

ECONOMIC AND SOCIO-POLITICAL RELEVANCE OF BENIN CRAFT GUILDS PRIOR TO 1897

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Abstract

The treasure of ancient Benin Kingdom acquired in history have been the discovery of Benin famous works of arts by European. Consequently, that exposed the great artistic creations to unbelievable height of craft Guilds. In fact, the traditional leadership of Benin kingdom in Pre-colonial period promoted cultural understanding and respect for the cultural institutions (guilds) and through pragmatic approach of the communities within territorial authority of Benin kings. Of course, this western partnership transformed the socio-political and economic structures of Benin empire to a modern African State through the sustainable growth and development of guilds system thus promoting the livelihood of Craftsmen and protecting the cultural heritage of Benin kingdom. Therefore, this study set to examine the relevance of European visits before 1897 and reveals the economic and sociopolitical significance of Benin craft guilds. The data is based on archived sources, interview, observation and extant literature. Hence there is need for government for better financing and training, of which it will improve the commitment and skills of the craftsmen in Benin society.

Keywords: Benin, Craft, guilds, art, European.

Introduction

The background of Benin Craft guilds can be traced to Benin Kingdom historical past and Benin guild system, which were manifestation of power in period of Ogiso monarchial rules and pre-colonial Benin. In fact, the history of Benin before and during Ogiso's rules was largely an extraction of great history with mythology in folktales that revealed the treasure of Benin Kingdom in the guilds system.

According to Egharevba, "*The first Benin dynasty was founded about 900 AD. The kings were commonly known as "Ogiso" before the arrival of Oduduwa and his party from Ife in Yoruba Land, about the 12th century, of the Christian era*"¹. Meanwhile, Egharevba revealed further that one of the prominent leaders, Igodo was made Ogiso or king Igodo, the first Ogiso wielded much influence and gained popularity as good ruler. He died after a long reign and was succeeded by Ere, his eldest son."²

However, during the reign of Ogiso Ere, promoted the rich cultural assets, arts and heritage and directly advanced the economic and socio-political potentials of tourism industries of Benin Kingdom, with these innovations by the Ogiso Ere that has given the king core power to appropriate custodians of cultural and traditional guilds of the kingdom. Indeed, Ogiso Ere transformation steps in craft guilds is in line with its quest to expand the Benin kingdom to neighbouring towns of West African region. Basically, the traditional artifacts represented the ultimate symbol of Benin Empire history and spirituality of ancient heritage in Benin were enhanced and protected by the craftsmen.

However, Egherevba reiterated that *“there were many improvements of craft guilds during the reign of Ere. He founded many villages such as Ego and Erua and the groups of craftsmen known as Onwina and Igbesamwan. The former are the traditional carpenters and the latter the carvers in wood and ivory, it was Ere who introduced the royal throne (ekete), the Chief’s rectangular stool (agba), the round leather fan (ozuzu), the round box (ekpokin) made of bark and leather, the swords of authority (ada and eben) beaded anklets (eguen) and collars (odagba), as well as the, undercoated form of crown. Also introduced include domestic wooden plates and bowls, mortars and pestles, which were carved by the Onwma, and the wooden heads, carved by the Igbesamwan, and kept in ancestral shrines”*.³

Historically, Ogois Ere created the guilds system in Benin kingdom and introduced new idea in craftsmanship in the Benin communities. This advancement came as a result of his contact with many artisans, as they were scattered in the villages in Benin. The most prominent of which were the iron workers (blacksmiths), wood worker, potters, weavers’ leather, carvers, hunters and traders. Ere was very pragmatic in the management of the affairs of the kingdom. Basically, as mentioned earlier Ogois Ere is credited with the set-up of guilds system and it was in his bid to secure Benin monarchy. There had been a lot of economic struggles, between communities before Ere became Ogois, in form of jealous competition with one another in power. Egherevba described Ogois Ere, as *very zealous in the management of the affairs of the kingdom and a lover of peace and concord*”⁴.

The craftsmen antecedence in history underscores their functions in Benin palace as an obligation and the relationship are inseparable from the daily duties of the king himself. The crafts guild offers historical perspective into the study of Benin cultural heritage and traditions with divine power and authority that is given by the King of Benin for the administration of the kingdom. According to P. Thatcher *Ogois dynasty kings who ruled some time before 1400, was eventually overthrown and for a short time, Benin experienced republican government until Prince Eweka with the title Oba, became the first ruler of the dynasty, which survived until the present time*”.⁵

Therefore, craft guild had existed even before the Ogoisos and was the most prominent trade and occupation in nearly all the communities. In fact, iron was used by all other workers, such as the wood workers, weavers, potters, leather workers, etc, for religious purpose, farming and warfare. Moreso, the job done by the ironsmith and other craftsmen professionals as well as the farmers, was only to satisfy the needs of the Benin Monarchy. Meanwhile, Eweka described *the famous Edo works of art stand out uniquely – (neither Egypt’s nor Ife’s works have much in common with the Benin art fact)*.⁶

Egherevba affirms that Oba Oguola (1280 – 1295), *introduce brass-casting into Benin so as to produce works of art similar to those sent him from Ife*.⁷ *Therefore, he sent to the then Oni of Ife, for a brase-smith and Iguegha was sent to him. Iguegha left many designs to his successors and was in consequences deified and is worshipped to this day by brass-smiths. The practice of making brass castings for the preservation of the records of events was originated during the reign of Oguola*.⁸ Though the craft describe in this study existed in the villages and communities, they could not however, develop into guilds system until the administration of Oba Oguola.

Moreso, the possession of the authority of the guild system signifies political exploits and exhibitions of power in that era. Thus, various kings of Benin were involved in organizing the crafts of Guild into units of the communities and to ensure socio-political equilibrium, while creating atmosphere for the economic interest and commercial activities. The guilds were organized in associations of trades, given monopoly rights by any Oba or king in Benin, who saw the needs of such groupings to produce, market, standardize, attend to their products and protect the services of the palace. The monarchy became an important institution in Benin community life. This was partly due to the establishment of the guilds which had a strong links

and relations with the Oba of Benin. Thatcher further stated that “Benin Dynastic *continuity and a reasonable system of succession based on primogeniture contributed to Benin’s success*”.⁹ The guilds system reflected the way the guilds supply some of its products to the king and Craft guilds had a compulsory necessity that shows virtually all aspects of the economic and socio-political needs of the kingdom and protecting the monarchy of Benin Empire.

Statement of the Problem

Benin kingdom has a dynamic history of earliest time which favoured centralized monarchy that generated hatred and conflict among people and neighbours. The system of Monarchial rule has been a complex issue in Benin Empire as result of internal conflict due to the power struggle within the royal family. Isichei stated that Benin was a kingdom whose ruler, the Oba was thought to be divine.¹⁰

From that simple reason, Benin craftsman Guilds fled for their safety during the Benin annexation of neighbouring communities and succession problem within the Benin kingdoms resulting to wanton destruction of lives and artefacts, during the conflicts. Moreso, *Isichei contended that, “Benin internal crisis can be seen in the conflict within the governing class. But it seems likely that there was another sources of tension as well as to be found in a conflict of interests between the governing class and the people they ruled.”*¹¹ Also, Europeans visit to Benin kingdom gave birth to many territorial expansions which affected large number of people including the crafts guild, that created widespread poverty, unrest, and displacement. *Isichei avers that “the expansion of Benin in the sixteenth centuries was made possible by firearms bought from Europeans and that the decline in the quality of Benin social like social life was paralleled by decline in the quality of its art”*¹². *Egbaravba avers that Ewuare the great fought against and captured 201 towns and villages in Ekiri Ikare, Kukuruku, Eka and the Ibo country on side of the river Niger. He took their rulers captive and caused the people to pay tribute to him.*¹³

The departure of craftsmen becomes inevitable as no traditional institutions were available to protect them and their artistic works due to internal violence and external conflicts. Of course, the craft guilds managed to survive in the communities of Benin because the guild system were family-based innovations.

The study therefore is critical to generate an understanding of the problems of Benin craft guild system in Ogiso dynasty and pre-colonial Benin. Of course, the craft guilds were seen as evil and fetish with the onset of Christian missionary activities, it is termed to be primitive, archaic and old fashion, the problem of storage and delivery value of craft guilds contributed to its replacement as a medium of exchange, the dominance of western culture and civilization try to devalue craft guilds. Infact, to correct these gaps, the research questions become necessary; the following questions guided the study:

1. What is the economic significance of the Benin craft guilds?
2. What is the socio-political relevance significance of the Benin craft guilds?
3. What is the effect of European visit to Benin kingdom on craft guilds in pre-colonial era?

Objectives of the Study

The aims or objectives of this study are to:

1. examine the economic significance of Benin Craft Guilds.
1. identify the socio-political relevance of Benin Craft Guilds.
2. establish the effect of European visit to Benin Kingdom and craft guilds system.

Significance of the Study

In the light of this, the study will envisage the following relevance.

1. To provide a valuable instrument for bridging the relevant of craft guilds between the Benin palace and society.
2. To serve as a reference document for instituting effective and appropriate policy in the practice of guilds system in Benin.
3. Add to the existing literature in the subject area and
4. Finally, the outcome of this study will serve as a reference point for scholars who belong to this field of research.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

The study will concentrate only on the Ogiso dynasty and pre-colonial period prior to 1897. The research will therefore be limited to Benin craft guild in appraising the economic and sociopolitical relevance of the guild system within the set period.

Methodology

The primary source of data for this study was structured interview, while the secondary data were sourced from available relevant textbooks and journals. The population consists of both male and female who are cultured in craft guilds and respondents were interview on the economic and socio-political of significance guild system prior to 1897. The data used for this were analysed through content analysis that arms to showcase the relevance of craft guilds in cultural belief, values and tradition.

Brief History of Craft Guilds in Benin

Historically, there are several guilds in Benin kingdom of which dealt with definite functions as assigned by the leader of the society. Then, Iwebo society is the most senior of the three great Benin palace societies and it is made of several chambers, charged with specific duties such as illustrated by Eweka:

- a. *The Eghaevbo*
- b. *The Urhehakpa*
- c. *Ekhaemwen Uko*
- d. *Affiliated Guild*¹⁴

The guilds system was deliberate to secure the monarchical institution of Benin, monopoly right of their services to the Obas who have created them or brought them from other land. The craft guilds include mud architects and sculptors, the blacksmiths, brass-casters, carvers carpenters, costume and bead workers, the leather worker, pot makers and weavers. Of course, with the advantages offered by the formation of the guilds system Benin, longs from time to time, saw need to form groups of craftsmen into guild with monopoly of Benin Palace.

Therefore, Igbafe in his lecture organized by the Federal department of Antiquities during the exhibition of the lost Treasures of Ancient Benin stated that: *“The Guilds were associations or occupational group of craftsmen and professionals under whose ages Benin artistic products were organized, developed, perfected, marketed under strict rules and royal patronage. The associations of craftsmen supplied the Oba’s specific needs in return for monopoly rights from the Oba in these various trades. Under the system of various craftsmen in Benin were encouraged to form associations on which were conferred the monopoly rights to provide, standardize, perfect and market as well as amended to their products.”*¹⁵

However, it is obviously also that guilds served themselves and other member of the community as well for commercial activities. Originally, the guilds grew the societies out for the desires to have security but eventually developed into guilds because the guilds therefore provided the much-needed goods and services to sustain an organized Ogiso dynasty and Benin pre-colonial period. Odoemena contended that *“in pre-colonial West African, had abundance of woods which were hard, plant, and workable and blessed with craftsmen skilled in carving and carpentry. Bowers, shield makers and other markers of weapons practiced the craft usually on family compounds which were under the special protection of town chiefs, and they had the own gods and ritual”*.¹⁶

Moreso, the art and crafts of Benin were the products of an organized society which had grown over the years into economic administrative and political units within Benin kingdom. In facts, the guilds as a whole were originally form to render services to the kings. Therefore, the guilds covered all aspects of the national needs consequently, the manpower of the guilds grew into a complex chieftaincy system through which the associations had with the Oba of Benin. Therefore, the guild were organized into group of their own known as *Otu* (many group). Each of these craft guilds like the other numerous guilds in the town, had sections in different part of Benin where they lived with the leader who supervised their jobs. Their living together under a supervisor helped to improve the quality of whatever work that were produced. Each of these craftsmen in their individual guilds worked together fondly and their products were constantly checked on and were directed and supervised by the leader of the guild as explained by Chief Kingsley Inneh when interviewed¹⁷. The various guilds were also known to have exchange this finished articles between themselves for economic and socio-political gains. Meanwhile, Isiechei explained that; *The palace chiefs were responsible for the guilds of craftsmen, the bronze caster and so on. They advised the Oba and formed a colonial of state together with town chiefs?*¹⁸

Basically, some reasonable accounts can be given on the origins of each of the craft guilds which forms the subject of the succeeding pages. These guilds are in themselves products of the historical developments. Among three major ethnic groups in pre-colonial west Africa such as the Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. The Benin people enjoyed much international recognition due to craft guilds, but certainly the Oba Benin were influential kings' pre-colonial period of Ogiso dynasty because of the positive aspect of their cultural heritage and strategic territorial expansion in southern axis of Nigeria and west African colonies. Therefore, guild system were regarded as administrative units in Ogiso dynasty and pre-colonial Benin. In the administration, the leaders are recognized as the head of the council of craft guilds elders. Then, the council of leadership were thus acquired in any of three ways:

1. Hereditary
2. Appointment and
3. Seniority

The following are the guilds affiliated to Iwebo palace society of Benin kingdom. The various guilds in Benin were really formed to protect these ancient arts of culture and Oba palace. And as illustrated by Eweka the fourth group of title holders attached to the Iwebo place society.

a. Ogbelaka

Eweka stated that *“one of the earliest quarters of Benin city was Ogbelaka, the people came with Ewebo who reigned between 1255 and 1280 A.D”*.¹⁹

The Ogbalaka craft guilds were known drummers, singers, dancers, herbalists, etc, quest to serve the Oba. There are guilds according to their precedence of Ogbelaka

- i. Izegbo
- ii. Esonokhua

- iii. Eghaeguae
- iv. Ivbie Elekingludi
- v. Ewua
- vi. Eleha
- vii. Ikpiwini
- viii. Igbozu
- ix. Ivbiawo
- x. Iboyanyan
- xi. Erhanihun
- xii. Emelagua
- xiii. Igbani Herhan
- xiv. Iwagualoba
- xv. Ogbesasa
- xvi. Evborhan

b. Ogbesanwan

This guild was founded by Oba Eware, the people were originally living in Iwebo but were brought to Ogbelaka to settle, they are the shield-bearers to Oba of Benin.

b. *Igun-Eronmwon* and *Igun-Ermaton*

- i. *Igun-Eronmwon* are the bronze casters. The fact that the art of bronze casting is still being vigorously practiced in Benin today from time immemorial.
- ii. *Igun-Ermaton*. This guild specializes in Iron-casting and it is reputed to have begun in the same period as the bronze-caster.

c. Avbiogbe

members of this guild perform the duty of supervision of land, police and town-crier or bellringers. They also announce new laws and declarations of war and treaties of peace.

d. Igbesanwwan

Also, members of this guild are the traditional hood and Ivory carvers. The guild was formed by Oba Ewaure the Great (c. 1440 AD).²⁰

e. Odionmwan

This guild belongs to the ceremonial executioners

f. Ikpema

The guild belongs to the royal drummers who usually perform during Ugie ceremonies, and festivals.

g. Ivbiosa and Ivbiosuan

these town guilds and headed by the twin brothers Osa and Osuan, who were both diviners as well as physical were made priests of the two deities which were believed to ward off evils from and provide fertility for young prince being sent Benin. Their official duties are the protection of the Oba and the fertility of the Edo people.

i. Emadase

this guild is the cult of Oro dancers who perform certain rites during Ugie ceremonies.

j. Isekpokin

The Ogiamen's family was allowed to continue to carry on the leather work, the Oba of Benin constituted into a guild called Isekpokin which makes all leather goods except the Elele (throne).

k. Igbuzebu

the Igbuzebu is a guild of dancers whose origin dates back to the reign of Oba orhogbua (circa 1550-1578 A.D).²¹

l. Iwifenwen

members of this guild were great archers like Ake in whose memory the guild was granted by Oba to keep the relics of his old friend. The members of his guild are mainly drawn from Hobi people in Isi who are reputed for producing poison for the arrows which are relied on used during Isiokuo festival.

m. Iwoki

Iwoki guild was formed by Oba Esigie (circa 1504 – 1550 AD)²². Members of this guild are reputed to be astrologers and astronomers. They are expert in weather forecast and are capable of controlling the weather too.

n. Iwogun

The guild was formed by Oba Ewuare members of the guild are caretakers of the Ebo-N'Edo and Ogun shrines.

o. Ukhegie

This guild which was founded to care of the shrine in memory of the face of the land, is reputed to be one of the oldest guilds on Edo and. Moreso, tradition had it that the magical snail shell which had the power of creating land was buried at the spot where Ukhegie stands.

p. Igusi

The guild as probably formed during the reign of Oba Ozulua to render some private service to the Oba.

q. Iviokpen

The guild is made up of leopard hunters.

r. Ivekpen

Oba Ewuare also created this guild whose responsibility it is to slaughter the animal.

s. Aragua

The guild deals with ritual purifications of women after the royal obsequies.

t. Igbemaba

Members of this guilds are group of drummers which originated with Oba Esigie after a war at Udo. They perform during Igwe festival and other ceremonies.

u. Ikpeziken

This is guild in the royal elite players.

v. Ikpakon

This guild is the elephant tusk blowers.

w. Ifieto

These members are usually armed with ritual armlet and they feature prominently at royal ceremonies at Igwe and other ceremonies the Ifieto usually lead the procession and clear the route which the Oba passes. Ogboji et al observed that *African traditional religion is indigenous to African then same as craft guild is indigenous to Benin people*²³.

Relevance of European Visit to Benin Kingdom and Craft Guilds

The European contact with Benin kingdom as seen by the visitors as a beautiful city. They met a city which was to then one of the most prosperous and best organized cities south of the Sahara. Isichei wrote that *“the first Europeans to visit Benin, from the late fifteenth century on have left us an extremely attractive picture of it. They thought it comparable in every way with a European city.”*²⁴ Of course, they noticed walls are well maintain and a powerful city of guilds which had worked in Benin Kingdom in pre-colonial period.

According to Egharevba, *the Portuguese explorer named John Afonso d’Aveiro visited Benin City for the first time in 1485-6. He introduced guns and coconut into this country.*²⁵

Then, craft Guilds which popularly drew their attention included carpenters, wood carvers, iron workers, brass workers, leather workers, weavers and bead workers. This meant that, by the time the Portuguese arrived, the craft guilds had already attained their level of fullest development. Moreso, this contact did not just end in European visits and their recording of what they saw. There were attempts at religious minister and exchange of goods and trade, all of which had an artistic and cultural impact, which enabled the Benin Monarch to get involved actively in trade. The Benin king were thus, provided with luxury times such as coral beads, cloth for ceremonial purposes and a great quality of brass.

Furthermore, Egbaravba reiterated that, *John Afonso d’Aveiro, came to Benin-city for the second time during the reign (Oba Esigie, beginning in AD1504). He advised the Oba to become a Christian and said that Christianity would make his country better.*²⁶

Then, availability of raw materials for the brass casters enabled them to introduce new designs and forms into Benin Arts. This has been of responsible for the Benin craftsmen moving further away from the influence to develop their own style as of the European visit. Actually, the availability of the brass did not directly cause the change in style and techniques of the Benin craftsmen but with improvement due to the European contact. And the period was one which were known to be responsible for recording events in the palace and were thus highly influenced by European visit and mixture of the two cultures. Some historians such as concluded that this period of pre-colonial Benin, it was the finest of all the works of Benin arts were produced. Isichei revealed that *Benin craftsmen produced works of art in bronze and ivory, which are among that art wonders of the world. Many of them were reliefs, where the relative size of the people deputed reflected their relative social importance. This one shows a smaller scale and in the two upper corners, smaller still, two Europeans drinking from flasks.*²⁷

In fact, the Portuguese traders and sailors patronized Benin arts and craftsmen through Oba permission from the leader of the Iwebo Palace society and Uwangue society and managed the guild system. The craftsmen were allowed to produce for the Portuguese. These works were definitely produced to suit the description given by the Europeans. The result of this European experience rebuilds in the production of excellent art works like the famous and magnificent salt sellers, ivory spoons with handles. Beautifully carved in animal and bird forms and hunting horns all of which were sold to the sailors and the Europeans nobilities as directed by the King. Thatcher wrote that *diplomatic relations between the two countries were established, and attempts were made to convert the Benin people to Christianity.*²⁸

Today, in several private collections, excellent works in Ivory and wood can be found, with hunting home, salt cellars, sporous, folks, and dagger heads all served for the Portuguese nobility and royalty by Benin craftsmen. According to Elder Osarobo Ogbevoen, in an interview declare that these works of art could be seen as influenced by the Europeans contact and experience showing the great beauty and skill of Benin art works as well as the capacity of Benin craftsmen to imbibe new ideas. Nevertheless, not be tempted to attribute the beauty of the art works at this time, solely to the influence of the Europeans. The fact still

remains that the craftsmen existed before the Europeans arrived and their contributions were also represented in the Benin art works²⁹.

Moreso, guilds, particularly the brass-casters and carpenters, spent more of their time in the palace during the pre-colonial period in Ogiso Dynasty. Thus, they got involved with the European visitors as well as producing for the visitors. Also, not only did the carvers and brass-casters benefit from this period, other craft guilds experience boom in their commercial activities. The Portuguese also traded in coral beads with the Benin guilds of bead workers, and the Oba's costume guilds had to work actively in making holes in beads as well as making them into royal outfits as explained by Mrs. Ekhaton³⁰.

However, by the 17th and 18th centuries, the Portuguese monopoly of the trade had been broken and Benin had begun to trade with the Dutch, French and English. Benin craft guilds in fact noted the changes at a given time, because the socio-political situation that existed within the Benin kingdom when there was peace and tranquility in the kingdom, the resultant effects led to a growth of art works. Egharevba further revealed that *the king of Portugal also sent some Portuguese traders who established trading factories at Ughoton, the old part of Benin, they traded in Ivory, Benin clothes, pepper and leather commodities in king of Portugal interest.*³¹

By the 19th century, after stopping trade with the Dutch on Ivory, the Benin kingdom experienced, an increase in trade and palm oil trade with British. Finally, the relation between Oba Ovonramen, the Oba of Benin and the British towards the closing years of the century, led to the conquest of the city by the British in 1897. Isichei explained that:

*The Portuguese made the supply of firearms conditional on Benin's adoption of Christianity. Since this condition was not fulfilled firearms were not supplied.*³² As at early sixteenth century, the Oba began to restrict the sales of art works to the Europeans because of territorial expansion. Egharevba reported that *a Frenchman, captain J. F. Handolphe came to Benin city in 1769, 178 and 1787 during the reign of Oba Akengbuda.*³³

In fact, the economic support given to the Benin Kingdom by the craft guilds was one of the basic factors responsible for the survival of the kingdom. Thatcher wrote that, *during the 17th and 18th centuries, Benin's power declined considerably, but the centre of the kingdom successfully adopted to changing economic and political conditions and survived until the British conquest of 1897.*³⁴

Economic Relevance of the Craft Guilds in Pre-Colonial Benin

The basis of the guild system was to supply the needs of Oba of Benin. Accordingly, each of the craft guilds was actively involved in the service of the Benin Monarch. The architect and mud sculptors involved themselves with the buildings, mud reliefs in the palace as well as its sculptural aspect; all of which need constant maintenance. Moreso, the brass-caster were also actively involved in this aspect of economic support for the throne. Oba Erediauwa wrote that: *The arrival of d'Aveiro in Benin followed by the Portuguese traders and missionaries. The object of the traders was to secure Ivory, pepper, palm oil and were later involved in the slave*".³⁵ The brass-casters products, were not merely works of art and display as they are primarily seen today. Their duties to the palace consisted by the recording of events for the Oba. These works in brass, depicting the memories achievements and the contemporary for keeps at the ancestral shrines of the Oba and Palace. Moreso, Oba Erediauwa posited again that: *Ewedo's successor – Oba Oguaka is famous for the introduction of the cire perdue casting brass and thus, a craft which has made Benin famous.*³⁶

The carvers and carpenters working jointly also contributed to this recording of events in wood and ivory. The Obas ancestral shrines did not consist of brass heads only. There were also carved Ivory trunks, carved

rattle staff and wooden beads. Both the carners and brass casters were also responsible for the moral decoration on the walls of different chambers in the Oba palace. The Benin monarchical rules imposed on the communities and craftsmen, created a great impact on the social, political and economic relations among craft guilds. The craft guilds, beyond generating all these benefits and opportunities, guilds system created positive economic impacts on both the craftsmen and oba palace.³⁷

In spite of all these, there existed a hunter guild, the rest of the people still went hunting because the economic of people centered on agriculture. At the same time they paid their homage to the Oba through their guilds. Edeagbonya et al stated that *"several of Benin craftsmen became rich and well known because apart from producing specially for monarchy, they also sell their products to the healthy chiefs and people"*.³⁸

This rather than the Oba spending money or paying in any other way for the goods or services, these were taken as the people contribution towards they monarchy welfare. This was of tremendous advantages to the Oba's economic wellbeing. Sometimes in return for these services, each of the guilds received gifts such as wives, kolanut, and foodstuffs from the Oba.³⁹ In the pre-colonial Ogiso dynasty craft Benin, the guilds members, most especially the brass-casters and carvers, were earning enough money which enhanced their economic wellbeing. Thus, is manifest action of the constant economic support they rendered to the palace of the Oba.⁴⁰ Basically, the black smiths produced his sword of authority (eben) and the architect also help the chief to draw mark lines in the walls, which reflects their status and position. Moreso, the craft guilds also produced artefacts worship in houses that had altars. The guild members were believed to produce various objects, though with royal permission for the Benin citizen who could afford them.⁴¹

Since their attention was not constantly demanded at the palace, producing for others, also led credence to their economic growth. Thus, the guilds did not exist only or solely for the Oba, they were in integral part of the Benin economic system. In Benin, the guilds were organized into some form of commercial societies of their own based on the principle of division of labour. Benin kingdom imposed the limits on trade, insisting that all trade through the communities be conducted by Oba palace. The monopoly brought great wealth to the kingdom, but also annoyed the Europeans. According to Abiodun *many demonstrations of diverse cultural heritage are capable of attracting patronage from natural and international terrorists*.⁴² Craftsmen, in their bid towards productivity for economic survival, the guild system descendants engage in different kinds of economic activities such as trade, artisanal works, interior decoration and building.⁴³

Meanwhile, Elder Jacobs Enogunwengie, explained further that, Probably their early contacts with the Europeans gave the craftsmen an edge over others as their works in crafts were more sophisticated.⁴⁴ Benin craft is developing worldwide as treasure of art because it has great significant in economic contribution to the local communities. Membership of the guilds posed no problem as they continued to expand and grow because they were organized on family basis thereby, ensuring that the needs of each of the Obas of Benin were constantly catered for. In an interview with Mr. Ada Izevbigie, the craft's major objective position is the promotion of economic wellbeing of his members, and he did not hesitate say that craftsmen are hardworking, peace loving and hardly engage in illicit business, because they cherish their family and traditions. The contribution of craft guilds to tourism industries has increased tremendously in the past couple of decades due to several calls for the returns of Benin artefacts from Europe.⁴⁵ Moreover, the expansion and continuity of the craft guilds were in fact a direct result of the economic relevance in pre-colonial Benin. Isichie reiterated that *Benin Kingdom was simply following a policy of expanding as far possible in all directions, or if the movement towards the coast was stimulated by advert of European traders and the commercial possibilities this opened by Benin*".⁴⁶

Socio-Political Relevance of the Craft Guild in Pre-Colonial Benin

As a result of the craft guilds being given specific area of abode, the city was divided into a number of self-government wards, each one being occupied by members of the affiliated guild. The Oba *Benin was revered by his people, but he was not absolute. The basic structure of Benin government remained the same as established by Ewedo in the thirteenth century. Benin City was surrounded by a high wall, divided into two sections, separated from each other by a wide avenue of the palace and the town.*⁴⁷ Of course, the guilds settle in specific quarters of Benin which were called after the guild names. For example, the areas or quarters for brass-caster was call Igun-Eronmwon, a name it still maintains till today and the area for carvers, called Igbesamwan. The guild elder's council was responsible for the internal administration of the guilds with their specified quarters. Osadolor contended that *Benin is probably the best known of all the precolonial west African states as it evolved a centralized political system with a monarch hierarchy of state and territorial officials. By the time Europeans first visited Benin at end of the fifteenth century, the structure was already completed and so founded that it survived essentially unchanged through many upheavals for another five hundred years.*⁴⁸

However, some of the craft guilds were thus, hereditary but Benin politics was more a matter of open competition for power and title than anything else. The Oba sometimes conferred the title on some influential members in the guild. It should be noted that the elders, who were all members of the council were not all considered equal. They were grouped into a hierarchy of (i) senior grade (ii) second grade (and iii) junior grade. Isichei reported that, *Benin craftsmen produced works of art in bronze and ivory which are among the art wonders of the world. Many of them were reflect, where the relative size of the people depicted reflected their relative social importance.*⁴⁹

The oba of Benin was in controlled of the craft guilds and protected their commercial interests. The craft guilds have been one of the unifying factors of Benin communities before the advent of Christianity. Ediagbonya et al affirms that *"another feature of the guild system in Benin was that the guilds were affiliated to one of the palace societies in line with the feature of the services. Part of the reason for the affiliation was that each of the palace societies took charge of the Oba's household and each of the guilds performed special service function for the Oba."*⁵⁰

Furthermore, the craft guilds serve as instruments of socio-political integration and platform for interactions, of which has become a bond of unity and identity in the occupational life of Benin craftsmen. The European influence had tremendous impact on the socio-political life of Benin people in pre-colonial period, these changes affected the nature and relations among the craft guilds. Moreso, in the craft guilds, traditional practice and job performance is important as anything or actions contrary to this is considered rebellion or insubordination, which attracts several sanction and consequences from the Oba palace.

The Benin society like any other African society had their own traditional belief system which is manifested in their belief in deities of the Oba of Benin. Hence, all of them played a socio-political relevance role in strengthening each other for the purpose of actualizing aforementioned goals of protecting the Oba of Benin kingdom. Benin craft guilds has a socio-political structure that is rooted in the chieftaincy institution which formed important organs in the administration machinery of guild system. Osagie et Ikponswvosa stated that *"the professionals and craftsmen organized into guilds were not starving while proving for the needs of the monarchy"*⁵¹.

Nevertheless, titled men in the craft guilds involved in governance of the guild systems by settling minor cases, which are brought before them by the aggrieved members. Also, cases involving two guilds, were settled by both councils. They also collected the stipulated tributes, organized the youths for public works and adults for war at the command of the Oba and his council. They were also in charge of law and order

within their own guilds, which mean that within each separate area in pre-colonial Benin and contemporary time. Basically, it is important to note here that contact and relationship between craft guild was longer controlled by the people themselves in the precolonial period, but by the Oba of Benin in line with the Oba's socio-political interest.⁵²

They women were not allowed to get involved in the production of any article and in the event of the women touching the implements, or violation of any taboo, the leader would to perform a purification. The attitude towards women was based on the fact that they were regarded as unclean at certain times of month. It is still a cultural practice in contemporary time. However, it was not strictly adhered to in the weaver's guild where women were initially allowed to practice work. Hence, as for the brass-casters and carvers and all the other craft guilds, women were never allowed to touch the tools of production and hence did not participate in the work because of purity and to avoid pollution.⁵³ Benin craft guilds are indices to the craftsmen religious belief, philosophy, geographical location, fears, culture, language, situations about their family background birth, history, politics.

However, the reason women were restricted in other craft guilds other than the weaver was that the others craft namely carvers, iron workers, leather worker, brass-caster, all worked with highly ritualized materials – metal which was of great significance in Benin religious symbols and women were not considered pure enough to touch them. Moreso, the weavers implement were totally wooden and were not ritually. The leader and his council members organized the age grade of the members of their guild with the relevant socialization process to enable such members absorb the duties of the guilds the leader also took responsibility for the success and failures of the guild before the Oba, when the occasion arose. They were also responsible for the education of the person next in succession as the guild leader, and perform the duties, functions and responsibilities of the guild during the inevitable period of orientation for such successors. Isiechie reiterated that *both the Oba palace and the head Chiefs have wealthy and powerful, controlling craft guilds and numerous followers.*⁵⁴

Furthermore, the guild leader also spreadhead the group in the worship at the guild shrine during ceremonies and festivals, when the guild gods and shrines were appeased. The leader also represented the guilds at conference whenever problem arose in the kingdom in which their presence was considered necessary. The leader of guild occupied a position of social and political significance since he was the representative of the guild at many levels and because of the multifarious socio-political functions. The expansion and growth of any of the craft guilds depend to some extent on family arrangement because children automatically always became members of their father's guild. In some case when the children in a family were many, some of them took up membership of their mother's guild. Since the craftsmen lived in wards around the same area.

Infact, one direct result of the political and social contributions of the craft guilds or this guild system as a whole, was a good organization of craft industries as well as a high perfection in regulating crafts and guild product by Oba palace. The craft guild particularly the brass-caster wood and ivory carvers, produced article which were used in the promotion of political relationship with outsiders. Osagie et Ikponmwosa contended that *"the support rendered to the Oba by the craft guilds was a major reason for the long way survival of the monarchy and the kingdom"*.⁵⁵ Fortunately, the villages mentioned-above such as Igun, Igbesnawan, Ogbelaka etc cultural heritage has survived the modern Benin.

Apart from aiding relationships with outsiders the guild system in Benin also help in the social and political transformation within Benin itself. The Benin craftsmen kingdom in pre-colonial were mostly a member of

the palace societies while most of the commoners were in the guild. The guilds system was affiliated to the palace societies and under this arrangement, they provided economic and socio-political links between the Oba palace and Benin people in pre-colonial Ogois dynasty Benin. Hence, Ajayi et al viewed African society especially Nigeria is richly blessed in arts, cultures, traditions, heritages and economic development which includes trades, norms, values and identities that have been in existence since the creation of man.⁵⁶

Summary and Conclusion

Since the discovery of Benin work of art by the European diplomatic contact prior to 1897. The artistic traditions of Benin were firmly established in the people's way of life and maintained by the people's traditional institutions specially designed for this purpose and Oba's authority. This work has shown how, in the process of establishing some of its institutions, Benin laid a solid foundation for craft guilds industries, which became an integral part of economy, socio-political and administrative organization of Benin monarchy. This study has also demonstrated that a good and viable central government is necessary for political stability which in turn has effect on the social and economic aspect of a polity. The famous Benin kings were known to have promoted the works of the craft guilds to produce their finest works and secure the community and territorial expansion.

This period also considered with the period of the European constant visit to Benin, which began in the second half of the fifteenth century their influence and the peaceful co-existence between them and the Benin kingdom motivated the craft guilds a great achievement resulting in a period of beautiful innovations and creations. However, it should be noted that in spite of these contacts, the foreign culture did not suppress the on-going art in Benin. The craftsmen combined their new talent with their traditional ones, with the latter still having a stronger impact.

In a purely pre-colonial settings, the guild system actively promoted the development and growth of indigenous craft industries in Benin kingdom. The guilds fulfilled a role which the circumstance of the period recognized and encouraged. The level of economic growth in the society, the demands of the ruling elite and needs of generality of the people dictated nature and character of the service which they rendered in pre-colonial Benin. As long as the social situation which justified and encouraged the existence of the guild system and the guilds has continued to flourish in the contemporary time. The Benin craft guilds had more relevance today because of globalization and the guilds are well positioned traditionally so that it will continue to satisfy the needs of modern Benin and Edo state government.

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