Benin: A study in the budding crises in the polity, 1914 to 1939

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Abstract

The study examined the budding crises in the polity of Benin between (1914 -1939) it also assessed the conflict of interest between Oba Eweka II and the Iyase of Benin kingdom, Chief Agho Obaseki in the Benin Native Administration from 1914. It accounted for the crises of 1920, 1936, and water rate agitations. It also analyzed the agitations of the educated elite in Benin.

The study relied on documentary data and secondary sources like books, Newspapers, Articles, Journals, periodicals. The documentary data were sourced from intelligence reports, divisional reports, colonial letters, dispatches, government reports and correspondences. The data were subjected to internal and external criticisms for authentication and then to textual and contextual analyses.

The study found that crisis in Benin started in 1914 because the Iyase of Benin kingdom, Chief Agho Obaseki dominated the Benin political scene to the detriment of the newly crowned Oba, Eweka II. The study also found that the abolition of district headship generated more crises. The study demonstrated that Oba Akenzua II’s refusal to consult the people before signing the water rate regulation in 1939 led to attempt to depose him. The study also found that the denial of the educated elite in Benin to participate in Benin Native Administration was the last straw that broke the camel’s back.

Keywords: Crisis, Elite agitation, Oba (king), Confrontation, Resolution
Introduction

In Benin, the period under focus witnessed serious institutional challenges. The institution of the monarchy was under serious threat. The establishment of Benin Native Administration in 1914 which came into effect in 1915 generated a lot of crises. The new Oba, Eweka II lost all the attributes of a respectable monarch and became a glorified puppet. The government laid down the conditions on which the Oba shall hold his office. Unfortunately during this period, Chief Agho Obaseki, the Iyase of Benin dominated the Benin political scene with the backing of the British political officers. Also most of the titled and non-titled chiefs who were very active in the period of interregnum suffered a severe political deflation in the new administration, hence crises were inevitable. The district heads, appointed by the British government shifted their loyalty to government instead to the Oba which also resulted to conflict. The abolition of the District head system in Benin in 1936 fuelled more crises in the political system.

The sudden rise of educated elite during this period did not help matters, who although interested in serving in the native administration, their denial brought more crises. They were not happy with the sole native system, unrepresentative nature of the Oba’s council, councilors appointed on the basis of the titles and promulgation of obnoxious laws by government. Hence, the period witnessed unprecedented rancour, animosity, hatred and acrimony.

It may be necessary at this point to examine the concept “crisis” in order to give meaning and understanding to the work. Crisis is a perception of an event or situations as an intolerable difficulty that exceeds the person’s resource and coping mechanisms. In another sense, crisis is the situation of a complete system (family, economy, society), when the system functions poorly, an immediate decision necessary but the causes of the dysfunction are not known. Crisis has several defining characteristics. Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer say that crises have four defining characteristics which are; “specific, unexpected and non-routine events or series of events that create high level of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to organization’s high priority goals”.

Venette argues that, “crisis is a process of transformation where the old system can no longer be maintained”. Our inability to recognize crises before they become dangerous is due to denial and psychological responses. Crises necessarily exhibit two faces which are positive and negative effects, so crises are not always undesirable. Crises may increase organization or group involvement and commitment as these members who truly care for the group would try to resolve the crises and also provide the group members with alternative viewpoint that were not previously obvious to them. In addition, the known negative impacts of crises may alert groups to hasten, to resolve emerging crises and thereby fostering peace.
However, it is necessary to add that crises deprived people of both emotional, physical and mental stabilities. As John Pepper Clark humbly pointed out that not only those who fought the civil war are causalities or those who suffered the loss due to the war but we are all casualties. Thus, crises and conflict apart from affecting us psychologically also go a long way in hampering the nation building. Crises and conflict in Benin like the other kingdoms in West Africa date back to ancient time. J.U. Egharevba noted that, during the reign of Ogiso ere, the eldest son of Ogiso Igodo, for instance, if there was fighting or quarreling among his people, a crier would be sent out by him to announce to the fighters, the terms “Auwane Ere” meaning quarrelling is forbidden by Ere and at once peace would be restored. Many factors or challenges were at work between 1914-1939 which brought the crises. The factors were:

The Establishment of Benin Native Administration

After the banishment order placed on Oba Ovonramwen by Consul-General Sir Ralph Moore on 9th September, 1897, there was no possibility that the old political structure might be reconstituted as an instrument of British rule. However, certain political development in Nigeria in 1914 favoured the restoration of the institution of monarchy in Benin. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern province into the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria took place in 1914. Sir Fredrick Lugard, the Governor-General was desirous to introduce the indirect rule system in Benin, as he did not hesitate in recognizing the basic fact that, Benin would be an area most suitable and conducive for trying out the emirate system in the North. As Sir Lugard wrote in July 1913 “It seems to me that Benin and its subordinate towns is the chief place in Southern Nigeria where the system in operation in Northern Nigeria might be successfully tried.

However, at this point in time, a factor seems to be a serious challenge or obstacle to the restoration of monarchy in Benin. The banished Oba Ovonramwen was still alive. Tradition demands that until he dies, a new Oba cannot emerge. Oba Ovonramwen became seriously ill on 9th January, 1914 and died on the 13th January, 1914 in a hospital in Calabar. With the death of Oba Ovonramwen, the way was now clear for the emergence of Prince Aiguobasimwin, as the heir apparent to be crowned. However, it is important to add that, the way to the Benin throne was not smooth as there was bitter struggle and antagonism between Obaseki and Aiguobasinwin to occupy the throne.

District Commissioner, Benin, F.P. Adams recorded on 8 November, 1910 that “Chief Obaseki has four many years been the most prominent supporter of government among the Benin chiefs and his services have been and are of real value to the government.”
The controversy started when James Watt, the commissioner of Benin province, who believed so much on the ability of Obaseki summoned the Benin chiefs to a number of interviews to select an Oba. Aiguobasimwin, Eson, Ezomo and Ero were invited. Chief Ezomo supported Obaseki for the Benin throne. Chief Ero told James Watt that, the title of Oba is hereditary in Benin. Chief Eson supported Ero’s stand on the side of tradition in favour of Aiguobasimwin.

It is important to add however that, before a final decision on the succession was taken, Lord Lugard sent Colonel H.C. Moorhouse, who knew the Benin native and custom to some extent to visit Benin and report to him. After much consultations and proper investigation, James Watt and Colonel Moorhouse recommended that Aiguobasimwin should be allowed to succeed his father as the King of Benin. On the strength of the above, it can be said that, the principle of hereditary and primogeniture as well as the support of chiefs Ero, and Eson saved the situation, as James Watt could have preferred his friend, Obaseki to be crowned as the Oba, thereby creating more problems.

Hence Bradbury argued that, dynastic continuity was the first axiom of Edo political values and there was almost universal agreement that Aiguobasinmwin was the only acceptable candidate. Osadolor Edomwonyi said, “But for the wise judgement of the British officials on the strong evidence of some Benin chiefs, the table would have turned in favour of Chief Agho Ogbeide the Obaseki of Benin, who had acted for the Oba during the interregnum”. Finally, the Oba was appointed on probation for a year before the formal confirmation of appointment.

So, Aiguobsinmwin was installed as Oba Eweka II on July 22, 1914 while Agho Obaseki became the Iyase of Benin kingdom. Thus with the restoration of the institution of monarchy, the Benin Native Administration was established in 1914 and the features of the Benin Native Administration were:

a. The system comprised of a central authority made up of the Oba who was assisted by a council invested with judicial and executive powers.

b. Benin Division was divided into four districts, each under a district head. Further revision took place in 1921 which increased the districts to six.

c. Another feature of the system was a native treasury. Fees, fines, market dues, timber royalties, rubber receipts, rents and the proceeds of a direct tax on all able-bodied men would form the revenue of a native treasury from which the salaries of the Oba, the Iyase and council, court, district and quarter chiefs and other administrative expenses would be met.

The last in this administrative network were the village heads, who could be either the Onogie or the Edionwere who was to look after the work of the villages. However,
the operation of the Benin Native Administration resulted to crises in Benin. Infact the institution of the monarchy was under serious threat in Benin. Oba Eweka II lost all the attributes of a respectable monarch and became a glorified puppet. He was infact stripped of his executive powers. Bradbury noted that at Eweka’s accession the government reserved all rights in regard to policy making and the allocation of administrative responsibilities. Infact in practice, the new Oba was not in charge rather his chief adviser the Iyase of Benin, Obaseki was fully in control of the administration, enjoying the confidence and trust of the British officers. Justifying this, the Acting Lieutenant Governor, Southern Provinces, F.S. James once said while he was addressing a meeting of the Benin Chiefs:

“It is very satisfactory to me to see that Aiguobasimwin has Obaseki who is now called Iyase to help him. Obaseki is a most reliable and helpful chief the Government and as long as Aiguobasimwin the Oba follows the advice of the Iyase, he will not go wrong. The Oba will receive his instructions from district officer and convey them to his chiefs through Iyase.

It was so bad that the new Oba lost the power to collect and impose taxes, the power of appointment and selection of his chiefs, the power to make laws for the people and he lost all rights and authority over the land of his ancestors.

The Oba could not take the initiative to go to war nor practice religion seen by the British as anarchonistic. In fact the government laid down the conditions which the Oba shall hold office.

While the British government tried all possible means to reduce the powers of the oba, the people were full of happiness that after many years, a new Oba was restored in Benin. The people sent gifts of different kinds to the Oba to express their satisfaction over the installation of Oba Eweka II.

A situation whereby the Oba was relegated by the British officers and promoting the Iyase of Benin was bound to bring crisis. It is on record that, the British administrators did almost everything through Agho Obaseki. In the first place, Iyase was the chief adviser of the Oba. Second, he enjoyed the position of the permanent president of the Benin district native courts of Benin City, Ekenwan and Ehor. He was also the district head of Benin. He presided over the native courts in the district and was enjoined to keep the Oba informed of the details of all important crises. Hence it could be said that, the Iyase of Benin, Chief Agho Obaseki was the man really in charge of Benin Native Administration while Oba Eweka II was a puppet or a figure head. Oba Eweka II saw a lot of frustration which compelled him to write a letter to the District officer dated 30th August, 1920 parts of which read:
The Iyase is ordering me in which I am not pleased because I do not want anyone but the British Government to command me….The Iyase has many times come to the Oba’s house and boasted that his orders surpass the Oba’s … I am deprived of my pays by the Iyase.

Considering the colourful nature, the joy of the people, the jubilation and festivities which featured during the installation of Oba Eweka II on July 22, 1914, this unique position of Agho Obaseki in the Native Administration which now make him to disrespect the oba will definitely not go unchallenged by the people and the chiefs who were equally neglected in the administrative network. Even though, D.N. Oronsaye asserts that “though Oba Eweka II was installed as the Oba of Benin the British officials did not allow the Oba to exercise his fully powers and authority”. It is important to quickly add that in spite of the relegation which Eweka II suffered in the hands of the British officials and Agho Obaseki, an Oba in Benin is held in high honour and respect among the people. The monarchy is seen as a rallying point for unity and preservation of their cultural identity. In another way the powers of the Oba enhanced by his control over all the religious activities in Benin and its environs. He approves all religious activities especially festivals before they are performed. He is equally the patron of all the gods or deities in Benin. These deities or gods are believed to be responsible for the protection and prosperity of the Oba and the people. In a way, an abuse to such a person is an abuse to all. It was not surprising that in 1920, crisis started.

One would recall that, in a report dated 6 September, 1920 “Talbot described a meeting which he had with the Oba and all the Benin chiefs except the Iyase:

“Everyone of them, district heads included, supported the Iyase’s suspension. Since there was no one to speak for him, Talbot inferred that, he must have abused his power, though very capable, he was dictatorial and arrogant. His power rested entirely on his favour with the European.”

It is equally fresh in our memory that, Agho Obaseki, the Iyase died in 1920. Another problem created by the establishment of Benin Native Administration in 1914 was the exalted positions of District Chiefs, which Oba Eweka II and Oba Akenzua II saw as detrimental to their powers, authority and prestige. The Benin Native Administration made possible the creation of the post of District Heads, whose conflicts with the Oba was inevitable. The district chief systems were in the government’s view the key to efficient administration and from the chiefs standpoint, the most desirable prizes. They were assigned to the Iyase and three other chiefs now all of senior Eghaevba rank who had proven themselves most useful during the interregnum. Marshall opines that in 1916, the Benin Division was divided into four districts and that further revision took place in 1921 which increased the districts to six.
The appointment of district heads was not in the best interest of the Oba Eweka II and Oba Akenzua II. It brought crisis between Oba Eweka II and the district heads on one side and between the villages in which they supervised. Oba Akenzua II later inherited this conflict situation when he took over from his father in 1933. Oba Eweka II begged the government to support him lest the chiefs would overthrow him as they had overthrown his father.

Bradbury (1973) also maintained that, given the compactness and size of their new domains and the fact that, they were now supposed to reside in their districts and to be presidents of districts courts, all radical departures from pre-colonial practice, the district heads were in an even stronger position than they had been as paramount chiefs.

It may be necessary to assess the factors that brought the acrimony between the district chiefs and the Obas. In the pre-colonial Benin, the Oba kept all the territorial chiefs under control. The chiefs owed their position to the British Officers, not to the Oba because they were appointed by them. P.A. Igbafe argues that, the allocation of consolidated and geographically contiguous territories to the district heads which was a direct negation of the pre-colonial Benin practice made the possibility of their acquisition of cumulative influence a real threat to the Oba’s authority. The district heads were working for the British Officers against the Oba’s interest and prestige. Hence their positions threatened the Oba’s power. In such situation, crisis was inevitable. Even, the district heads regarded themselves as responsible directly to the administrative offers.

Second, the approach of Oba Eweka II in handling the above precarious situation resulted to more conflict. The Oba felt that, the best option was sending messages direct to villages when making requisition for labour and other services without informing the district chiefs. This practice humiliated the district chiefs and also undermined their authority. In the same vein, it drastically reduced the respect which the villagers gave to the district chiefs. The poor relationship between the Oba and the district heads came out clearly when the British officers recorded in 1918 that:

“It is however imperative that, the Oba should give the district heads ungrading support and rely upon them more than he has done in the past.” In the same vein, when the Urhonigbe district revolted against the Osula in 1918, the Acting District Officer, H.M, Bricesmith, in an on-the sport report the Resident stated that: The Oba has not given Osula the support he requires...his position is rendered impossibly by the practices of the Oba’s direct contact with his district behind the back of the district head ... Osula has no executive authority in the district and requires all the support he can get. Commenting on the Urhonigbe district then under Chief Eson, H.G. Aveling wrote in his yearly report for 1970-1921 that: “the Oba was constantly interfering with his work and trying his best to get him removed”
Third, most of the district heads were very corrupt and oppressive. Commenting on this, Igbafe says that:

The district chiefs were hardly more than British administrative agents, and subject to no customary sanctions, they were unpopular with the people and the many of them ignored the welfare of the people they were supposed to govern rather concentrated on self-aggrandizements and the rapid accumulation of personal fortunes\textsuperscript{27}.

The district chiefs were aware of the support of British Officers and the fear their authority instilled on the villagers. This motivated them to do what pleased them. There was no proper supervision of their works by administrative staff, who at this time were few. To compound this situation, there was no personal or traditional ties between them and their areas of authority, they generally paid undue close attention to their own personal interests. Igbafe, also argues that, what particularly made their practices annoying to the people was the frequency of their demands and the intensity or rigour with which such demands were enforced\textsuperscript{28}. With the strong support of the British officers, most district heads carried on oppressive practices. They were the presidents of native courts, so placed in a position for imposing fines arbitrarily on villages. They forced the villagers to hunt for them, force the people to contribute large amounts of food as presents, imposing arbitrary forced labour for the construction of personal houses and those of his relation.

On account of the constant conflicts between district heads and their subjects, as well as the Oba’s use of alternative channels to undermine them, these chiefs were constantly being reposted to different districts. Early in 1917, the district heads were interchanged among the districts\textsuperscript{29}. At the beginning of 1919, changes were again made in the posting of district heads\textsuperscript{30}.

\textbf{1920 CRISES}

The 1920 crisis started when Chiefs Obasuyi, the Esogban and Oloton of Eghaebo N’Ore titles sent a petition to the Governor-General, Sir Hugh Clifford, on behalf of all the titled chiefs of Benin City against their exclusion from the Benin Native Administration. This was when the Governor-General visited Benin in July, 1920. The petition was dated 28\textsuperscript{th} July, 1920. According to Igbafe, they listed a number of malpractices indulged in by the chief organs of that administration and called on the Governor-General to rectify these\textsuperscript{31}.

Their opinion was that the native administration since 1914 was bad. They complained that the native administration was a joint rule of the Oba and the Iyase by promise of power and emoluments. They condemned the behavior of the Oba and Iyase
in similar terms that both had used their power to extract private tributes and free services from all the villages. They particularly frowned at a situation whereby the Oba had taken the Chiefs former household slaves and set up new villages with them to work plantations for him and others he has given to his daughters on their marriages to the Iyase and Edogun and still others to the Iyase himself\(^\text{32}\). They demanded the removal of the Iyase from the permanent vice-presidency of the native court and the rotation of all court-vice-presidencies among the chiefs. They suggested that all administrative matters should be discussed, publicly at Ugha-Ozolu instead of the private arrangement between Oba, Iyase and Resident, James Watt in the residence of the Resident. They recommended the suspension of Iyase\(^\text{33}\). They also condemned the new “head taxes”.

Even though the Oba was accused in this petition, he supported the people against Iyase and he prescribed pension for him. He recommended that the Iyase should be suspended. It is important to note that, the 1920 crisis was a very complicated one. While some of issues raised by the aggrieved chiefs could be immediate factors, there were the remote factors. When the native administration was established, most of the old rank holders and chiefs of Benin expected that, they would be given some measure of control and powers. But they were shocked that, it was the handing over of power to a few men, those who were considered useful. Agreeing with this Igbafe maintains that:

> The political officers paid too much attention to appointing to offices those chiefs who had proved to be effective instruments for the execution of their power in the period before 1914 while too little consideration was given to the climax of those who actually possessed real power and prestige in the eyes of the people\(^\text{34}\).

The Benin Native Administration made provisions for few chiefs while the rest were excluded. Most of the district heads for example were very corrupt, oppressive and had no personal or traditional ties between them and their areas of authority. Agho Obaseki, the Iyase was the Chief adviser of the Oba. He was made the permanent President of the three Benin district native courts at Benin City, Ekenwan and Ebor as well as a district head of Benin yet many paramount chiefs were excluded from the administration. It was therefore not surprising that the 1920 crisis came up. The Oba was attacked by the petitioners because the chiefs villages were seized from them. the pre-colonial era had given these Benin Chiefs villages to control. Under the new political dispensation, they were ignored while the Oba was removing their household members, building camps and villages for himself and using these villagers for work in his plantations and cultivation of private farms.

In another development a situation whereby the Oba’s council had a very restricted membership and positions filled through selection by political officers, who left
out a consideration number of chiefs under the old regime while power was concentrated in a few hands fuelled 1920 crisis.

1936 Crisis: Macrae Simpson Intelligence Report and the Abolition of District Headship in Benin

The 1936 reforms in Benin Native Administration brought in a lot of complications in Benin. District Officers throughout Southern Nigeria were instructed to conduct enquiries into district head system, tax collection, regulations concerning such matters as sanitation, the felling of trees, planting of permanent crops in early 1930s; Macrae Simpson, the Assistant District Officer in Benin Division was assigned to that in the Division. Infact by 1930s there were enough evidence of resentment against British rule. This resentment brought the need to reform the structure of government, for example was the Aba women riot of 1929. This was resentment against arbitrary taxation, while it may be correct that, this was riot against the imposition of taxes but it was an indication of peoples resentment against alien rule generally.

The enquiry which followed this crisis and others led to the compilation of reports which covered the whole of the Southern provinces including Benin. The numerous reports which followed referred to as Intelligence Reports formed the basis of the subsequent re-organization of British administration in Benin on both the executive and judicial planes. In these reports, officers were instructed to investigate and report on the indigenous social and political organization, the possibility of its adaptation to new functions as units of local government and the economic and educational proposals for re-organization. Though ethnological enquiries were being undertaken in various parts of Benin province from 1932 onwards, followed by re-organization, a serious attempts at re-organization of the Benin Native administration were not made until towards the end of 1935. The chief reason for this delay was the death of Oba Eweka II in February 8, 1933-an event that led to Governor-Cameroon’s directive that re-organization attempts should be postponed for two years.

In February, 1936, Simpson Macrae, the Assistant district officer, Benin Division went round some of the districts to explain to them Native Administration and the need for a change in the system. Macrae Simpson in his Benin Division Intelligence Report came out with the following proposals:

That the District Headship should be abolished. He proposed the constitution of village and village group councils which would be responsible to the Oba for local affairs and which at a latter date might be represented on a central state council. Also that, the quarter headships of the capital would be replaced by a form of administration based on the traditional wards. He suggested the enlargement of the council to include all the Uzama and Eghaevbo which will consist of 54 chiefs.
The abolition of District and Quarter Headships brought in a lot of trouble for Oba Akenzua II. According to Bradbury, the District and Quarter Headships were however immediately abolished and their incumbents experienced the same kind of deflation that had been the lot of the ex-paramount chiefs twenty years before. The Oba to whom the village chiefs and headmen were now directly responsible and who had a big say in the running of the administrative bureaucracy, stood to gain from this re-organization. The disposed chiefs accused Akenzua II as being responsible for the deflation of their prestige and prerequisite hence they supported the anti-traditionalists throughout the troubled period, since they saw the Oba as the sole recognized authority of British policy. More especially, Oba Akenzua II was accused by them of given approval to the abolition. Oba Akenzua II support for the move to abolish the posts of district heads in the Benin Native administration brought crisis.

Inspite of the accusations against Oba Akenzua II, a critical study of the situation in the 1920’s and 1930’s show that, the abolition of the District head system was long overdue.

First, in the absence of an Oba, there were no checks and balances on the power of the District heads and their districts were well defined and consolidated blocs of territories allowing them to build up their position. This led to abuse of power and malpractices and general discontent. In the pre-colonial Benin, the Oba kept all the territorial chiefs under control but after 1914, the appointment of district heads from the Oba’s Central Council made the control of these district chiefs by the Oba and council difficult. In the same vein, shortage of administrative staff meant inadequate supervision of the work of district chiefs.

Second, the district chiefs were British administrative agents and not subject to the Oba. Their oppressive, abusive and hostile nature contributed to their unpopularity hence they were in battle with the people.

Third, the creation of artificial administrative areas as districts and the appointments of district heads led to the usurpation of the executive and judicial function of village councils. So many village heads were dissatisfied with the system.

Also, despite the fact that, district headships’ system was still been operated in 1935, events show that the system was becoming very unnecessary. The system had outlived its administrative usefulness. Bradbury comments that, wage labour had replaced levies of labourers and carriers. He says further that, direct taxation on the basis of normal rolls was well established and tax clerks.
From the foregoing, it is not a surprise that the district headships in Benin Division were abolished. But the unfortunate aspect was the crisis this abolition generated. The Oba became the sacrificial lamp and the scapegoal because, Oba Akenzua II saw nothing wrong in supporting the abolition of the district head system. This group of chiefs who now found themselves thrown out of their offices joined other aggrieved old chiefs to give the Oba an effective battle. It is however important to add that, inspite of the accusation against the Obaa, as regard the abolition of district headship system which generated crisis, a critical study of the situation between 1916-1935 shows that, the abolition of the District head system was long-over due. However, these rank of chiefs increased the tempo of opposition against the Oba. The opposition rate now grew at a geometrical progression instead of arithmetic.

The Agitation of Educated Elite (1933-1938)

One surprising aspect of this re-organization in the Benin Native Administration from 1914-1936 was the deliberate neglect of the Benin educated elite. One wonders why these articulate and vocal elements should not be integrated into political machinery. Marshall analyzed the educational development in Benin during the period under survey:

According to him, there are probably very few men in Benin under the age of 25 who cannot read, write and speak English. This is only a very small highly educated class while there is fairly large and ever growing class who are sufficiently educated and sufficiently interested to read the paper.40

Supporting the above view, Bradbury posits that, as a result of the introduced schools and new economic opportunities over the previous thirty years, there was by this time, a growing intelligentsia of teachers, clerks and civil servants whose literacy gave them access to western political ideologies.41 Also in existence at this time was new commercial elite. This comprises transport owners, rubber and timber producer, traders etc. Many of these were sons of the original paramount chiefs. They were in sympathy with the educated elite in their agitation.

The educated elite were able to win the support of a large number of the traditional chiefs, most of whom were the influential members of the Oba’s council. Sensing this segregation and discrimination in Benin, the educated elite quickly formed a powerful body called the Benin Community to articulate their ideas and press home their demands. This Association was formed in the early 1930s in Benin. It was made up of various interest groups like educated elite, the commercial class, farmers, traders, civil servants. Some of most reactionary and the title-holders associated themselves with the Benin Community. The secretary of the community was H.O. Uwaifo while the assistant secretary was E.E. Omere. This body gave a serious and prolonged political resistance to
the Oba. They saw Oba Akenzua II as the representative of British administration which promulgated obnoxious laws. They wanted democratic deliberations. The educated elements in Benin were totally dis-satisfied with the Benin Native Administration where the Oba was the sole Native Authority, aided by a council selected on the basis of traditional title holders and thus unrepresentative of the various classes of people in Benin City. A complex situation was created when Oba Akenzua II was made the sole Native Authority, which implied that the Oba virtually constituted the Benin Native administration for purposes of giving sanctions to measures, promulgating new rules and taking effective decisions. In another way he was seen as the only source of power. It was quite unfortunate that the sole Native Authority was practiced at a time when educated elite had emerged, who was quite aware of their rights and were ready to promote democratic government in their society. They wanted an overhaul or reform in the Benin Native Administration which will allow many people especially the educated elite to participate. They condemned in particular, the appointment of councilors mainly on the basis of title. These agitations became pronounced in the late 1930’s because the proposals of 1914, Talbot’s intelligence report of 1920 and Macrae Simpson’s Intelligence Report of Benin Division of 1936 did not make provisions to accommodate the educated elite hence they decided to take their destiny in their hands.

Also, political developments in some parts of the country at this time motivated them to fight for their rights. Coleman observes that in the early 1930s, official thought regarding the relationship between educated groups and the native authority system particularly in the southern provinces began to change. There was sudden burst of organizational activity among educated groups in the early 1930s which reflected their strong desire to participate in the affairs of their home villages or districts. British policy towards the educated elements began to change by warnings from observers and students of the African scene, who felt that meaningful roles must be provided for the previously excluded and unwanted group of educated Nigerians. Charles Roden Buxton warned that “we neglect the intelligentsia at our peril.” In another vein, another Britain’s leading Africanist, Lucy P. Mair said in 1936 that demands for change had always come from minorities with specific ground for discontent and that the African educated class would ultimately triumph. Also contributing, Margery Perham in her examination of the problem in Nigeria setting in 1936, acknowledge that:

“The emergence of the educated Nigerian was absolutely necessary for Britain’s colonial mission and recommended that more Nigerians should be employed to positions of trust” and everything must be done to find or create opportunities for them within the Native Administration.

It was not surprising then, why the educated elements under the newly formed Benin community were all out to resist Oba Akenzua’s draconian tendency between
1933-1939. They were opposed to the native authority with Oba in charge under the supervision of the British administrators. They wanted administrative reforms which will usher in representative government. In another vein: Sir Clifford Constitution of 1922 was already in place which made provisions for a legislative council of forty-five members. Article 4 of Nigeria (legislative council) order in Council, 1922 stipulates that under the 1922 constitution, there was a legislative council for the colony and protectorate of Nigeria consisting of 46 members. Article 6 states that four were elected. These four were indeed the first elected Africans in the legislatures of British tropical Africa. Out of the 4, three were to represent Lagos as the capital and a big commercial city and one to represent Calabar. That means for the first time in Nigeria, as early as 1922, Lagos and Calabar were granted the right to vote in an election to the legislative council.

Ezera Kalu indicated that the limitation of this elective principle of these coastal towns was based on the assumption that Lagos and Calabar were at that time the only places that had sufficiently large numbers of enlightened citizens to be able to use the franchise.

Hence Joan Wheare wrote:

The elective principle was embodied in the constitution of 1922 in respect of Lagos and Calabar because of their long association with British trade and government had led to the creation of sophisticated and westernized elements in both towns.

In the case of Benin, the situation was different, in spite of sizeable number of educated elite, no provision was made for them up till 1939, when Marshall saw it paramount to break the gin of neglect of the Benin educated elite in the Benin native Administration.

Ezera maintains that as soon as the new constitution came into force in 1923, political parties sprang up overnight and several newspaper commenced publications. It stimulated unprecedented political awakening in Lagos. Nigeria National Democratic Party under the leadership of Herbert Macaulay emerged as the most powerful political organization of the period. The party contested and emerged victorious by claiming the seats in the legislative council between 1923-1933. The party also won the Lagos Town Council election. Coleman says that elective principle had been extended to Lagos Town Council since 1920. Also, the Nigerian Youth Movement which was formed in 1936 had its influence in Benin. It challenged the 15 year domination of Macaulay and his Nigerian National Democratic Party over Lagos politics and representation on the legislative council. As part of its effort to achieve this in Nigeria. In 1938, and again in 1940 the leaders of the youth movement summoned delegates from all branches including Benin to attend a representative conference in Lagos. Among the items discussed include abolition or reform of indirect rule and higher appointments in the civil service.
According to P.A. Igbafe, Nigerian Youth Movement was a known opponent of native administration and indirect rule and the Youth Movement played on the self-interest of the chiefs in order to detach them from the Native Administration in Benin. It is pertinent to state that many members of the Benin Community were also members of the Nigerian Youth Movement. E.E. Omere, who was the Assistant Secretary of the Benin Community was the leader of the local branch of the Nigerian Youth Movement in Benin. Little wonder when the delegates got to Benin, they were more agitated therefore calling for the overhauling of the Benin Native Administration. It is possible that some of the educated elite in Benin might have lived in Lagos before coming to Benin. It is also possible that some visited Lagos periodically where they witnessed the political activities hence they were seriously agitated. Notably among then was Omo Humphrey Osagie, who later became the timber and cadre of Benin politics.

The emergence of newspapers in Nigeria can also explain the situation in Benin. By 1921, the first militantly nationalist newspaper appeared. The Lagos Weekly Record, was founded by John Payne Jackson. By 1925, Daily News was founded by Herbert Macaulay. There were others like Pioneer, Lagos Standard, The Time of Nigeria, The Lagos Chronicle. Some of the newspapers began to take an interest in reporting the debates of the legislative council and the result was that many of the literate members of the society began to take more interest in public affairs. These papers contributed in no small measure to the push for constitutional development. However, it was not until the 1930s that viable ones emerged. These 1930s papers did not hide their anti-colonial feelings. Most of the Benin educated elite might have read some of these papers thereby increasing their political consciousness. Also since a branch of Nigerian Youth Movement was established in Benin, it is a possibility that their journal, the Daily Service was readily available in Benin for the people to read by 1936.

The availability of papers in Benin in the 1930s can be seen in the intelligence Report of Marshall when he said “There is a fairly large and over growing class who are sufficiently educated and sufficiently interested to read the papers”. From the foregoing, it is not a surprise that the Benin Community was very critical about the Benin Native Authority in the late 1930s and they increased their level of criticisms against its operation.

The members took their first action in March 1922, when they presented a petition to Government. Disclosing the content of the petition to the Resident Benin Province on 8th March, 1933 the District Officer, Benin Division said.

“I attach in triplicate a communication address to His Honours which is called ‘suggestions Re-Benin Native Administration’, it is signed by 22 persons.”
The petition was dated 2nd March, 1933 and was addressed to His Honour. The Lieutenant Governor, Southern Province, Enugu, among the issues raised were:

1. Appointment of quarter chiefs by Oba alone. They suggested that the chiefs should be appointed by the people
2. That chieftaincy should be extended to Christians and Mohammedans and not limited to pagans. That government may make suggestions to modify the ceremonies at the palace for Christian and Moslem chiefs
3. Individual ownership of land should be granted
4. Abolition of the four layer regulation as suitable for the subjects of the Oba. They condemned the policy of only the King to live in a building of five layers or more.
5. The removal of the restrictions of the use of Iroko timber for building purposes. According to them, Iroko timber is of great utility for building purpose as it is being capable of resisting white ant scourge.

What was surprising in this petition was the reaction of government to the issues raised. Apart from the issues of appointment of quarter chiefs by ballot and the demand that the oba’s council should be opened to Muslims and Christians who had been excluded because they refused to undergo title taking rituals, which were not accepted by government, the other issues were granted by government. While it is correct to say that the issues were critically analyzed based on merit, it may also be argued that government was becoming conscious of the neglect of the educated elite in the Benin Native Administration or is seeing the sound reasons behind their actions. Most probably, it could be attributed to the new British policy of recognizing that educated elite as necessary for Britian’s colonial mission, premised on sound presentation from British intellectuals and experts stressing their relevance. Even when the petitioners proclaimed that, the petition was a suggestion to improve the Benin Native Administration and create a better understanding between the Oba and his people, a critical look at the issue raised, give a clear indication that it was anti-traditional in tone. Oba Akenzua II came to the throne on 5th April, 1933, there was already a petition containing contentious issues which if not well handled can bring crisis which will pay way for disunity in the domain of the new Oba. This uncompromising nature of members of the Benin Community at the inception of the reign of Oba Akenzua II gives an impression that the new king awaits a lot of challenges. Hence Bradbury (1973) noted that Oba Akenzua II was aware from the onset that he would have to work hard to establish his authority and that he had the additional burden of promoting the acceptance of a new government policies and regulations which were rarely universally popular.

Oba Akenzua II and Iyase, Okoro-Otun Conflict (1935)
In 1935, Oba Akenzua II refused Iyase Okoro-Otun appearing in the streets, wearing a beaded head-dress which Eweka II permitted him to wear. He also prevented him from using the ceremonial sword (ada) which the Iyase carried while visiting other chiefs. This was seized by the Oba for about 4 days till the Resident Mr. White intervened before it was restored. The Oba also refused his sons’ admission into any of the palace societies. It may be necessary at this juncture to trace the origin of Iyase title in Benin and also establish the relevance of this title in Benin Kingdom. The title Iyase was created by Oba Ewedo (1260-1274) who was to act as the opposition to the Edion Uzama, who were very conscious of their personal self-aggrandizement. However, when Ewuare the Great came to the throne (in about 1440-1473), he created a council of state known as Eghaevbo N’Ore and appointed the Iyase as their leader. D.N. Oronsaye (1995) stated that, “The Iyase was also the leader of the Ore the ordinary people, in opposition to Ogbe – the palace and its officials. The Iyase was vested with powers which included the prerogative of arguing with the Oba and disagreeing with the Oba’s point of view and to appease Iyase, the Oba usually give his eldest daughter to the Iyase in marriage.\(^{56}\)

The Eghaevbo N’Ore acted as a balance to the palace and the Edion Uzama. J.U. Egharevba opines that, Oba Ewuare created the Eghaevbo n’Ore (State Council) whose members were at that time the Iyase. Esogban, Eso, and Osuma, with the Iyase of Benin at their head\(^{57}\). The position of Iyase in Benin is very unique. He is the mouthpiece of the people and the Oba’s first subject. If an Oba is becoming autocratic and absolute, he is the only person by tradition that can check him. He commands popular support from the people and sometimes called prime minister in Benin. Others see him specifically as leader of the opposition. He was the champion of popular liberties. He performs his traditional role as defender of the people’s rights against palace autocracy. He was the supposed to be a safety value against the abuses of absolute monarchy and a check on the autocratic tendency of an Oba.

Oba Akenzua II was not diplomatic enough in handling the affairs of the Iyase realizing his role as the leader of the opposition and the Prime Minister of the Kingdom. Tradition bestows certain functions on them. Inspite of the fact that Oba Eweka II made Okoro-Otun, Iyase in 1928, and other privileges which he extended to him he championed most of the agitations in the late thirties and early forties against Oba Akenzua II. Hence, it was not surprising that in the late thirties and early forties, Okoro-Otun spearheaded the opposition to the Oba. As a result of his aggressive and uncompromising nature, when he died in 1943, Oba Akenzua II refused to appoint another Iyase to replace him. Infact he made serious attempt to abolish the title which led to the abolition of Iyase title crisis in 1947. May be he forgot that, the Iyase serves as check to Oba’s possible autocracy and abuse of power. In fact Okoro-Otun the Iyase, confronted Oba Akenzua II to a point of a standstill. Agho-Obaseki, the Iyase, so frustrated Eweka II that he requested the Resident to mediate between them instead of
fighting him. In the case of Gaius Obaseki and Oba Akenzua II, it was a sad and very painful paradox. Oba Ewuare appointed his slave Idiaghe as Iya se and gave his eldest daughter to him as a wife. This was designed to win loyalty. Imagine ordinary slave now made Iyase. But Iyase Idiaghe disappointed him by questioning and demandig explanation on the action of the Oba. However, Idiaghe cannot be accused of not being grateful because he was only performing his duty as the Iyase of Benin.

The power and authority of the Iyase in Benin Kingdom can be seen in the episode of Oba Ohen and Iyase Emuze. Oba Ohen, a 14th century ruler who came to the throne in 1334, ordered Emuze to put to death. When the news of the death of Iyase Emuze came to the open, the people became rebellious and they stoned Oba Ohen to death, inspite of all attempts made by him to appeal to them.

Water-rate Agitation (1937-1939)

Of all crises in the 1930, the most volatile one that remained indelible in Benin history was the water-rate agitation of 1937-1939. The people of Benin resisted the house valuation basis of water rate and supported a flat rate based on water consumption. Osadolo Edomwonyi said:

The introduction of water-rate based on tenement basis to which the Oba was alleged to have given assent without consultation with his chiefs and people brought general dissatisfaction.

Bradbury posited that the reaction to the water-rate was serious and the agitation later became the great water-rate agitation, one of the legendary landmarks of Benin political history. He added that, it served to cement the two groups opposed to the Oba into an effective condition and to polarize the residents of the capital into pro and anti-palace faction.

Contributing to the issue of water-rate agitation, Oba Ezediauwa in his welcome address to the people during his coronation ceremony in 23rd March 1979, said:

“Shortly after Oba Akenzua II ascended the throne in 1933, he saw the need for the expansion of the Oredo pipe-borne water system that was commissioned 1910 and the necessity for financial contribution by his people. Consequently, he accepted the introduction of the Native Administration in 1936/37 of the levy water-side. A move which would have inculcated the spirit of self reliance and social responsibility in the people, however, generated dissension which came to be popularly known as the water-side agitation, agitation he had to contend with for a couple of years.

In actual fact, the Benin City water work constructed in 1910 was becoming inadequate. In order to provide the city with a proper and adequate supply of water, the
government granted an interest free loan of 20,000 pounds for the extension and reconstruction of the Benin City water works in 1921. When the scheme was completed on July 16, 1935 the Benin Native Administration was asked by the Public Works Department to take responsibility for all annual charges for the maintenance and supervision of the water works. Igbafe hints that it was intended that all expenses in this regard should be met by the imposition of a water-rate, with assessment based on the annual value of tenement. On April, 1937, regulations imposing these rates came into force under the draft rules of the Benin Native Administration. These draft rules were made under the Native Authority Ordinance. As a result of this development, a levy of 5% of the annual value of tenements was announced in Benin, but later, this amount was found to be inadequate hence it was increased to 10%. This rate was highly condemned by the people as highly exorbitant compare to 5% of annual value of tenements in operation in many places in southern Nigeria.

The Benin Community was in the forefront of this agitation for the abolition of new water rate in Benin. Some members of the Oba’s council like Iyase, Ezomo, Oshodi fully supported the agitation. Mass meetings were summoned to spread its condemnation and series of petitions were written to press home their demands. The government rejected the flat-rate proposal because it could not bring in enough revenue to make the Benin water works self-sufficient. At the beginning, Oba Akenzua II slighted the agitators and saw them as disloyal elements but later it became done on him that the agitation was assuming a threatening state hence he was ready to accept a flat-rate depending on the disposition of government officers, especially when there was rumour to depose the Oba.

The water rate agitation which started in 1937 ended in 1939 with serious consequences. In view of the high degree of criticisms by educated elite on Benin Native Administration and the volatile nature of water rate agitation, in 1939 the administration officers saw it paramount to find a political settlement in Benin affairs. Marshall was of the opinion that the bitterness generated by the water-rate crisis adequately found expression on the question of re-organization. As a prelude to this in February, 1938 His Honour, the Chief Commissioner, Southern Provinces, W.E. Hunt suggested at a public meeting that the Benin Community should write their own Intelligence Report. Six of their members were appointed for this assignment. The report contained the following recommendations:

a. It condemned the appointment of councilors mainly on the basis of title and suggested an elected council representative of all sections of the tax-paying population in Benin.

b. That, in due course, literacy and intelligence should be preliminary, qualification for membership of the Benin Native Administration. This report was however
not accepted because of the high level of criticisms it attracted from Oba Akenzua II and that it was not detailed enough to form the basis for re-organization in the Benin Native Authority.

c.

It was on the strength of these observations that Mr. H.L. Marshall, an Assistant District Officer was instructed to write another report. It is very important to point out here that the report of the Benin Community forms the basis for discussion in the course of production of Marshall Intelligence Report. Mr. H.L. Marshall’s, Intelligence Report came out in August, 1939. The report contained his proposals for re-organization for the Benin Native Administration.

Conclusion

Even though the institution of the monarchy was restored in 1914, the lopsided nature of Benin Native Administration from 1914-1920 whereby Oba Eweka II was stripped of his executive powers while Agho Obaseki was bestriding the Benin political system like a colossus made crisis inevitable.

The crisis expanded with unspoken rapidity with the investiture of a new persons or inferior standing with power of control and guidance over the administration while a greater number of the old Benin chiefs were given no positions whatsoever in the native administration inaugurated in 1916.

A complex situation was created when Oba Akenzua II was made the sole Native Authority at a time when educated elite had emerged, who was quite aware of their rights and was ready to promote democratic and representative government as against sole Native Authority. Their vocal and articulate zeal promoted and sustained the crises. The abolition of District headship system in Benin following the intelligence Report of Macrae Simpson brought more crises.

The promulgation of obnoxious Laws which Oba Akenzua II supported without consultation which particularly enacted a regulation which insisted on a water rate based on house valuation or tenement basis brought serious crisis. It generated dissension, bitterness, protests, agitation and tension in Benin. However, it is important to add that the water rate agitation resulted to positive political reforms in Benin Native Administration in 1939.
Endnotes

8. National Archives, Ibadan. CSO, 26: 09305, P.1
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18. D.N. Oronsaye, *The History of Ancient Benin Kingdom and Empire* (Benin: Jeromeliaho, 1995) P.71
32. Ibid, pp167-169
33. Ibid, pp167-168
34. Ibid, p.155
35. Ibid, p.287
36. Ibid, P.297
38. Ibid, p115-116
39. Ibid, p.115
41. R.E Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, p.114
46. Nigeria’s (Legislative Council) Order in Council, 1922, Article 4.
53. BP. 309, Ben Prof. p.1
54. BP, 209, Ben. Prof. pp4-9.
55. R.E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*
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60. Oba Erediawa’s Welcome Address during his Coronation Ceremony, 23rd March,, 1979.
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   63. Ibid, p.54.
64. H.F. Marshall, Intelligence Reports.
65. National Archives, Ibadan BD 835, P.58