

CHAPTER 4

BENIN IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Objectives

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:

- examine the nature and extent of Benin empire in the 19th century;
- discuss the reasons for the fall of Benin empire;
- explain the role of the British in the fall of Benin;
- explain the impact of the abolition of the slave trade on Benin economy.

Introduction

Benin rose from a small kingdom in the 13th century to an expansive empire in the 16th century. A number of factors were responsible for the rise and expansion of Benin Kingdom namely, political stability, economic prosperity, efficient military and good leadership.

However, Benin's decline began to set in from the 18th century as a result of a combination of factors which shall be discussed at the end of this chapter.

4.1 Benin at the Beginning of the 19th Century

(a) Nature and Extent of Benin Empire in the 19th century

Benin had a strong central government headed by a monarch with the traditional title of Oba. Benin traditional economy was based on agriculture, craft making and trade.

Agricultural production in Benin was based on subsistence production of crops like maize, plantain, rice and cocoyam.

Traditional craft industries in bronze and iron works existed in Benin. Trade especially with the Europeans was also an important economic activity. For example, Benin exchanged slaves ivory, cloth and palm produce for European manufactured goods especially fire arms.

However, while Benin economy was still doing well, politically it was facing serious challenges due mainly to internal disputes among Benin leadership.

At the height of its power in the 16th century, Benin Empire extended to Lagos in the West, Asaba in the East, Igala in the North and Ijo in the South. But by the 18th century when the empire began to decline there was little evidence about its size or extent. However, it is known that such vassal states as Ishan and Agbo had begun to assert their independence from Benin, by the time of Oba Akenzua's reign (1713 – 1735). The Ijo and the Itsekiri also broke away from Benin and seized control of the Benin River. By the 1860s, the British had conquered and annexed Lagos.

By the late 19th century, Benin had lost much of her power and territory. The once vast empire was reduced to the small Edo kingdom because of a number of economic and political reasons.

4.2 The Impact of the Abolition of the Slave Trade on Benin Economy

Benin Empire was involved in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade with European slaving nations. At one time, its economy came to depend much on the trade. However, when the slave trade was abolished (1807 and 1833) and replaced with legitimate trade, Benin economy was greatly affected.

During the era of slave trade, the Benin port at Ughoton was an important slave port. With the abolition, trade in the port was directed to other areas and this meant loss of revenue for Benin.

The abolition of the slave trade led to the introduction of the trade in commodities (legitimate trade). Benin began to export palm produce, rubber, etc. in place of slaves. In this way, the abolition of the slave trade had a positive impact on Benin economy.

The abolition of the slave trade and the trade in commodities made it possible for more number of people to participate in internal and external trade than in the slave trade period.

The development of the commodity trade in place of the slave trade increased British interest in the internal affairs of Benin which finally led to the sack of Benin in 1897.

The abolition of the slave trade had serious consequences on Benin economy. It creates for Benin economic problems which contributed to her decline and fall.

4.3 Political Crises and the Emergence of Weak Rulers

(a) Problems of succession and the emergence of weak rulers

Early in Benin history, the Uzama chiefs who were hereditary chiefs and heads of clans in Benin had an overwhelming influence over the Benin Obas. The reason is that they were powerful and decided who among the members of the royal family would be an Oba. From the time of Oba Ewedo, attempts were made by Benin rulers to free themselves from the Uzama by creating non-hereditary chiefs of loyalists to support them against the dictatorship of the Uzama.

However, it was during the reign of Oba Ewuare that profound changes that affected the powers of the Uzama took place. He reorganized the capital and separated the palace (Ogbe) from the town (Ore). He also created other titles for the palace and for the town palace and for the town, and all the titled chiefs participated in decision-making on important issues. He did this to reduce the power of the hereditary Uzama and to enhance the authority of the ruler.

Ewuare also created the position of Edaiken or heir apparent and the principle of primogeniture or the practice that allowed a ruler to be succeeded by his eldest son.

These efforts of Ewuare created political crises in Benin as the Uzama saw themselves as targets of these policies. Their powers had been usurped by the non-hereditary or palace chiefs and they no longer had the ability to decide who would succeed an Oba. The Uzama or hereditary which they lost under Ewuare by making it difficult for the principle of primogeniture to work after

Ewuare's death. For example, Ezoti, heir of the throne (Edaiken) was killed by a poisoned arrow during a coronation ceremony. Ewuare's daughter died in mysterious condition and one of his sons was banished from Benin city.

As the conflict between the palace chiefs and town chiefs continued, many of the vassal states which were conquered under Ewuare used the opportunities to regain their authority and to wage wars against Benin. Benin chiefs had to bring back Okpame, the banished son of Ewuare and made him a king. He took the throne named Ozolua and was able to reassert Benin authority over rebel provinces.

Succession, disputes and the struggle for power between Benin Kings and the hereditary chiefs continued into the time of Esigie. For instance, Oliha the leader of Uzama chiefs entered into alliance with King of Idah to overthrow Esigie. The plot did not succeed but it made Esigie to create more non-hereditary chiefs to check the powers of the Uzama.

It was during the time of Esigie that the Europeans came in contact with Benin. This relationship ushered in an era of prosperity for Benin and the kingdom remained without any major succession dispute for a long time. Benin also witnessed strong warrior leaders to be able to secure Benin authority and territorial boundaries.

But the death of Ehengbuda, a Benin Oba while on a military expedition led to a practice where Benin Obas no longer went to war. Gradually, the Oba began to confine his activities to the palace to the extent of appearing in public only twice a year. This situation increased the authority of the Uzama who reversed the principle of primogeniture and began to regulate succession of the throne. They appointed rulers who were not as far-sighted and courageous as the early Benin Obas.

The overall result of this struggle for power and succession disputes was a decline in the authority of the Oba and the eventually decline of Benin kingdom.

4.4a The Decline and Fall of Benin Kingdom

A number of economic and political reasons which shall be discussed below contributed to the decline and fall of Benin in the late 19th century.

i. Economic Reasons

Abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade:

Benin's economy comes to depend on the slave trade and slaves exported through the port at Ughoton. The state gave less attention to legitimate means of production such as agriculture and craft production. When the slave trade was suddenly abolished by Britain, Benin lost a major source of revenue.

The abolition also reduced the importance of the once strategic port of Ughoton which had become a population slave port. Benin was forced to import and export its goods through Warri, which was a more expensive route.

ii. Development of Legitimate Trade

Also the development of legitimate trade, which allowed more people to participate in external trade with the Europeans reduced the Oba's power and monopoly of trade. Other groups and states began to participate equally in the profitable commodity trade. This new prosperity was one of the factors that gave the vassal states the boldness of rebel against Benin.

iii. Diversion of Trade to Lagos and Badagry

The development of the ports of Badagry and Lagos for coastal trade affected Benin's trade and commerce negatively. This is because trade in Yorubaland was diverted away from Benin's port at Ughoton. Little trade was therefore conducted with Europeans in Benin and this amounted to decrease in revenue for the empire. A combination of these economic factors contributed to the decline and fall of Benin Empire.

Political Factors

i. Emergency of Weak Rulers

Benin produced outstanding leaders such as Oba Equare Esigie, Ehengbuda and Ahman that contributed to the expansion and development of Benin. But from the early 19th century, Benin witnessed a succession of weak and selfish leaders who were not as sensible and far-sighted as those early rulers that made Benin great. The reign of these later Obas was therefore characterized by political unrests which contributed to the decline of the empire.

ii. Spread of Fire arms

Benin had an alliance with the Portuguese and obtained from them fire arms which it used to wage wars. Soon, other European traders began to supply fire arms to vassal states which they used to break away from Benin.

iii. Weakness of the army

Benin army was weakened by problems of disunity due to unpopular appointments in the military. The appointments of Ezomo as the army chief in place of Iyase affected loyalty in the Benin army. In addition, Benin army no longer had the monopoly of fire arms and the use of them in the area. Other groups acquired weapons from European traders and with them, successfully resisted Benin rule. These factors greatly contributed to the decline and fall of Benin Empire.

iv. Revolt of Vassal States

The weakness of the army and other political problems made many of the vassal states to revolt against Benin control and to declare their independence. Ishan, Ijo, Itsekiri, Agbo and many other vassal states rebelled against Benin authority and regained their independence. Ijo and Itsekiri took

over the control of the lower Benue and Niger which was formerly in Benin hands. The successful revolt of these vassals meant loss of territory, markets and tributary revenue for Benin kingdom. These factors eventually led to decline and fall of Benin empire.

v. British Military Expedition in 1897

The final blow that led to the fall of Benin kingdom was the British punitive expedition of 1897 that destroyed Benin city. In February 1897, British Soldiers marched into Benin and sacked the ancient city in retaliation for a British party ambushed by Benin soldiers in January of the same year. The Oba was exiled to Calabar.

A combination of these economic, political and external factors such as the abolition of the slave trade, diversion of trade to Lagos port, emergence of weak rulers and British punitive expedition against Benin contributed to the collapse of Benin Kingdom.

4.4b The British in the Fall of Benin Kingdom

The first European that came in contact with Benin were the Portuguese in 1482. By 1520, the Portuguese had withdrawn from Benin to trade with the neighbouring Itsekiri. The Portuguese were however, replaced by Netherlands and Britain. This Benin – British relationship was based on trade in agricultural products, crafts and slaves as well as manufactured goods.

However, the economic relationship between Benin and Britain changed as Britain began to establish a protectorate over the Nigerian coastline and to control the trade they went on in the area.

Ovonramwen, the Oba of Benin was accused by the British of obstructing free flow of legitimate trade because he made efforts to control the palm-oil trade in the area against British policy of free trade.

In 1896, Lt. James Philip, an acting consul visited Benin on a day the Oba did not allow visitors into the kingdom. Benin rulers saw this as an act of aggression and had to kill the British party.

This incident led to the British punitive expedition to Benin in 1897, which finally destroyed the ancient city of Benin.

Benin–British relations were largely based on trade. The struggle between the two countries over the control of the legitimate trade contributed to the Benin – British war of 1897 in which Benin was defeated. This defeat by Britain was the most important factor in the fall of Benin kingdom.

4.4c Consequences of British Military Expedition in Benin

British military expedition led to the destruction of the ancient Benin city. Also from that day, Benin lost her independence to Britain and was incorporated into the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. Britain used soldiers for this expedition and they killed many Benin citizens.

Ovonranwen, the Oba of Benin at the time was dethroned and exiled to far away Calabar where he died in 1914. Significantly too, the British invaders looted and carted away to Britain countless pieces of Benin arts and crafts such as the famous Bronze mask.



Fig. 4.2: Picture of Benin Bronze Mask

Summary

- By the late 19th century, Benin had lost much of his power and influence and the once vast empire was reduced to a small kingdom.
- Benin economy depended much on the slave trade. She therefore suffered economic loss when the trade was abolished.
- The abolition of the slave trade reduced the importance of the once prosperous port of Ughoton and made Benin to direct her trade to other parts.
- The legitimate trade in primary goods allowed more people to participate in trade and broke the monopoly of Benin Obas.
- Other groups acquired fire arms with which they successfully resisted Benin rule.
- The final blow to Benin kingdom was the British military expedition of February 1897 which destroyed the ancient city of Benin.
- The emergence of autocratic and weak rulers contributed to the decline and fall of Benin.
- British invaders looted and carted away to Britain countless pieces of Benin arts and crafts such as the famous Bronze mask.
- The developing of the commodity trade in place of the slave trade increased British interest in the internal affairs of Benin.

Revision Questions

Objectives

1. Benin practised a centralized system of government headed by the _____.
 - A. Obi
 - B. Oba
 - C. Alaafin
 - D. Oni
2. Agricultural production in Benin Empire was based on _____.
 - A. subsistence production
 - B. large scale production
 - C. mechanised production
 - D. plantation agriculture
3. By the 1890s, Benin's vast territorial size shrunk down to the _____.
 - A. Edo heartland
 - B. Ife heartland
 - C. Ijo Rivers
 - D. Oyo Area
4. The abolition of the slave trade destroyed the Benin port of _____.
 - A. Ughoton
 - B. Lagos
 - C. Onitsha
 - D. Benin River
5. One reason that led to the decline of Benin was _____.
 - A. emergence of
 - B. french incursion
 - C. rise of weak rulers
 - D. rise of Oyo army
6. The final blow that caused the collapse of Benin kingdom was _____.
 - A. revolt of the vassal states
 - B. collapse of Benin economy
 - C. emergence of foreign Obas
 - D. British expedition of 1897
7. The European sent the Benin Oba on exile to _____.
 - A. London
 - B. Calabar
 - C. Ibadan
 - D. Oyo
8. _____ was one of the Benin's important exports at the time of the legitimate trade.
 - A. Palm oil
 - B. Cashew

- C. Oil
 - D. Slaves
9. British soldiers destroyed Benin and carted away _____ to Britain.
- A. Benin art works
 - B. Benin soldiers
 - C. Benin women and children
 - D. Benin Obas
10. The major cause of the Benin British war was the _____.
- A. desire to control trade in produce and manufacture
 - B. need to control the slave trade
 - C. need to control craft industries
 - D. desire to promote port development

Essay Questions

1. Highlight the economic reasons that led to the fall of Benin Empire.
2. Discuss the role of the British in the fall of Benin Empire.
3. Describe the nature and extent of Benin Empire in the 19th century.
4. Explain the impact of the abolition of the slave trade on Benin economy.
5. What political factors led to the collapse of Benin Empire?