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THE BENIN KINGDOM: RITUALS OF KINGSHIP AND THEIR SOCIAL MEANINGS[1]

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ABSTRACT Rituals of kingship in some parts of Nigeria represent the main social reality for many people, providing meaning amidst clashing and ineffectual ideologies, and promising security in a politically unstable time. In the Benin kingdom the Oba's power is less than in centuries past, but the ideas underling kingship persist, through myth and ritual, as a general cognitive model.

By exploring the meanings of Benin kingship rituals and the contemporary contexts of royal ceremonies this paper shows how court performances and other legitimating icons such as cement statuary give the Bini a sense of stability by tying them into a larger imagined tradition of greatness.

Key Words: Ritual; Kingship; West Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Few of us recognize the importance of ritual. In Western utilitarian societies, ritual is thought to be associated with the sacred, a domain peripheral to the functioning of a secular, rational state. There is the further assumption that ritual is valid only for what Claude Levi-Strauss called "cold" societies, "the societies that anthropologists study...that remain indefinitely in their initial state...static societies with no history" (cited in Leach, 1990: 3). In "hot" or "modern societies like our own which work like steam engines and are constantly modified by history" (Leach, 1990: 3), rituals are presumably undermined by the relentless forces of change. This rationalist bias is so strong that anthropologists often regard industrialization as the antithesis of ritual, the dynamic production of the one pited against the repetitive reproduction of the other.

As a subcategory, rituals of royalty are perceived as even more anachronistic. Most of the world's royalty are dead or dethroned, from Czar Nicholas to Haile Selaisse and the Kabaka of Buganda. That the rites of rulers are regarded as marginal can be seen by the representations of royalty in the tabloid press, the function of which journalism is to reveal society by presenting to it images of the superweird other: aliens, savages and wacky royals. At their most innocuous, royal rituals are seen as spectacle: princely marriages and fairy tale investitures that rivet our attention with their otherness. At their most insidious, they are webs of mystification, targeted for the "immature social strata who," as Lane argues, "have been unable fully to develop their critical faculties" (1981: 26; emphasis in original).

Over the past several decades, however, as anthropology moved from explana-

tion to meaning, pageantry and the rites of rulers have achieved a compelling prominence. The most forceful expression is Geertz's study of the theater state of Bali. He contends that 19th century Bali devoted its energies to elaborate dramaturgical performances and only minimally to administration. The ritual aspects of the state superseded those of the practical aspects so "power served pomp, not pomp power" (Geertz, 1980: 13). Whether this is an extreme case or a case extremely argued, it reminds us that the ceremonies of public life are more than epiphenomena.

Attention to the symbolics of power opens the way to understanding the relationship between ritual and power. How do the rites of rulers reinforce hierarchy? Are contradictions between ruler and ruled smoothed over by royal ritual or given ritual outlet? Are ceremonial occasions, in Cannadine's words, "consensual examples of collective effervescence or conflictual instances of the mobilization of bias" (1987: 4)? To narrow the scope of inquiry to West Africa, if kings are sacred, what is the connection between the supernatural and the terrestrial order? Again, to quote Cannadine: "Is (the king) an exemplary center or not? Is he a god, or isn't he, and if he is, then how...does ceremonial bring this about" (1987: 4)?

Studies of African kings refer to their power over nature and their position as the dynamic center of the universe: savior-kings who control life and fertility. That African kings are sacred in an anthropological truism. But sacredness is a cultural construct. It presupposes some sort of supernatural legitimation. Rituals of royalty are potent means of legitimation because they offer a way to unite a cognitive image of the divine king with the emotional saliency attached to that image. They embody a view, in Kertzer's phrase, " of how the world is constructed" (1988: 182).

In examining how hierarchies of power are generated and maintained, the material culture and artifacts of a particular society become crucial objects of study: the regalia that surround and embellish royalty are among the most visible of arts, as are the crowns and emblems of rank, palaces and monuments, performances and dance. The art of the former Benin kingdom, for example, is a royal art. In Ezra's words, it "expresses the roles and ranks of the myriad chiefs, titleholders, priests, court officials, and attendants who constitute the kingdom's complex administrative and ritual hierarchy" (1992: 1). Benin art, she continues, evokes its history: "It portrays past people and alludes to past events that have contributed to the kingdom's power, wealth, and conceptual or spiritual greatness. The themes of history, politics, and...divine kingship are inextricably woven into the fabric of Benin art" (1992: 1).

Most remaining kingships are shadows of former greatness, the rites surrounding them no longer carried out or performed as superficial pomp rather than as sacred drama. This is not the case for kingship in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria where the role of traditional rulers is being enlarged. Their role has been largely informal until now, but that may change as new political experiments sweep Africa. Once perceived as divisive, they are now seen as a potential stabilizing factor. As Nigeria again undergoes a transition from military to civilian rule, a multitiered legislative system would incorporate traditional rulers into the decision-making process. Far from a spectacular anachronism, kingship in Nigeria represents the

main social reality for many people, providing meaning amidst clashing and ineffectual ideologies, and promising security in politically unstable times. In the Benin kingdom the Oba's (King's) power is less than in centuries past, but the ideas underlying kingship persist, through myth and ritual, as a general cognitive model. Second in status only to the gods, the Oba of Benin remains a sacred overlord.

Yet, while a great deal of attention has been paid to the art of Benin, little has been given to its ritual. As the pride possession of major European and American ethnological museums, Benin art in brass and ivory is the subject of extensive research: in chronologies and stylistic analyses for the most part, but recently in iconography and symbolism. By contrast, there are not more than a mere handful of studies on ritual, or on the relationship between ritual and art: Bradbury's (1959) early description of *Igue*, P. Ben-Amos & Omoregie's (1969) study of *Ekpo* masquerades, and my work on court ceremonies (1983–4), the *Ugie-Oro* festival (1986), and *Olokun* initiations (1988). Bradbury has crafted excellent studies of palace organization and history but these are limited to formal roles. It is difficult from his work to get a sense of how kingship is sustained or to understand how beliefs underlie the rites of kingship.

By the way, similar lacunae exist in nearly every aspect of Benin Studies, except for art (Fagg, 1970; P. Ben-Amos, 1980), history (Ryder, 1969; Igbafe, 1979), archaeology (Connah, 1975; Darling, 1984) and folklore (D. Ben-Amos, 1976). There is as yet no full-scale published ethnography. Bradbury's (1956) village-based research is limp and uninspired, prompted, we are told by Tonkin (1990), more to satisfy the rural myopia of his teacher, Daryll Forde, than his own desire to elucidate palace oral history. Bradbury's (1957) International African Institute survey is similarly constrained. In material culture the really valuable work remains Dark's *An Introduction to Benin Art and Technology* written in 1973. Dmochowski's (1990) recent magisterial compendium on Nigerian traditional architecture disappoints in the section on Benin by its brevity and a focus on building techniques that reveals little about style and meaning. For reasons not altogether clear, the study of Benin culture has not produced a cadre of indigenous scholars whose work can stand international scrutiny.

Leaving this aside, here I relate the rituals of kingship to my fieldwork experience, and argue for the on-going importance of kingship rituals in a contemporary context. My purpose is to present a fluid description of kingship rituals highlighting certain activities and artifacts, and, in an offhand sort of way, demonstrate how such rituals support hierarchy and cultural definitions of identity. Kingship rituals are more than symbolic constructions divorced from human activity. They are themselves a type of power, subject to manipulation and change.

FIELDWORK AND THE RITUALS OF KINGSHIP

My fieldwork on rituals began unexpectedly in 1978, although I had been a resident of Benin City since 1975. The death of Oba Akenzua II was not a planned event, and it would not have done for one to anticipate such an eventuality. As a

result, research on the rites of succession did not fit the usual pattern of anthropological fieldwork in which the repetitiveness of human interaction in a single setting over a long time provides the infrastructure for analysis. These ceremonies were dramatic, episodic, and, in a sense, unique. To put it another way, they were once-in-a-lifetime events.

My introduction into the palace aroused initial skepticism and antagonism. Consent carried the condition that all material must be submitted to the palace prior to publication; a constraint I accepted because I had no choice. I was also informed that my access to information would be limited. The secrets of the palace are, in a way, the nature of secrecy itself. Nothing binds a group so tightly as secrets tightly held. Achebe, the Nigerian novelist, has aptly described palace officials as "those men of Benin, ready to guide the curious visitor to the gallery of their art, willing to listen with politeness even to his hasty opinions, but careful, most careful, to concede nothing to him that might appear to undermine their own position within their heritage or compromise the integrity of their indigenous perception" (1975: 28). Of course, the conduct of fieldwork involves precisely that violation of privacy that the palace is determined to protect. 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.

At every ceremony, permission had to be negotiated anew with one group of participants or another. As often happens, those with the smallest roles huffed and puffed the most. It was a case of "Those who do not own the father are calling father," or, in English, we might say, "Empty bottles make the most noise." The heir apparent, aware that the rituals involved a remembered past of 33 years ago and of participants' power to control events, informed me that I worked at my own risk.

The ceremonial sequence can be grouped into three parts: the investiture ceremonies conferring upon Solomon Akenzua the position of Edaiken, or Crown Prince; the burial rites called *Emwinekhua*, or, "The Big Things," and the accession itself. Bear in mind that a coronation is a rite of passage: a set of rituals that mark the transformation of the social person from one status to another.

Rites of passage actually include two rather different kinds of rituals both of which are embodied in the succession rites described here. One kind, the so-called puberty rite, "converts irresponsible immature minors into morally responsible adults" (Beidelman, 1966: 401). Here, individuals are incorporated into mundane worlds. The coronation sequence did mark the attainment of a certain kind of majority by the King. The second kind separates individuals from those spheres, bringing about "admission to age groups and secret societies (as well as) the ordination of a priest or magician (and) the enthroning of a king..." (Van Gennep, 1960 [1909]: 65). The rituals of succession began soon after "the Leopard had gone to his lair," a euphemism for the death of Akenzua II (the leopard is a royal totem). His eldest son, Prince Solomon Akenzua, a graduate in law from Cambridge University with several decades of experience as a civil servant in the Nigerian government, began his year-long journey to the throne by first undergoing the rites of

passage that invested him as Crown Prince.

By custom, anyone wishing to "enter the palace" first initiates into one of the three palace societies charged with the state regalia, the harem and the king's person. Regarded as "a bride of the king," Prince Akenzua wore white garments, a sign of purity. In public he covered his mouth with a white cloth to show that he would never speak against the king, just as the dutiful wife never speaks ill of her husband. Like a bride at her wedding, he feigned shyness and walked haltingly. Rites of passage such as this draw heavily upon images of liminality that enhance the sense of being on the threshold.

Dressed in regalia appropriate for a chief, the celebrant danced in thanksgiving to numerous "national" shrines that commemorate the immortal heroes of the kingdom: archetypal reminders of Bini moral values. The prince also paid homage at the shrines of *Osa* (God), said to have been constructed on the sites of churches built by the Portuguese in the 16th century.

Local interpretations of the public outing hinged on the historical and mythical origins of the shrines themselves. They emphasized the continuity of the kingdom with its sacred past and they obliquely pointed to the collective values that the origin narratives conveyed. At the same time, they are social events that carry strong emotional salience. The shrines are nodules that pull together various segments of the community in the celebratory rites of kingship. This is elementary Durkheim: the rituals and shrines reflect the social order. By elevating them to a mystical plane, they are endowed with sacred values, and so evoke a social consensus.

Like the medieval vassals of Europe who publicly had to demonstrate fealty to their lord, Prince Akenzua showed his loyalty to his father, the late king. On his hands and knees, he performed a rite that literally means the "plastering of mud on a house." Figuratively, it suggested the wholehearted involvement of the prince in manual labor and, by metaphorical extension, his submission to the authority of the king. As Turner wrote, neophytes are both passive and malleable. They must first be "ground down" so that their new identity can be built up (1967: 101).

Every crown prince lives in a makeshift palace of his own on the outskirts of the city where he completes his training in the etiquette of kingship. The structural equivalent of the palace in town, this one is rebuilt for each successor and then abandoned after he ascends the throne. Here, the Edaiken consummates his title by performing *Iyan-ehien*, roughly glossed as the Ph.D. of chieftaincy rites. Only the wealthiest of titleholders undertake it. Over a two-week period, the prince distributed enormous quantities of cloth, food and money. He created chieftaincy titles for his wives and prepared an elaborate feast for the senior town and palace chiefs. Every morning, royal dance groups welcomed him as he emerged from the palace. Andrew Young, then U.S. ambassador to the U.N., also paid him homage.

On the seventh day, priests anointed the prince's head with the blood of sacrificial animals, an act testifying to the belief that the fate and fortune of an individual are symbolized by the head. The most important reason for marking the forehead with blood is to enjoy vitality and health. On the most obvious level, the blood of an animal is a substitute for the life of a man.

The prince wore a "crown of good fortune" made from white clay, chalk and sacred plants. In a pavilion constructed from reed mats and lined with scarlet cloth, attendants rubbed his body with chalk. Placed in front of him, a large loaf of chalk spotted with red represented his *ehi*, or guardian spirit, his incorporeal antithesis in the spirit world who awaits his turn to enter the world of the living. Red implies spiritual potency; white denotes that which is socially beneficial. Chalk is the essence of whiteness and its use conveyed luck and destiny.

Finally, the royal butchers sacrificed a chicken, goat and cow to the prince's head. The chicken is the most common sacrificial animal in Benin; the cow is the most esteemed because of its size and cost. To announce the successful conclusion of the ceremony, retainers carried the head of the cow to the palace.

A few weeks later, the most senior town chief stood solemnly in the palace and announced that the "chalk of the Oba was broken." He dashed a large ball of kaolin to the ground. Bystanders burst into tears. The town criers carried the message through the streets of the city. Market women scurried frantically to close their stalls. Weddings and funerals were banned. Shrines were closed. With the metaphors and rituals reserved for an Oba of Benin, the death of the late king was at last made public.

While the actual interment of the late king had, months before, laid to rest his physical remains, the second burial rites focused on the incorporation of the king's spirit in the other world, and the establishment of new relations between the deceased and the bereaved community.

As part of this process, adult males "picked dirt," a court euphemism for shaving one's head to mourn the dead king. So strong is this tradition that Bini citizens abroad — in Lagos, London and New York — complied. As the saying goes, "He whom the king's funeral rites do not kill must have his head shaved by them."

The shearing of hair is a universal symbol of rites of transition, a sign that participants have temporarily separated themselves from the established life. Head-shaving is one of several symbols of discarding, demonstrating a reduction of status and, dialectically, with the regrowth of new hair, a new status. In the context of a king's death, head-shaving, like the closure of the shrines and markets, signalled the loss of that mystical energy which sustains and protects the community. The subsequent regrowth of hair, like the accession of a new monarch, symbolized the revitalization of the kingdom and the reestablishment of harmony between man and nature. Such rites possess an archetypal structure, for the same underlying patterns and procedures are universally apparent.

During the royal obsequies, the prince wore a mourner's garb of burlap. He appeared in public accompanied by the royal bodyguards who, armed with bows and arrows, swarmed around him like black ants, an apt analogy since they are known as "the ants that sting the King's enemies." His half-brothers carried sheathed knives. His sisters held aloft blackened weaving staves. Both served to ward off the spirit of the dead monarch. In Bini belief, the dead linger among the living so it is imperative to implore them, even force them, to accept their inevitable place in the other world across the sea.

In commoner burial rituals the eldest son of the deceased receives gifts from his younger brothers. Since inheritance is based on the principle of primogeniture this

shows his separation from them and acknowledges his sole right to the property of his father. By tradition the eldest son of an Oba has no full brothers, so, instead, palace initiates brought him boxes filled with cowries, a traditional form of money that here represented the wealth of the kingdom. An elephant figure constructed of a wooden frame covered with red cloth knocked over a nearly life-size effigy of the Oba. Do the elephant and effigy together represent the king's two bodies, one the body natural, the other the body politic, or are more meanings implied? The effigy, while rare in Benin, is one of several ways of representing the deceased during second burial rites, with variations occurring according to rank and status. The Oba, Ezomo and Ihama have full-size effigies. The privilege of having an effigy extends to the Oba's wives' parents, but these effigies are made of clay and carried on a tray. Both a full-size effigy and clay figure were employed during the second burial rites in 1914 for Oba Ovonrramwen, whom the British exiled to Calabar in 1897.

During the burial rites, the palace banned cooking in the city and pregnant women left town. The first injunction warned the lurking spirit of the king that there was no food for him to eat; the second protected unborn children who might be snatched by his departing spirit. Pregnancy is an object of prey for all sorts of evil spirits, so the crisis of birth is surrounded with precautions and prohibitions. On the final day, a senior palace chief represented the deceased king in a rite of leave-taking while the prince "cast away sticks." This symbolically disposed of his father's earthly remains and released the living from further danger of contact with the dead. Sometime later, the heir apparent "planted a shrine" to his father's memory that would be watered with the blood of sacrificial animals. He liberated his father's many wives from the harem by delegating his chiefs to "pull the thorn out of them." This negated the act that had implanted it. By custom an Oba's wives spend the rest of their days in a kind of semi-seclusion, for it is said that "they ate the salt of the world and then stopped."

In contrast to the joyous rites of installation as crown prince, the *Emwinekhua* generated anxiety, panic and fear. Stories abounded about human sacrifice. The forcible head-shaving of non-Edos brought army units from Lagos. Markets and buildings mysteriously burned. This apparent chaos must be seen in the context of the transitional status that is the hallmark of an interregnum. The bedlam provided a dramatic demonstration of the consequences to the society if it were to be without a king. Only the accession of the new king puts an end to this disorder and is adequate proof of the kingdom's need for a head. For example, the closing of the markets showed that the welfare of the economy was inseparable from the king's welfare. The market was not simply the place for the exchange of goods but an arena of order, the equivalence of the world, at whose center the king reigns by ancestral sanction. This explains why the peace of the market was violently disturbed. It reopened only after a new king had been enthroned.

Uncertainty about such events made fieldwork hazardous. The various media services retreated from the scene, and even I shied away the last two days when it became clear that I didn't know what was going on, that it was too dangerous to find out, and that my equipment might be destroyed. Initially I had a field assistant but his fear outweighed his desire to accommodate me and he soon fled, to re-

appear some years later.

After a lengthy cooling-down period, the prince visited shrines in order to mollify regional deities of the lands over which he would hold dominion. These visits brought to light the dialectical tension between the center and periphery, with local deities and practices having a prominence not evident from the palace. In the court, ritual centers on the king; outside, autonomous rituals fundamentally alter his position. For example, at the installation of the Ohenukoni, a priest of the *Okhuaihe* cult and a mini-monarch in his own right (a right disputed by the Benin center), the Oba and Ohenukoni greet each other as brothers and equals, then part, never to meet again. Significantly, the Ohenukoni wears an *oro* — a vestige of an ancient crown — on his head, its embedded charms serving as protection against harm. On certain occasions, the *oro* is worn by Chiefs Osa and Osuan, the Uzama nobles, and the king himself. In the cast art it appears on the brass equestrian figures.

The succession rituals commenced with the prince symbolically climbing the palm tree called "No prosperity without labor." Trials of strength and ordeals of labor are common to initiations. Welcomed afterwards in the city by the town chiefs, he spent three days in a "bachelor's camp" where he slept with a surrogate wife. Both the tree and the camp marked and affirmed his passage to manhood and the crown.

Accompanied by priests, musicians and chiefs, the prince moved to temporary quarters at the site of the first palace built by Oba Ewedo, fourth king of the present dynasty, who ruled in the 14th century. Here, the royal bards sang and danced. Their songs, chastising the unscrupulous, provided people a rare opportunity to publicly express their disgust with greedy chiefs, selfish businessmen and lazy civil servants, thus defusing any resentment they may have harbored against them. Anthropologists have customarily viewed such rituals as outlets for the expression of political disenchantment, as well as a restrictive frame in which the potential for anomie is conducted.

Here, too, in the dead of night, the hereditary kingmakers, descendants of the autochthonous rulers of the land, proclaimed the prince king, acknowledging his authority to "pronounce over all the land, even to the land of the Europeans." In predawn rites, the prince appeared in a red wrapper, knelt on a mound of cowries, symbol of wealth, and received a crown of coral beads. Shortly after sunrise, he walked to the palace along a procession route lined with his subjects. Heavily fortified with amulets and dressed in coral-beaded garments, he resembled the giant termite mounds that are ubiquitous in the region. Indeed, one of the praise names for the king is "anthill." In his right hand, he held a talisman known as "red will go to the festival," that is, go and return safely. Around his chest, he wore a coral-beaded rope called "hunger belt" used to suspend hunger. To it was attached a coral-covered bell called "The ground (that is, the king) does not feel the weight of a load."

The king crossed a make-shift bridge over an imaginary river. The shallow side (River Otegehele) and the deeper, far side (River Omi) signify something only an Oba can accomplish. River crossings often occur in African origin stories. They are a cliche, an easily remembered statement (or event) about a complex reality, a

representation of space in a cosmographic model. The image of a king crossing a river is here a metaphor for achievement.

Near the palace at a site crowded with visitors, the new king announced the name by which he would be known: Erediauwa: "Ere (an historical figure) has come to set things right." He replaced the crown of *ede* with the crown of *oro*. Representatives of the Nigerian Head of State presented the king with the Staff of Office of a First Class traditional ruler.

A week later, a mock battle commemorated an event which centuries ago prompted Benin's imperialism and territorial expansion. In this re-enactment, the king's troops, dressed for war, ripped apart the enemy's defenses. The treaty which followed spelled out the conditions of peace. Symbolically, the treaty divides the living and immaterial world: earth for the king, the other world for the deities.

With the end of the coronation ceremonies in June 1979, and the processing of films shortly after, the second stage of fieldwork began which consisted of trying to find out what had happened during the first stage, that is, what the events meant. Some of the problems I have mentioned also applied to the collection of this material. At one point, the king placed an embargo on my research. At what felt simultaneously like a board meeting and a stay of execution hearing, the king, flicking through his dossier on me, said that I had been probing too deeply into palace secrets. When I replied that he had the right to expunge any materials he found offensive, his retort was: "By then it will be too late. What will be left if you learn everything?" Eventually, he told his chiefs that they were free to cooperate with me up to a limit, the precise boundary of which each knew and could individually determine. Fortunately, most took this directive as a *carte blanche*. Since then, most of these chiefs have become friends and share palace gossip with me. Oddly, the more knowledgeable I have become about the royal court, the more I seem to be bound by the same conventions of secrecy it adheres to.

THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF ROYAL RITUALS

Under the present Oba, royal ceremony has reacquired some of its public potency and magnificence. The rituals of kingship during the latter part of Oba Akenzua II's reign had diminished and some had lapsed altogether. Erediauwa has rallied his people by revitalizing archaic kingship rituals and reactivating the city's major shrines. The use of legitimating icons now extends to cement statuary placed at the entrances and main thoroughfares of the city. These include Queen Idia, a chief in full regalia, Bini bowmen who shot British attachers in 1897, and a mystifying statue of a woman wearing a coral-beaded crown and other kingship apparel. Conflicting statements about who the statue represents are due to the fluidity of perceptions and layers of meaning found in urban religious practices (Gore & Nevadomsky, 1991).

Such ceremonials and icons correspond to a need for unifying symbols for Bini citizens which do not threaten civilian/military rule. They give the Bini a feeling of stability, as well as a measure of pride by tying them into a larger imagined tradi-

tion of greatness. Experience and change insidiously undermines the authority of the monarchy, but ritual shores it up. Control over and elaboration of these performances support the symbolic recreation of the sacred ruler, which helps prop up the hierarchical social structure. This in turn gives continued meaning to Bini identity and serves as a basis for the expression of local interest in relationship to other groups.

Igue is an example. This sequence of annual "refresher" rituals includes *Otue*, where the Oba hosts his chiefs from the highest to lowest with palmwine and kolanut, the essential fruit of hospitality, and from the lowest to highest they reaffirm their loyalty. The central rite of *Ugie Erha Oba* honors the king's paternal ancestors, especially the king's father, at the same time that the earth itself is honored. *Iron* reenacts the ancient conflict between the king and the seven Uzama; their act of subjugation emphasizes the king's authority and, as Ezra points out, "illustrates the historical consciousness that has motivated so much of Benin art and ritual" (1992: 19). *Igue* itself focuses on the king's person. By restoring the king's vitality with the herbs of the forest and by blessing his head, seat of his capabilities and wisdom, with the blood of sacrificial animals, the body politic is made impervious to danger in the coming year. As part of *Igue*, town chiefs toss their swords in ceremonial salute while at the same time there is an implicit threat in the pangolin-like costumes they wear. In Bini thought, the leopard is king of the forest, but the giant pangolin can sometimes overpower it. *Ewere*, "the leaves of joy," is a ceremony of hope and blessing during which the Oba, on whom the welfare of the kingdom depends, receives leaves said to be from the Ooni of Ife, the sacred ruler of the former Yoruba Kingdom of Ife. Finally, during *Emobo*, any evil spirits remaining in town are sent packing to Udo and Idah, places that centuries ago challenged the supremacy of Benin.

Before the Punitive Expedition of 1897 ended them, rituals of kingship occupied much of the court calendar. From the warrior kings of the 15th and 16th centuries to the divine kings of the 18th and 19th, the nature of kingship changed as the Obas became captives of ceremonial. When Eweka II took the throne in 1914 he resumed the rituals, but in abbreviated form. Under Oba Akenzua II they were grouped into a two-week period in December to take advantage of the school break at Christmas and the attendant festivities. During the Biafra War, they became private rather than public. Erediauwa moved them outdoors again and expanded them to include intercommunity wrestling competitions (the winner of one such event is now on the wrestling team for California State University, Los Angeles) and *Ekpo* masquerade festivals. At other times of the year, *Ugie-Ivie, Ododua* and *Ugie-Oro* are performed. The king's regalia are washed with blood during *Ugie Ivie*, the Festival of Beads. *Ododua*, coinciding with Lent, is a complex and yet to be decoded ritual that celebrates the king's paternal ancestors, but has Portuguese and village associations as well. During *Ugie-Oro*, the king's chiefs beat the beak of the brass birds of prophecy which falsely predicted that Oba Esigie (in the 16th century) would suffer defeat by the Ata of Idah during the Benin-Idah wars. The third, seventh, and tenth anniversary of the king's reign have been specially celebrated; the first two reflect the traditional importance of three and seven in Bini numerology, the last, marked by a symposium on Benin history and

culture, the influence of Western culture. On the surface, many of these rites argue for the durability of the system, and especially ritual, in the face of massive changes in the material world. However, the elaboration of ritual today in Benin represents not a simple continuation of a long-held tradition, but re-elaborations of old symbols to meet changing political conditions.

Local power relations and legitimacy are expressed not only in webs of ritual repetition and standardized annual performances but by making use of the entire store of powerful symbols and redirecting them on a massive scale to new purposes. For example, the egg is a symbol of accidental death. At burials, it is passed over the heads of mourners and tossed away to prevent the living from accompanying the dead. In the household it is passed round the family car before a journey to prevent an accident along the way. When sometime ago Benin City reeled from a rash of fatal car accidents, the deaths in quick succession of prominent Bini, and other assorted mishaps, to cool the city and restore harmony, the Oba decreed that each Bini citizen should bring an egg to Emoton statue, where, after touching it to one's body, it would be left for disposal by palace functionaires. At various times, the Oba has decreed a ban on the public sale of coffins; similar bans have been effected on the sale of roadside food cooked in palm oil, a tempting treat for *Ogun*, god of iron and cause of road fatalities.

Earlier this year, a state election tribunal summoned the Oba to answer charges that he had influenced the recent gubernatorial election results. The Oba trekked the two kilometers to the venue of the tribunal. His decision to walk, when he could have gone in his Mercedes, communicated a powerful message. The affront to the dignity of the palace — the humiliation of a king challenged to court — transformed the Oba into the King at war. One commentator stated: "...the premises of the tribunal became a traditional carnival as the Benin monarch appeared in a spectacular and significant red regalia with a retinue of high-ranking chiefs.... The appearance of the King produced a major problem for those who had brought the charges because the average Bini saw it as an abomination" (Abasiliu, 1992: 20). That significant red is, of course, the color of war. Afterwards, marketwomen threw sand on those who had brought the charges, and cursed them by removing their wrappers and displaying their vaginas. On the trek back to the palace, having been exonerated of all charges, the Oba danced *ukpukpe*, the traditional war dance and on-lookers commented that the court premises could be likened to the battle of *Eki-Okpagha* of many centuries ago (Airihenbuwa, pers. comm., 1992). The overall effect was to produce a powerful dramatization on the endurance of kingship. Those who had brought the case to court now found that they had not only the palace as an enemy, but the collective weight of the ancestors and of history.

CONCLUSION

The late Arnold Rubin once suggested that, given "the accelerated rates of cultural change in the Benin region, it is by no means certain that more fieldwork would yield much in the way of definitive information. In most instances, we will

probably have to resort to doing the best we can with what is already in the record" (1981: 6). This conclusion is too pessimistic. What most distinguishes present-day art historical studies in Benin is sustained fieldwork. The thrust of current research is to delineate Benin art forms from within, that is, by considering indigenous cultural categories and conceptions, and by associating this art with other types of cultural behavior and constructions, such as architecture, material culture, urban religious cults, and of course, royal rituals. This is a large and formidable task, especially for researchers whose training does not predispose them to an emic, that is, native's point of view, methodology. But it is not an impossible task, as recent research on Benin shows.

NOTES

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