uwaifiokun {1430AD-1440AD} usurped the throne of the Benin kingdom in place of his elder brother, Prince Ogun, who was the heir apparent. Ogun in those times of travail paid secret and nocturnal visits to Benin from his exile. On many occasions, this market woman called Emotan warned Ogun of impending dangers and advised him against interacting with some treacherous chiefs who might reveal his presence. On one occasion Emotan actually hid Prince Ogun

from his adversary. When Prince Ogun eventually regained the throne and was subsequently crowned as the real Oba of Benin, he took the name Oba Ewuare the Great {1440AD-1473AD}. He did not forget the pivotal role played by this simple market woman Emotan who saved him from glaring dangers during his exile years (www.edoworld.net).



Plate 1: Emotan Statue

Source: www.imgrum.org/tag/emotan

Kwekedee (2014), reports that Iyoba Idia popularly known as “Idia ne Iye Esigie” was a renowned warrior-queen, skilled administrator and the first Iyoba (Queen Mother) of the Kingdom of Bini (Benin) in the present-day Nigeria. Queen Idia who

bravely fought side by side with her son Esigie, ensured that he ultimately defeated his brother and conquered the Igala, thereby reestablishing the unity and military strength of the Benin kingdom. Queen Idia received much of the credit for these victories as her political counsel, together with her mystical powers and medicinal knowledge, were viewed as critical elements of Esigie's success on the battlefield.



Plate 2: Queen Idia Mask

Source: www.kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2014/02/iyoba-ida...

Oronsaye-Salami (2005) recounts a number of stories about strong Edo women. Queen Iden, for example, procured the throne of Benin for her husband with her blood, though she did not go to the war front. She chose to die so her husband Oba Ewuapke would recover his lost glory as a

king. Hers were the politics of love. The reign of Queen Ubi is shrouded in mystery till this day. Many feminist historians have cause to believe that Ubi's purported offence of bed-wetting was too trivial to warrant the punishment she was served. They are of the opinion that she probably challenged the political structure of her time. On the other hand, the role of Queen Ewere as a docile and subjugated wife is today commemorated with a state festival, Ugie were . It is therefore not surprising that Ubi's confrontational disposition was strongly resisted and condemned. Princess Edelayo, daughter of Oba Ewuare the Great and the sister of Olua, was known to have been a very powerful and rich woman. She was as powerful as any Oba on the throne, and was about to be crowned king when the Kingmakers for the some flimsy excuse interrupted her ascension. Princess Edelayo, daughter of Oba Ozolua was crowned Edaiken (heir apparent to the throne) when her younger brother refused to become king, but was later divested due to mere feminine indisposition. As a result of this, the Uzamas (kingmakers) and Eghaevbo (executive council) enacted a law permanently prohibiting women from becoming king in Ancient Benin. Oba Ozolua's daughters, Adedeku and Imagbogho, were also very rich and powerful. Princess Imagbogho is known to have assisted her father in his battle against Elekidi of Ogbelaka. Ikpoghodu and Uwahen, daughters of Oba Obanosa, were said to be very powerful and influential too. Aghayubini, daughter of Oba Osemwende, was renowned for her vast resources; she is remembered in oral history

for the great help she rendered her brother Oba Adolor (dates) to gain the throne of Benin. Princess Evbakhavbokun, the eldest daughter of Oba Ovonramwen (dates) was also considered very rich and influential. In the Ogiso dynasty {About 1170 A.D-1200A.D} there are records to show that some women were rulers; however, due to feminine indisposition and palace intrigues perpetuated by the kingmakers, the reign of female Ogiso came to an abrupt end. Oronsaye-Salami reveals that the reign of women was so abhorred during the current dynasty that when it was claimed that prince Odogbo, the only son of Oba Ehengbuda {About 1578AD-1606AD} was a girl because he was so handsome, with feminine features, the father made him walk naked, in the company of his attendants, from Uselu to Benin City to dispel the rumour. Another influential woman in pre-colonial Benin was Eyowo, the wife of Elekidi of Ogbelaka, who fought gallantly beside her husband in their battle against the Oba ({About1481AD-1504AD} after the fall of her husband Oba Ozolua married her, but later killed her because he was afraid that she might revolt against him in future.

Roles Played By Women in the Coronation Ceremony of an Oba in Benin Kingdom

Like most parts of Nigeria (and indeed Africa) the women of Benin Kingdom have no voice when it comes to making important decisions even when such decision would adversely affect their lives and those of their children. Women are

either seen in the background waiting on their male folk or cleaning up after them because tradition dictates that they are lesser than men, hence, minimal roles are given to them in the coronation rites of an Oba

Marriage/Surrogate Wife

Eweka, asserts that: “The roles of women are significant in the traditional activities in Benin kingdom. They play spiritual, social and in these areas and others as they are an integral unit of society.” One tradition of the great Benin Kingdom demands that the Oba of Benin must take four new wives as part of his coronation rites before he ascends the throne, even though the crown Prince/Oba already had three wives. However, before his coronation ceremony, he had already picked two young virgins, one from Uselu and the other from Ugoula, and would be choosing the third virgin bride from Uzama (www.bulletunes.com 2016).

Nevadomsky (1993) writes that one of the coronation rituals demands the crown prince spend three days in a "bachelor's camp where he slept with a surrogate wife." Vanguard reporter (2016) does not confirm this report about surrogate wives at Eko-Ohae. According to Idahosa Daniel, an indigene of Benin City, Edo state, (2016),

women don't play any significant roles during coronation in Benin. They are the weaker vessel. Most African traditions relegate women to the background; ours in Benin is not different. The only part I remember seeing a woman during

coronation was the virgin girl that should ceremoniously ascend the throne together with the Oba; it has a traditional implication. Apart from that, other times women were seen very passive. In response to the above, Eweka (2016) argued that a lot of speculations abounds that are not true.

i. Prayer Intercessors/Praise Singers

Women are required to come out en masse during the coronation to sing in praise of the crown prince; the lyrics of their songs are prayers as well as praise. Some of these women wear dresses /wrappers sewn of fabric with the Oba's portrait, or matching fabrics indicating their affiliation as a group. According to Eweka 2016: "They do not only sing they also render prayers which are very significant; in fact, any woman who chooses to play any significant role is allowed but not to be made a king."

A Mother's Blessing

All that I am or ever hope to be, I owe to my angel Mother--Abraham Lincoln

According to Usman (2016), Chief Utetenegiabi in an interview stated that the Crown Prince would make a stop at Uselu Shear for blessings of the Queen Mother before he moved on with his journey to Iya-Akpan at the Five Junction and was handed over to Oredo chiefs by Uselu chiefs. However, in an interaction with Eweka (2017), he says that it is not in the tradition of the Benin people for the Crown Prince to

seek his mother's blessings during the coronation process, Eweka further states that every new Oba reserves the right to enact new laws and jettison old ones. That the crown Prince thought it necessary to make a stop at Uselu Shear in order to receive blessings from his mother (Iye Oba) is indeed a recognition (on his part and that of the Uzama chiefs) of the importance of a mother's blessing to the success of his reign and the general good of the people of Benin kingdom. Certainly, this constitutes another important role played by women in the coronation ceremony of an Oba in Benin.

Conclusion/Recommendation

Being a woman is not a deficiency; neither is it a crime. The monthly flow is nothing but preparation for the body for the production of *life*, and therefore women should not be relegated in matters of state in the Benin kingdom or anywhere in the world in relation to their menstrual cycle, rather, for the content of each individual's character and personal hygiene. The daughters of Benin City (Edo State) are cerebral, proactive and industrious. They should be accorded the respect they deserve, and not segregated.



Plate 3:

Title: “The Bold and Beautiful”

Genre: Painting

Medium: Etimpaste on Canvas

Dimensions: 2ftx1ft

Artist: Etim Ekpenyong

If women like Queen Idia who played a significant role in the rise and reign of her son Oba Esigie, and Emotan who was pivotal to the success of Prince Ogun’s

ascension to the throne as Oba Ewuare the Great despite their feminine gender, it is hereby recommended that women should be accorded the long deserved respect/honour by way of conferring them with chieftaincy titles and giving them more roles to play in the matters of state in the Benin Kingdom. Suffice it to say that it cannot hurt to confer chieftaincy titles to deserving daughters of Benin. Rather, it can only strengthen this ancient great kingdom. . Moreover, more women should be encouraged to partake in Edo politics; they should be emboldened to vie for political offices such as local government councilors, Local government Chairpersons, Senators and governor so that Edo state can ones again experience and enjoy the “Idia/Emotan” spirit that would reflect in the administration of these perspicacious and erudite daughters of Benin City Edo State.

REFERENCES

Coronation (2016) Retrieved from: <http://www.bulletunes.com/2016/10/new-oba-of-benin-takes-3-young-virgins.html?m=0The>

Emotan . Retrieved from: <http://www.edonation.net/salami1.htm>

Eweka, K. (2017) Interview with Researcher, via the social media.

Idahosa, D. (2017) Interview with Researcher, at the department of Fine and applied Art, University of Benin, Edo State



Idumwonyi . M (2011; P3) *Rites And Power: Conceptualizing Menstruation And Ancestral Veneration As A Symbolic Tool For The Exclusion And Legitimization Of Power In The Benin Tradition*. Retrieved from <http://www.citeseerx.ist.psu.edu>

Kweku, D. (2014), *Idia In Nigeria*. Retrieved from: <http://www.kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.co.ke/2014/02/iyoba-idia-popularly-known-as-idiadne.html?m=1>

Moses, J. (2016) Retrieved from: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/10/coronation-crown-prince-amb-eheneden-erediauwa-edaiken-nuselu/Coronation...>

Nevadomsky, J. (1993; P68 and 72) *The Benin Kingdom: Rituals Of Kingship And Their Social Meanings* . Retrieved from: [http://www.repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.pj/.../...](http://www.repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.pj/.../)

Oronsaye-Salami, I. (2005) *Emerging From the Shadows? Changing Patterns In Edo Women*

Political Participation. Retrieved from: <http://www.edonation.net/salami1.htm>

Osukwu, C. (2016) *African Women and the Struggle for Gender Equality*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.worldpulse.com/en/community/users/celine/posts>

Usman, B. (2016) *Royal Work to the Throne for Benin's New Oba*. Retrieved from

<http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/features/story/166877.html>

Williams, R . (2016) *21 Great Christian Quotes about Mothers*. Abraham Lincoln. Retrieved

from: <http://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/21-great-christian-quotes-about-mothers/>

Williams, R . (2016) *21 Great Christian Quotes about Mothers*. Billy Graham. Retrieved from:

<http://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/21-great-christian-quotes-about-mothers/>

/