

**CULTURE AND INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY: A CASE STUDY OF HOLY
ARUOSA CATHEDRAL IN BENIN CITY BEFORE 1897**



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BY

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by GRACE ONOME JOSHUA (Miss) with the matriculation number ART2100596 in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, Nigeria.

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Date

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(Head of Department)

Date

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to God Almighty who is my strength and provider, as well as to my Family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am forever grateful to the Almighty God for the grace to successfully complete my studies at the University of Benin and for the unquantifiable gift of life without which this work would never have been possible.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral in Benin City is a significant cultural and historical landmark that reflects the complex interactions between traditional Benin spirituality and international influences. The Holy Aruosa Cathedral was founded in the early sixteenth century during the reign of Oba Esigie. The Holy Aruosa Cathedral was established by the Portuguese before they set up the Roman Catholic and other churches in Benin. The Holy Aruosa Cathedral in Benin city, Nigeria has a complex and intriguing history with the Portuguese. While it is widely believed that the cathedral was a relic of Portuguese missionary presence, others suggests that the Holy Aruosa predates early Portuguese contact with the Benin kingdom.¹ The Cathedral history dates back to the period when the Europeans explorers arrived Benin. The Holy Aruosa Cathedral is believed to be one of the oldest churches in Africa.

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral has its location at Akpakpava in Benin city, Edo, Nigeria. It had Oba Esigie (son of Oba Ozolua and Queen Idia) as the supreme head. It was founded by Oba Esigie alongside the Portuguese missionaries. It is commonly called the church of the Oba of Benin and the elderly Binis (people of Benin)¹. The Holy Aruosa Cathedral also has its own sacred book known as the 'Book of Holy Aruosa' which was written by the 'wise men with dictates, teachings and sayings of the ancient Benin kingdom'². The Benin people believed in the direct worship of the supreme being, Osanobua, the Bini world view permeates Aruosa's doctrine, rituals and usage. The Portuguese influence on the Holy Aruosa Cathedral is evident in its architecture and doctrine. The Cathedral's design and structure reflects a blend of traditional Benin and European influences. The cathedral was constructed with the help of the Portuguese missionaries' artisans. The construction of the cathedral was effort of the Portuguese missionaries to convert the Benin people

to Christianity. This resulted to the Doctrine of the Cathedral to be mixed with Benin traditionality and Christianity which makes it unique from other denominations, as it doctrine emphasizes direct worship of GOD without intermediaries (therefore making it open to everyone).

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral has played a crucial role in the Benin cultural and diplomatic history especially during the period of European contact and trade³. It marked the beginning of European contact with the Benin Kingdom leading to the establishment of trade relations between the Binis and the Portuguese. Through the Cathedral, the Benin people had cultural exchange with the Europeans, the construction of the Cathedral is evidence of cultural exchange. The Holy Aruosa Cathedral introduced Christianity to the Benin kingdom which had significant influences and impact on the kingdom's cultural and spiritual practices. The cathedral's presence also helped to facilitate trade and commerce between Benin and European countries. It also helped the Benin kingdom diplomatic interactions and secured its position in the region.

The Holy Aruosa cathedral reflects the dynamic interactions between the traditional Benin spirituality and international influences, therefore providing a unique lens through which the complexities of cultural exchange and diplomacy in pre-colonial west Africa can be understood.

Aim and Objectives

This study aims to investigate the cultural and diplomatic significance of the Holy Aruosa cathedral in Benin city before 1897.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. To examine the Benin cultural development before 1897.
- ii. To investigate the historical process that led to the arrival of the Portuguese in Benin and the construction of the Holy Aruosa church.
- iii. To analyze the cathedral's interaction with European's countries i.e., the Portuguese.

iv. To explore the dynamics of cultural exchange and diplomacy and examine its impacts on the Benin landscape.

Scope of the study

This study focuses on Benin city, Nigeria, and its surrounding regions, exploring the cultural and diplomatic significance of the Holy Aruosa cathedral within the context of pre-colonial west Africa. The study covers the period from the establishment of the church (around 1507) to 1897 when the kingdom was captured by the British. It would examine the Holy Aruosa cathedral's role in Benin's cultural and diplomatic history during the pre-colonial era. The period before 1897 serves as a significant time frame for understanding the historical context of the Holy Aruosa in Benin city.

Methodology

This study employs a historical method of research. It focuses on the Holy Aruosa cathedral's significance in Benin cultural and diplomatic history. This approach will allow for an in-depth examination of the cathedral's impacts. This study draws on a range of sources, including:
Primary sources: historical documents, letters, oral interviews and other primary sources related to the Holy Aruosa cathedral and Benin's cultural and diplomatic history.

Secondary sources: the secondary sources that would be used in this research work includes; books, articles, and other secondary sources that provide context and insights into the Holy Aruosa cathedral's significance.

Literature Review

The Holy Aruosa cathedral in Benin city hold a significant cultural and historical importance, particularly in the context of international diplomacy before the British-Benin expedition of 1897.

According to R.E Bradbury in his book “*The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-speaking Peoples of South-western Nigeria*”⁴, provides valuable insights into the culture and history of the Benin kingdom. This book explores the kingdom’s social conditions, ethnic groupings and cultural practices. It focuses on the ethno-graphic survey of the Benin kingdom and the Edo-speaking people. It covers the topic such as the kingdom’s geographical location, climate, language, and dialects, population and demographics, origin myths and historical development of kingship and chieftaincy systems in the Benin kingdom highlighting the complex political structure that evolved over time. The Benin kingdom was established around the 1000AD and lasted until it’s colonialization by the British empire⁴. During its peak, the kingdom expanded its territories establishing trade relationship with European powers particularly the Portuguese⁴. Bradbury highlighted some notable Oba’s in his work, which include; Oba Ewuare (1440-1473), Oba Esigie (1504-1550), - he was known for his diplomatic relations with Europeans powers and his military campaigns. It was during his reign that the Holy Aruosa cathedral was established with the help of the Portuguese missionaries. Oba Ovoranwen (1888-1914) – he was the last Oba of Benin before the British colonization.

Bradbury’s work did not give an explicit information on the Holy Aruosa cathedral. While his work focuses on the Benin people’s origin and evolution, this research work, “culture and international diplomacy, a case study of the Holy Aruosa cathedral in Benin city before 1897”, tends to explore the influences of the Portuguese as an European power in the Benin kingdom and also reflect the unique blend of traditional Benin and Christian influences.

“*Great Benin; It Custom, Art and Horrors*”⁵ by Roth H. Ling, is a book that also provides a deep knowledge on the cultural and historical nature of the Benin people. It explores the history and traditions of the Benin people who are known for their intricate art and skilled craftsmanship.

The book covers three main aspects in correlation with its title, Customs; i.e., the traditional practices and rituals of the Benin people, Art; their intricate bronze and ivory sculptures showcasing the kingdom's artistic prowess, Horrors; i.e., the ritual practices and human sacrifice that were part of the kingdom's customs. Roth uses illustration and proof to explain the customs and traditions of the Benin people. Some of the practices include the annual human sacrifice of about five men, the crucifixion of humans for rain, etc.⁵ In the chapter six of Roth's book, he made mention of the Benin contact with the Portuguese and how they introduced Christianity, which was rejected by most, but still remained, therefore reducing most of their extreme practices.

Although Roth briefly talked about the Benin contact with the Portuguese, he didn't give an in-depth insight on the arrival of the Portuguese, conversion of some indigenous, and the construction of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral as the first church in Benin City and its diplomatic significance in her relations with the Portuguese and other European powers, which this research work would be indepthly talking on.

"The Benin Monarchy: Origin and Development" by E. B. Eweka is another book that discusses an aspect of the Benin history. It explores the history and evolution of the Benin monarchical system. Benin monarchy system has its origin dating back to the Ogoke dynasty which ruled for nearly 1000 years.⁶ Eweka explains that the monarchy system has evolved through three phases which include: Pre-imperial period, Imperial period and post-Imperial period (which was defined by the impact of the British). It can be said that the Benin monarchy developed in a specific historical context, with influences from African, European and other external factors. Its monarchical system differs from others but still share some similarities with few others like the African monarchical system of the Ashanti kingdom in terms of hereditary rule.⁶ E. B. Eweka's

book focuses majorly on the Benin monarchy evolution, which this research work tends to explore beyond this aspect. This research work would be working on the Holy Aruosa Cathedral and how the Benin monarchical system impacted it (because the Oba became the supreme head of the cathedral). This study, “culture and International Diplomacy: a case study of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral in Benin city before 1897” and E.B. Eweka book on “Benin monarchy: Origin and Development, differs in context but serves as symbolism as they both serve as diplomatic representatives of the Benin kingdom which promotes cultural understanding and cooperation.

“A Short History of Benin” by J. U. Egharevba, a renowned historian from Benin City, Nigeria, also provides a concise account of the history and culture of the Benin Kingdom. J. U. Egharevba started by providing a chronology of events, which covers the Benin interactions with other cultures. Although J. U. Egharevba talked about the Benin kingdom Interactions with the Europeans, but he didn’t mention the Holy Aruosa cathedral explicitly. While Jacob Egharevba’s book dwells on the general idea of the history of the Benin people, this study; *Culture and International diplomacy: a case study of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral in Benin City before 1897*”, would be dwelling on the establishment and impacts of the cathedral in the Benin culture and International relations. This study tends to give a detailed insight on how the Portuguese arrived in the Kingdom and brought a religion that shaped Benin’s foreign policy and Interactions with European countries. According to Egharevba, the Cathedral was established in 1506 during the reign of Oba Esegie, marking the beginning of a new Era of cultural exchange and spiritual growth in Benin.⁷

*“Benin Traditional Religious Practices: The origin of worship at the Holy Aruosa Cathedral”*⁸ by Ojo I. O, is another book that gives a detailed history of the Benin people. Unlike other works by several authors that has been reviewed in this study, Ojo I. O provides an explicit

information on the religious practices of the Benin people in context of the Origin worship at the Holy Aruosa Cathedra.⁸ The detail of this information is embedded in the ninth chapter of this book. According to the book, there are two main categories of religious specialists which are; priest (Ohen) and diviner/herbalist (Obo)⁸. He also stated that Holy Aruosa (Eye of God) was the religion of the Benin people with all its activities centered on Benin language. The issues of civilization and the British expedition of 1897 led to the growth and proliferation of Holy Aruosa. According to the book, it is said to believe that the cathedral was founded by the Portuguese in 1406. According to the Benin people, the Portuguese came for commercial and religious treaties i.e., they came to complement what Benin people had already. It was believed that the place the Benin people gathered to pray awaiting the return of Priest Okhuahe (who was taken by the Portuguese) is where the present site where the cathedral is located⁸. The Holy Aruosa Cathedral is a rallying center for Christians, Muslims and Idol worshippers. The Benin people are not against any religion they are concerned with direct worship and supremacy of “Osanobua”.

Unlike other writer’s work reviewed in this research work, Ojo, I. O gives a very detailed knowledge idea on the Holy Aruosa Cathedral which is in sync with this study; “culture and International diplomacy: a case study of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral in Benin City before 1897”. He further went to explain that the Holy Aruosa Cathedral is a traditional place of worship of the Oba and every Benin man and woman that holds the Benin tradition sacred and undiluted. The traditional Benin person is of the opinion that the Aruosa is a place where he or she could easily commune with God directly and his or her prayers would be answered without any Intermediary Interceding on their behalf. Despite Ojo I. O details in his work, he didn’t still give a clear description on how the Portuguese came in and influenced the traditional practices of the Benin Kingdom, which makes this research work different from his.

In conclusion, the reviewed texts focus majorly on the themes of Benin History, i.e it's origin, myths, customs, arts and trade relationships. However, this research work focuses on the Culture and International Diplomacy in Benin using the Holy Aruosa Cathedral as a case study, which targets a quite different perspective from that of the reviewed texts thus making this research work different. By addressing these gaps and building on the existing knowledge, this project aims to contribute a novel perspective and clear insights to the field.

Delimitation of Chapters

Chapter One: This Chapter introduces the research topic and gives an overview of what is to be discussed in the subsequent chapters. It also states the aim and objectives of the research work, the scope of the study and the methodology of the work. Chapter one also reviews the work of other writers.

Chapter Two: This Chapter gives an explicit information on the Benin culture and religion before their contact with the Portuguese. It explores all the traditional practices that existed before the arrival of the Portuguese in the Benin Kingdom.

Chapter Three: Chapter three explains the arrival of the Portuguese, their main aim and how their contact with the Benin People led to the construction of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral. This Chapter explains how the church was used as a means of trade relation between the Portuguese and the Benin People. It also explores how the People were able to still incorporate their traditional practices, i.e., how they were able to blend their traditionality with that of the Portuguese. They were able to blend the old and new religion to create a unique one.

Chapter Four: This Chapter focuses on the impact of the Cathedral on the cultural landscape of Benin. It explains its socio-cultural impacts on the Kingdom's Art, how it was able to blend with modernity and also religious syncretism.

Chapter Five: The last Chapter of this research work gives a general conclusion to the previous Chapters and also a summary to the key findings. It also contains the Bibliography.

Endnotes

1. “Holy Aruosa Cathedral”, *The Nation life-The Midweek Magazine*, February 18, 2021, pp15-18.
2. Ibid.
3. J. U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* (Ibadan: Ibadan university press, 1968). pp38-45.
4. R. E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-speaking People of South-Western Nigerian* (London: International African Institute, 1957). pp45-105.
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6. E. B. Eweka, *The Benin Monarchy: Origin and Development* (Benin City: Suben Printers, 1993).
7. J. U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, (Ibadan: Ibadan university press, 1968). pp45-70.
8. I. O. Ojo, “Benin Traditional Religious Practices: The origin of worship at Holy Aruosa Cathedral” In Oriiz U. Omuwaje (eds.) *The Benin Monarchy: An Anthology of Benin history*, (Benin City: Well crimson Limited, via Oba Ywuare II foundation, 2018). pp173-181

CHAPTER TWO

BENIN CULTURE (RELIGION) BEFORE THE PORTUGUESE ARRIVAL

The Benin culture specifically the traditional religion of the Edo people of Nigeria was rich and complex before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century. The kingdom of Benin, centered in what is now known as “Edo State”, was a sophisticated and powerful west African state. The Edo people who founded the kingdom around the 10th century, developed a complex religious system that intertwined spiritual beliefs, governance and artistic expression¹.

Historical Context

The kingdom of Benin, distinct from the modern Republic of Benin, emerged as a significant political and cultural entity in the region of southern Nigeria by the 10th century. It was initially ruled by the Ogiso dynasty, a line of semi-mythical kings², until the establishment of the Oba dynasty around the 13th century with the ascension of Oba Eweka, son of prince Oranmiyan from the neighboring Yoruba Kingdom of Ife². By the 15th century, under rulers like Oba Ewuare the great (1440 – 1480), Benin had become a centralized state with a powerful monarchy, extensive trade networks, and a vibrant artistic tradition. Religion was also a cornerstone of the Benin society which influenced governance, social hierarchy and cultural production.

Before the Portuguese arrived, the Edo people practiced an indigenous religion that was deeply animistic and ancestor focused. It centered on the worship of deities, spirits and royal ancestors. This religious system was closely yielded to the authority of the Oba, who was regarded as a semi-divine figure. The Oba wielded both political and spiritual authority, he was the cornerstone of the Kingdom’s centralized government. Although, the Edo people history lacks written records, most of their history comes from oral traditions, European accounts, and

archaeological findings such as “Benin bronzes”, which provides insights into the pre-contact religious iconography.

Religious Beliefs and Practices before the Portuguese Arrival

The Religious system of the Benin kingdom before Portuguese contact was a complex blend of animism, ancestor worship and the worship of deities, which together reinforced the social and political order. The Oba played very vital roles in religious life, leading elaborate rituals to honour ancestors and secure the kingdom’s well-being. Below are the key components of Benin religion during this period;

A. Concept of the divine cosmology

The Benin people believed in a supreme creator god, Osanobua (or Osanobue)³, who was the ultimate source of life and order but was distant from everyday human affairs. Osanobua was not directly worshipped³ but was acknowledged as the creator of the world and the deities that governed it. Below Osanobua were numerous deities (ebo)³, each associated with specific aspects of life such as fertility, war, or natural phenomena. The divine cosmology of Benin traditional religion, often referred to as Edo religion, represents a profound and intricate worldview that has shaped the cultural, social, and political fabric of the Edo people for millennia. Centered in the ancient Kingdom of Benin—now encompassing Edo State in southern Nigeria—this cosmology is not merely a collection of myths but a living system of beliefs that explains the origin, structure, and interconnectedness of the universe. At its core, Benin cosmology posits a dualistic yet harmonious universe divided into the visible realm of human experience (known as ‘Agbon’ or Earth) and the invisible realm of spirits, ancestors, and deities (encompassing ‘Erinmwin’, the heavens, and an underworld). This framework underscores the Edo people's animistic perspective, where every element of nature—rivers, trees, rocks, and even the wind—pulses with divine energy.

Unlike Christianity, with a singular, interventionist creator, Benin cosmology blends monotheism and polytheism in a unified hierarchy. The supreme deity, Osanobua (also called Osanobua Noghodua⁴, meaning "the Long-Suffering God" or "God Almighty"), reigns as the omnipotent, omniscient architect of existence, residing in a celestial palace. Beneath Osanobua lies a collection of lesser deities ('Ehi' or 'Ohen'), ancestors, and nature spirits that mediate divine will on Earth. This structure reflects the Edo's historical context: as a powerful forest kingdom flourishing from the 13th to 19th centuries, their beliefs emphasized balance between human society and cosmic forces, with the Oba (king) as a semi-divine bridge between worlds.

The term "divine cosmology" here encapsulates not just creation narratives but the ongoing dynamic of cosmic order. Rituals, divinations, and festivals maintain this equilibrium, warding off chaos. Influenced by neighboring Yoruba traditions yet distinctly Edo, this cosmology has endured colonial disruptions, including the British invasion of Benin City in 1897, which looted sacred artifacts like Olokun heads now in Western museums. Today, it informs modern Edo identity, blending with Christianity and Islam while preserving core tenets. To grasp its depth, we must delve into the creation myth, the pantheon's structure, key deities, the Oba's role, and ritual expressions revealing a theology of harmony, prosperity, and ancestral reverence.

At the heart of Benin cosmology lies the creation story, an oral epic transmitted through griots, palace historians, and initiation rites. This myth, akin to Egyptian cosmogonies that influenced it, begins in primordial chaos a vast, watery void symbolizing undifferentiated potential. Osanobua, the uncreated eternal one, emerges as the first cause, breathing order into formlessness. Envisioned as a majestic king on a throne of light, Osanobua molds the universe from his divine essence, establishing the dual realms: the sky (Erinmwini) as a realm of pure spirit and the Earth (Agbon) as a fertile yet perilous domain.¹³

One variant, recorded in Edo oral traditions and echoed in Jacob Egharevba's *'A Short History of Benin'* (1934),¹⁴ describes Osanobua sending four primordial forces—his "children"—down from heaven to tame the waters. These emissaries, representing wind, rain, earth, and fire, arrive to find the world submerged. The youngest, embodying cunning and humility, scatters sand from a snail shell (a gift from Osanobua) onto the waters, creating dry land—the cradle of Benin. This act symbolizes the triumph of resourcefulness over brute force; the elder siblings, gifted with wealth or magic, must barter their powers for settlement rights, establishing the Oba's primacy as "owner of the soil."

Another narrative, drawing from 'Iha Ominigbon' divination verses, portrays Osanobua as crafting the first humans from clay, infusing them with 'arue' (soul or life breath)¹³. Birds and insects descend first, as confirmed by modern paleoecology, underscoring the myth's empirical wisdom: without oxygen-producing flora, human life is impossible. Osanobua then appoints kings to govern, with the Benin Oba as the custodian of cosmic balance. This myth is not linear but cyclical; creation recurs through rituals, mirroring the Nile's floods or seasonal rains that sustain Edo agriculture. The Benin cosmology's pantheon is a tiered hierarchy, reflecting the kingdom's guild-based society bronze casters, warriors, and diviners each honoring patron spirits. At the apex sits Osanobua, remote yet omnipresent, who delegates authority to avoid direct interference, much like a monarch entrusting viziers. These deities are accessed through personal or communal shrines.

The Oba's rituals, like the "Igue" festival, renew cosmic vitality: blood sacrifices (historically human, now symbolic) feed ancestors, ensuring prosperity. Taboos shroud the Oba in mystery—asserting he eats or sleeps was once capital offense reinforcing his otherworldliness. During crises, the Oba consults 'Iha Ominigbon', Olokun's oracle, using cowries for divination.

This system integrated politics and spirituality; the Oba's bronze plaques depict conquests as divine mandates.

Yet, the Oba is not infallible; imbalance invites rebellion, as in the Ogo dynasty's fall (pre-13th century sky-kings ousted for tyranny). Post-1170, under Oba Eweka I (from Ife), the dynasty stabilized, blending Yoruba influences. Today, Oba Ewuare II (enthroned 2016) upholds this, blending tradition with modern governance.

Benin cosmology manifests in vibrant rituals that sustains flow. Annual festivals like “Ugie's” honor deities: Olokun's involves sea processions with white cloths, invoking wealth; Ogun's features iron dances. Divination (ifa) diagnoses imbalances, prescribing sacrifices (Ebo). Ancestor veneration is pivotal; the dead join “Igun”, influencing posterity via libations. This fosters communal ethics: taboos against incest or land desecration maintain order, with violations risking “ebo (curses). Women's societies like “Udumu” channel goddess energy, healing via herbs and chants. Some of the major traditional practitioners involved in the Benin cosmology includes:

i. Olokun⁴ the deity of the sea and wealth and it was particular significant due to Benin’s trade networks and proximity to the coast. Olokun was believed to control prosperity and was venerated through elaborate rituals and shrines. Benin is widely accepted as the home or origin of Olokun worship. While most Olokun initiates in Africa are women, the legends that mark the beginning of Olokun worship feature stories of men being their initial worshippers. Olokun worship came into being with the story of a hunter who ventured into the forest to hunt but was drawn to the River Ethiope where he was captured and taken to the bottom of the water and taught spiritual rituals. He was underwater for three years, which is family and friends thought he had been killed by an animal. On his shocking return, he came with a water pot on his head, mute and dumbfounded. His only response was to dance to the shock of his townsfolk. Eventually, the crowd

that had gathered began to mock his dance and it started what was to become a fourteen-day tribute of dance ritual to Olokun. After this period the hunter began to speak again and he shared some of his experiences after which he became the first Olokun chief priest. Till date, hunters gather to celebrate this festival annually with the 'Ekaba dance' ¹³.

ii. Ogun⁴ the god of iron and war, was revered by warriors and craftsmen reflecting the importance of metallurgy and military prowess in Benin society. The Edo cosmology viewed the world as interconnected with spiritual forces inhabiting natural elements like river, trees, and animals which were often propitiated through offerings.⁴ In Benin cultural displays, there are archaic ceremonial war festivals (isiokuo, ugie ogun) to Ogun displaying the transformative power of this deity as well as annual festivals depicting enactment of battle between the Benin king and town leaders in a civic pageant dedicated to Ogun.

In the 21st century, Benin cosmology resists erosion. Amid urbanization, youth revive cults via social media, while diaspora communities in the Americas syncretize with Vodou. Challenges include missionary conversions (Edo are 52% Christian), yet 18% retain traditional practices. UNESCO recognition of Benin bronzes' return amplifies calls for cultural repatriation, revitalizing shrines.

In conclusion, the divine cosmology of Benin traditional religion weaves a tapestry of profound wisdom: a universe born from chaos, ordered by Osanobua's grace, governed by a pantheon where Olokun's depths complement Ogun's forge, and anchored by the Oba's throne. This is no archaic relic but a resilient philosophy affirming interconnectedness—humans as stewards of Agbon in dialogue with the invisible. In an era of ecological peril and cultural loss, Edo beliefs offer lessons in balance, reminding us that true prosperity flows from honoring the divine in all things. As the myth endures, so does the Edo spirit: eternal, adaptive, and luminously alive.

B. Ancestor worship and the role of the Oba

Ancestor reverence was central to Benin religion, as the Edo believed that deceased ancestors particularly royal ones, continued to influence the living. The Oba, as a semi divine figure, was seen as the living embodiment of the kingdom's spiritual and temporal authority. His ancestors, especially past Obas, were revered as intermediaries between the living and the divine. Commemorative altars adorned with brass heads, ivory tusks and other artifacts were constructed to honour deceased Obas⁵. These altars were often placed in the royal palace, which served as focal points for rituals that ensured the spiritual well-being of the kingdom⁵.

The "Igue festival"⁶, one of the most important religious ceremonies was performed annually to renew the Oba's spiritual power and strengthen the kingdom. This involved offerings, dances and rituals to honour ancestors and deities, thereby reinforcing the Oba's divine mandate. Central to Benin cosmology is the Oba, whose divinity mirrors Olokun's aquatic sovereignty. Every Oba is a reincarnation of Olokun, descending from heaven via the Ehi lineage¹². This sacred kingship (Edo mwen oba)¹² positions the Oba as high priest, rainmaker, and judge, his palace.

C. Rituals and Sacrifices

Rituals were integral to Benin religion which was often conducted by priests (Ohen)⁶ and overseen by the Oba or his appointed chiefs. These rituals included offerings of food, animals and in some cases human sacrifices which is done during times of crises or to mark significant events like coronation or funerals⁶. Human sacrifice, through controversial and often exaggerated in later European accounts, was practiced selectively to appease deities or ancestors and ensure the kingdom's prosperity. Oral traditions suggested that such sacrifices were intended to bring good fortune to the people and community and also to ensure success in warfare, to demonstrate the authority of the royal family and to drive out evil forces⁶.

Divination often performed using palm nuts or other sacred objects was another common way or practice to communicate with spirits and seek guidance. The Edo people were also known for their use of charm and amulets. It is believed to possess protective spiritual powers, similar to practices observed by early Portuguese visitors in other west African societies⁶. The Edo people, under the divine rule of obas (kings) from the Ogo dynasty and later the Eweka dynasty (circa 1200 CE), revered Osanobua, the supreme creator god, alongside a pantheon of divinities including Olokun (god of the sea and wealth), Ogun (god of iron and warfare), Eziza (god of the forest), and Osun (god of medicine and magic). These deities governed natural and human affairs, and their worship was central to maintaining cosmic harmony and the kingdom's prosperity. Rituals and sacrifices, led by specialized priests known as ohens, were intricate ceremonies conducted in sacred groves, village shrines, and the royal palace, reinforcing the oba's role as a semi-divine intermediary between the living, ancestors, and spiritual realms. These practices, uninfluenced by European contact, were deeply embedded in Edo cosmology, emphasizing balance, communal unity, and the cyclical nature of life and death, as evidenced by the kingdom's enduring oral traditions and iconic bronze artworks.

Rituals in pre-Portuguese Benin were multifaceted, combining music, dance, divination, and offerings to engage the spiritual world. Major ceremonies, such as the Ugie festivals, marked seasonal transitions, royal anniversaries, or ancestral veneration. The Ugie-Erhoba, for instance, honored past obas with processions, drumming, and dances by guilds like the Iwebo (royal wardrobe keepers), who wore elaborate coral-beaded regalia. Drumming, using instruments like the ema (royal drum), set rhythms to invoke deities or induce trance states, where participants, believed to be possessed, exhibited feats like fire-walking or speaking in divine tongues. Divination, a cornerstone of Edo spirituality, was performed by ohens or diviners (often called

okhaeguele after their oracle tools) using kola nuts, cowrie shells, or carved bones to interpret spiritual messages. These sessions, lasting hours, guided critical decisions—whether launching military campaigns, resolving disputes, or ensuring fertile harvests—and often prescribed specific sacrifices to appease deities or avert misfortune. The Benin Kingdom’s divination system shared parallels with Yoruba Ifá but was distinct in its Edo-specific symbols and oral chants, as noted in later ethnographic works (Bradbury, 1973).

Sacrifices were the lifeblood of Benin’s spiritual practice, seen as offerings of vital energy (ase) to nourish deities and ancestors. Animal sacrifices were most common, with chickens, goats, and cows selected based on the deity or occasion. For example, white chickens symbolized purity for Osanobua, while goats were offered to Ogun during war preparations. The ritual process was meticulous: priests slit the animal’s throat, collected its blood in calabashes, and poured it onto bronze or wooden altars, often adorned with carvings of serpents or leopards (symbols of Olokun and royal power). The meat was cooked and shared in communal feasts, reinforcing social cohesion, as the Edo believed sharing the offering blessed the community. Archaeological evidence, such as animal bones found near palace shrines in Benin City, confirms the prevalence of these practices (Connah, 1975). Sacrificial altars, often decorated with skulls or jawbones, served as visible records of devotion, signaling a shrine’s potency. Non-animal offerings, like kola nuts, palm wine, or chalk (orhue), were used for minor requests or to honor benevolent spirits, placed at crossroads for Esu, the trickster deity who facilitated divine communication.

Human sacrifices, though rare and controversial in historical accounts, occurred in specific contexts and were tightly regulated. They were reserved for major events, such as the death of an oba, where war captives, slaves, or condemned criminals were offered to honor the deceased or appease deities like Olokun, believed to demand blood for the kingdom’s wealth and stability. Oral

traditions suggest these acts were symbolic, with victims seen as messengers to the spirit world, carrying petitions for prosperity. Excavations near the royal palace, including pits dated to the 13th-15th centuries, reveal human remains alongside ritual artifacts, supporting claims of limited human sacrifice (Egharevba, 1968). Estimates vary, but historians argue that European accounts, like those of Portuguese traders post-1485, exaggerated numbers to justify colonial interventions, with annual sacrifices likely numbering fewer than ten, often tied to crises like famine or war (Ryder, 1969). These practices, while shocking to modern sensibilities, were deeply spiritual, not gratuitous, and reflected the Edo's belief in life's cyclical exchange between physical and spiritual realms. The Benin Kingdom's rituals and sacrifices were immortalized in its art, particularly the famous bronze plaques and heads crafted by the Igun Eronmwon (bronze-casting guild). These artworks, found in the royal palace, depicted priests, warriors, and sacrificial scenes, such as an ohen pouring blood onto an altar or dancers in trance. The plaques, made using the lost-wax technique, served as historical records and spiritual tools, reinforcing the oba's divine authority (Ben-Amos, 1995). For example, a 15th-century plaque shows an ohen with a sacrificial goat, symbolizing offerings to Ogun, while another depicts a procession for Olokun, with coral beads and fish motifs. These artifacts, later looted during the 1897 British punitive expedition, reveal the sophistication of pre-Portuguese Benin's spiritual and political systems, blending aesthetics with devotion.

Unlike the Fon's Vodun in modern-day Benin, the Edo's pre-Portuguese religion was less syncretic, predating significant Yoruba influence, though trade with neighbors like the Yoruba and Igbo brought minor exchanges (e.g., shared reverence for river deities). The absence of European monotheism allowed the Edo to maintain a worldview where the oba, as a living god, mediated between humans and spirits, with rituals reinforcing his legitimacy. This system fostered a unified

kingdom, capable of monumental achievements like the Benin Moat, a 16,000-kilometer earthwork built partly through communal rituals. The arrival of the Portuguese in 1485 introduced Christianity and trade goods, gradually altering sacrificial practices by increasing demand for slaves (some of whom were spared sacrifice for export), but the core of Edo spirituality remained intact until colonial disruptions.¹⁶

In conclusion, pre-Portuguese Benin's rituals and sacrifices were a sophisticated blend of devotion, art, and governance, reflecting a worldview where the spiritual and material were inseparable. These practices, from animal offerings to rare human sacrifices, sustained the kingdom's prosperity and divine order, leaving a legacy in its oral traditions and bronze masterpieces, which continue to inform our understanding of this vibrant pre-colonial culture.

D. Art and Religion

The religious beliefs of the Edo were vividly expressed through their art, particularly in brass, ivory and wood. Series of artisans who were controlled by the palace, produced works that served both religious and political purposes. Brass plaques and commemorative heads, which were created using the lost-wax casting techniques, adorned the royal palace and depicted scenes of the religious and historical significance,⁷ for example; plaques often showed the Oba in ceremonial regalia, flanked by attendants which symbolized his divine authority. These networks were not just for decorative purposes as they were seen as sacred objects used in rituals to honour deities and ancestors. Ivory carvings such as the famous pendant masks depicting the Iyoba (queen mother), were also filled with spiritual significance. These masks often worn during ceremonies connected the living to the spiritual realm and honoured powerful figures like queen Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie.⁷ Benin developed a profound integration of art and religion that defined its cultural and spiritual identity, with the oba (king) as a divine ruler descended from Osanobua, the supreme

creator god, whose sanctity was so revered that mundane acts like eating were concealed to maintain his mystical aura, and his palace served as the epicenter of religious and artistic expression, embodying the Edo people's cosmology where art was not merely decorative but a sacred medium to engage deities, ancestors, and cosmic forces. The Edo religion was polytheistic, centered on Osanobua, who delegated powers to divinities, each requiring specific rituals and offerings to ensure communal prosperity, fertility, and protection, with ancestor worship integral to maintaining dynastic continuity through altars dedicated to past obas. Benin's art, produced by the Igun Eronmwon (brass casters) and ivory carvers under royal patronage, was inseparable from religion, serving as ritual objects, historical records, and symbols of divine authority in an oral culture. Brass casting, using the lost-wax technique with locally sourced metals, created life-sized commemorative heads for ancestral altars, depicting obas with idealized features, coral beads, and scarification, channeling ase (vital energy) during rituals like the Igue festival, which renewed the oba's powers (Ben-Amos, 1995). Rectangular brass plaques, nailed to palace walls, captured dynamic scenes—obas with leopard-tail scepters, warriors in acrobatic poses, priests performing sacrifices, or mythical narratives like wars against the sky—functioning as spiritual and historical narratives, with their peak under Oba Ewuare (r. 1440–1473), who expanded the empire and formalized guilds (Ben-Amos, 1995). Ivory carvings, prized for their white hue evoking sacred kaolin clay, included double gongs for the Emobo ceremony to expel evil, adorned with reliefs of the oba flanked by priests, as well as boxes, combs, and leopard figures with copper inlays, symbolizing royal dominion over nature, often placed in shrines or worn as pendants (Ben-Amos, 1995). Coral regalia, infused with supernatural ase, enhanced the oba's presence during festivals like Ague, ensuring fertility and protection, while wooden sculptures and iron figures for Ogun tied art to specific deities (Bradbury, 1973). The Iyoba (queen mother), elevated to a divine role

with her own palace, was commemorated in ivory masks and brass heads, reflecting her spiritual significance, though she was ritually separated from the oba to preserve his purity ¹².

Main Cultural Practices of the Benin People before the arrival of the Portuguese

The Edo people believed in a supreme creator god, Osanobua (or Osanobue) who created the world and delegated its governance to lesser deities, spirits and ancestors. The Oba was considered a divine descendant of Osanobua, embodying spiritual and temporal authority. Religious practices were communal as it involved the royal courts, priests, artisans and the broader population and were often expressed through rituals, festivals, arts and offerings. Artisans and specialists in casting and carvings played significant roles in creating objects for religious ceremonies, which were seen as sacred.

A. Ancestors worship and reverence

- i. **Erection of ancestral altars (Aru Okhokho)⁸**: every Edo household maintained an ancestral altar dedicated to deceased family members. These altars, often made of wood or mud, held carvings or symbols representing ancestors where offerings like kolanut, palm wine, and food were placed to honour and seek their guardance.¹
- ii. **Offering to ancestors⁸**: Regular offerings of food such as yam, chickens, or goat meat were made to ancestors to ensure their blessings for prosperity, health and protection. These were placed on altars during family gatherings or specific rituals.
- iii. **Annual Ancestral Festivals⁸**: Communities held annual ceremonies to honour all ancestors, involving communal feasts, music and dances to renew familiar bonds with the spiritual realm.
- iv. **Consultation of Ancestors via Divivnation⁸**: Diviners (who are often priests and elders) used tools like cowries, shells or palm nuts to communicate with ancestors, seeking advice on matters like marriage, health or disputes.

v. Commemorative Heads for Obas (Uhunmwum Elao)⁸: cast brass or bronze heads were created to honour deceased Obas and placed on royal altars. These brass or bronze heads symbolized the spiritual authority and wisdom of past rulers.

vi. Rites for deceased Chiefs and Nobles⁸: Specific rituals were performed to ensure the safe passage of prominent individuals' spirits to the ancestral realm, including sacrifices and prayers led by priests.

B. Worship of Deities

vii. Reverence or Veneration of Osanobua: The supreme creator, God was revered as the ultimate source of life and order. While direct worship was less frequent due to Osanobua's transcendence prayers and offerings were made to acknowledge his authority.

viii. Worship of Osun (God of magic and Medicine)⁸: Osun was a central deity associated with healing, magic and the rainforest's flora and fauna. Devotees offered bird feathers, herbs and animal sacrifices at Osun shrines to seek protection or cures.

ix. Olokun worship (God of the sea)⁸: Olokun, deity of the waters and wealth was revered through coastal shrines where offerings like coral beads, white cloth and fish were made to ensure prosperity and safe travels.

x. Ogun worship (God of Iron and wars)⁸: Ogun revered by warriors and blacksmith was honored with sacrifices of dogs, iron tools or palm wine to ensure success in battles or craftsmanship.

Worship of Obienmwun: Obienmwun is the deity responsible for safe deliveries in women. It had shrines in which worshippers come to venerate and make prayers.

The Ogiuwu deity: This deity was known or associated with death, usually referred to as the "god of death".

xi. Shrine maintenance for lesser deities: Each deity had dedicated shrines maintained by priests or community members adorned with carvings, brass plaques or natural elements like stones or trees.

xii. Rituals for Eshu (Trickster Deity)⁸: Eshu, the messenger deity was placed at crossroads with offerings to ensure communication between the human and divine realms.

xiii. Ake worship (Fertility Deity)⁸: Farmers and women seeking children offered yams, eggs or chalk at the Ake shrines to promote agricultural abundance and fertility.

C. Divine Kingship and Oba-centric Rituals

xiv. Oba as divine ruler⁹: The Oba was seen as a direct descendant of Osanobua, and his presence was centered to religious life. Rituals was performed to reinforce his divine status, including daily prayers by palace priests.

xv. Igue Festival (Annual Renewal)⁹: The Igue festival is one of the most significant Edo ceremonies. It was held to spiritually strengthen the Oba and purify the kingdom. It involves sacrifices, dances and communal feasting.

xvi. Coronation Rituals (Okhokho Eweka)⁹: The crowning of the Oba involved Elaborate ceremonies, including purification rites, offerings to ancestors and symbolic acts like walking through sacred grooves to affirm divine selection.

xvii. Human sacrifice for Oba's power⁹: In extreme cases, humans were sacrificed to enhance the Oba's spiritual strength or protect the kingdom. It was a rare practice before the 15th century, but later became more prominent.

D. Community and Agricultural Rituals

xviii. New yam festival¹⁰: This harvest festival honoured agricultural deities like Ake, with offerings of the first yam to ensure continued fertility of the land.

xix. Rain-making Ceremonies¹⁰: Priests and the Oba conducted rituals involving chants and offerings to water spirits to bring rain during dry seasons.

xx. Land purification rites¹⁰: Before planting seasons, communities purify the land with sacrifices of chickens or goats to appease earth spirits and ensure bountiful harvests.

xxi. Communal cleansing ceremonies¹⁰: Periodic rituals cleansed villages of spiritual impurities, involving sweeping with sacred brooms, burning of herbs and communal prayers.

xxii. Hunting rituals¹⁰: Hunters performed rites to honour forest spirits, offering palm wine or animal blood to ensure successful hunts and safety in the rainforest.

E. Divination and spiritual Consultation

xxiii. Use of Ifa Divination¹¹: Borrowed from the Yoruba, Ifa divination involved priests interpreting patterns of palm nuts, cowries or other tools to guide community decisions.

xxiv. Oracular consultations¹¹: Oracles often linked to specific deities like Osun were consulted for major decisions such as war or leadership disputes. This was believed to be done through or by the priests entering into a trance state to consult the oracles.

xxv. Dream Interpretations¹¹: Dream were seen as messages from ancestors or deities and elders or priests interpreted them to guide individuals and the community at large.

Before the arrival of the Portuguese in the Benin Kingdom of Edo state, their practices and belief were purely traditional and consisted of myths and ancestral worship. The above outlines the basic religious-cultural practices of the Benin people that was in practice before her encounter with European power (the Portuguese). Therefore, it can be asserted that the religious practices of the Benin people before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century were deeply rooted in their traditional Edo belief system which is centered around the worship of a supreme creator god “Osanobua”, along with lesser deities, ancestors and spirits.

The religious culture of the Benin Kingdom before the Portuguese arrival was a rich and delicate system which was deeply woven into the social, political and spiritual fabric of the Edo people. It was centered on voodoo, ancestral worship, and divine kingship, these practices was believed to provide a framework for understanding the world, maintaining social order, and connecting the community with spiritual realm. Divination and communal festivals further reinforced cultural cohesion and individuals' guidance, reflecting a worldview that valued the balance between the physical and spiritual. It is important to note that this vibrant religious heritage did not only shape the identity of the Benin people but also laid a resilient foundation that influenced their interactions with external forces including the Portuguese in the centuries that followed.

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CHAPTER THREE

ARRIVAL OF THE PORTUGUESE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HOLY ARUOSA CATHEDRAL IN BENIN CITY

The arrival of the Portuguese in the Benin kingdom during the late 15th century¹ marked a significant turning point in the region's history, initiating a period of cultural exchange, trade and religious interactions. The Benin kingdom located in what is now Edo State, Nigeria was a powerful and sophisticated West African State known for its advanced political structure, artistry and trade networks. The Portuguese as the first Europeans to establish sustained contact with the Benin introduced Christianity which laid the foundations for subsequent religious developments including the construction of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral, a significant religious and cultural landmark in Benin City.

Historical context: The Benin kingdom before Portuguese contact

The Benin kingdom centered in present day Benin city was a formidable political and economic entity by the 15th century. It was governed by the Oba, a divine king, the kingdom boasted a centralized administration, intricate bronze casting traditions and extensive trade networks that connected it to regional and global markets. In Benin, the people believed in traditional worship and it was through this that they venerated Osanobua, the Almighty God. The religious life of the Benin people revolved around a traditional system that emphasized ancestor worship, veneration of deities and the divine authority of the Oba. This spiritual framework was deeply integrated into the kingdom's social and political structures with the Oba serving as both a temporal and spiritual leader. Although the arrival of the Portuguese introduced new religious ideas challenging and eventually coexisting with these indigenous practices.

The Arrival of the Portuguese (1472 – 1486)

Portuguese contact with the Benin kingdom began around 1472, during the reign of Oba Ewuare with more sustained interactions under Oba Ozolua in 1480.³ Notable Portuguese explorers that landed in the kingdom includes Ruy de Sequeira and Afonso d'Aveiro. Driven by the age of exploration and the search for trade routes to Asia, Portuguese explorers ventured along the West African coast, seeking gold, spices and strategic alliances. The Benin kingdom with its wealth and organizational sophistication, emerged as a key partner.

Diplomatic and trade relations were established, which was driven by mutual economic interests due to the Benin kingdom vast geographical space and their sophisticated gold, brass and Ivory artworks. The Benin kingdom supplied pepper, ivory and later slaved people while the Portuguese provided firearms, brass manillas (a form of currency),³ and other European goods. This trade exchange boosted Benin's military and economic power, while the Portuguese secured a foothold in West Africa trade networks.

Alongside trade, the Portuguese introduced Christianity which was done primarily through Catholic missionaries who accompanied traders.⁴ In 1514⁴, Oba Esigie, a progressive ruler, expressed interest in Christianity as a diplomatic gesture to strengthen ties with the Portuguese. He was the first Oba of Benin to be converted to a Christian, he also permitted the construction of a small Christian Chapel in Benin city and sent emissaries, including his son, to Portugal for education. However, Christianity remained a courtly phenomenon, with limited impact on the broader population who adhered to traditional beliefs. Christianity remained confined to the elite due to the strength of Benin's traditional religion which was centered on ancestor worship and the Oba's divine status – this early Christian presence laid foundation for later religious institutions.⁴ The Holy Aruosa Cathedral formalized centuries later, can trace its conceptual roots to this initial

encounter as it represents a continuation of Benin's practice of selectively integrating foreign religious elements.

The Establishment and construction of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral

The name "Aruosa"⁵ derives from the Edo word aru, which means a sacred place or shrine, often associated with spiritual reverence in Benin's traditional religion.⁵

Holy Aruosa, that is the church of Benin, is a traditional religious and unique worship place where the Oba of Benin, his palace chiefs and family members including men and women of Benin Origin, commune directly with God. Holy Aruosa (Eye of God),⁶ was built in the 15th century and is situated along the famous Akpakpava Road, Benin city. The worshippers in this Cathedral is said to have direct contact with God, without going through any intermediary. It is the oldest church in the continent of Africa, and its architectural design tells its story.

Holy Aruosa is the religion of the Benin people which is headed by the Oba of Benin. The Cathedral has its entire activities centered on Benin Language. It was known for its prominence across other states and region until the experience of horrific events such as Western civilization, Nigerian civil war and the British expedition of 1897⁶, which led to the expulsion of Oba Ovorawmen N'Ogbasi. All these had it ripple effect on Aruosa. However, Oba Akenzua II subsequently rebuilt it when he ascended the throne in 1933.⁶

Many historical versions over the years gave divergent views about the origin of Aruosa as a religion. Based on oral interview conducted, architectural materials and other secondary sources, it can be asserted that they exist two major beliefs about the origin of the Aruosa. The first major belief which is according to the world initiative for peace, a non-profit organization, in its 5th world conference to the Portuguese, the ancient Benin Kingdom and the Romania churches as case studies, has it that the Holy Aruosa was founded by the Portuguese during the 14th century.⁶

From Oral interviews⁷, many Benin people doesn't agree to these as they defend the fact that the Portuguese came for commercial and religion treaties, saying that the Portuguese only came to complement what they already had.⁷

According to Ogebor⁸, many years ago. Benin people experienced strange happenings, man's inhumanity to man outlived its bound. Spurred by three fundamental questions and requests, namely that the young ones should not be dying for their elders, the need to continue to have rain throughout the season and that the dead should be able to visit the living. Okhuahe, a Benin priest volunteered to take the message God. Although, several years later, God spoke, unfortunately the requests could not be granted as they tend to violate the natural laws, which says there cannot be witness of any person who have seen God on Earth. This place where the Benin people gathered praying and waiting the return of Priest Okhuahe is said to be the present site of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral.

As said earlier, the British expedition affected Auosa as there were insinuations and accusations that Benin people were fetishists. Being a spiritual institution, Aruosa was demolished. Aruosa went underground until Oba Akenzua II now started rebuilding most of the shrines that were affected. Unfortunately, the civil war did the most damage. Aruosa is a rallying center for Christians, Muslims and idol worshippers. The Benin people are not against religions, but are concerned with the state of mind. The Cathedral was established as a state supported institution that blended Christianity liturgy with Benin traditions, creating a unique religious space that honoured both heritage and modernity.

The Emergence of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral, known as the "church of the Oba", represents a unique synthesis of Benin's traditional religion and Christian influences. While the Cathedral in its current

form is a modern institution, its origins are tied to the historical interplay between indigenous beliefs and the Christianity introduced by the Portuguese.

Historical Development

Pre-colonial Roots: The idea behind Aruosa suggests a connection to preexisting religious practices. Some scholars argue that the site of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral may have been a traditional shrine adapted for Christian worship, reflecting the Benin Kingdom's ability to integrate foreign ideas into its cultural framework

Colonial and post-colonial Era: The modern Holy Aruosa Cathedral emerged in the 20th century, particularly during the reign of Oba Eweka II (1914-1933) and Oba Akenzua (1933-1978). After the British conquest of Benin in 1897, which destroyed much of the city and looted its treasures including the black ball (stone) that dropped while the Benin people were praying for the return of Priest Okhuahe. The kingdom sought to preserve its cultural identity while engaging with colonial modernity. Oba Akenzua II a devout Christian formalized the Holy Aruosa Cathedral as a state supported church that blended Christian liturgy with Benin traditions. It was a way to unify the Benin people under a shared religious identity that honoured both their heritage and Christian influences.

Construction and Architecture: The Holy Aruosa Cathedral located in the heart of Benin city is a modest yet symbolically significant structure. Unlike European Cathedrals, it does not feature grandiose architecture but is designed to reflect Benin's cultural aesthetic, with elements like carved wooden altars and motifs reminiscent of traditional Benin monarchy, with the Oba as its patron and spiritual head, a role that echoes the pre-colonial divine Kingship.

It is important to know that the Portuguese arrival and the construction of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral was not without challenges, as some traditionalists viewed the adoption of Christian

elements as a dilution of Benin's indigenous religion, while colonial authorities and European missionaries were skeptical of its syncretic nature. The Cathedral's alignment with the Oba's authority also raised questions about its independence as a Christian institution, as it prioritizes loyalty to the Benin monarchy over denominational affiliations.

In the modern era, the cathedral faces the challenge of maintaining relevance in a rapidly globalizing world. While it remains a vital cultural institution, younger generations and urbanized Benin residents may be drawn or attracted towards mainstream Christian denominations or secular ideologies, posing questions about the cathedral's future role.

In conclusion, the arrival of the Portuguese in the Benin Kingdom in the 15th century initiated a complex process of cultural and religious exchange that laid the groundwork for the eventual establishment of the Holy Aruosa cathedral. While early Portuguese missionary efforts had limited success, their introduction of Christianity as a form of trade relationship influenced the Benin court and set a precedent for later religious developments. The Holy Aruosa cathedral, formalized in the 20th century represents a remarkable synthesis of Benin's traditional religion and Christian influences, serving as both a spiritual and cultural institutions under the Oba's patronage. Its construction and continued significance highlight the Benin kingdom's resilience and adaptability in the face of external influences from Portuguese contact to British colonialism and beyond. The cathedral stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of the Benin Kingdom, blending the old and the new to create a unique religious identity.

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral (church of Benin), is the Benin's people version of the Church of England or the Dutch Reformed Church. As said earlier, the oba is the head of the church and the priests, 'Ohen Osa' are responsible to him. The Holy Aruosa can also be compared with the Coptic Church in Ethiopia. The traditional Benin person is of the opinion that the Holy

Aruosa Cathedral is a place where he or she can easily commune with God directly and his or her prayers would be answered without any Intermediary Interceding on their behalf.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE IMPACTS OF THE HOLY ARUOSA CATHEDRAL ON THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF BENIN

Introduction

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral, often referred to as the "Eye of God"¹, stands as a pivotal institution in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. Established around 1517 by Oba Esigie in collaboration with Portuguese missionaries, it is widely regarded as one of the oldest churches in West Africa. Unlike conventional Christian churches, the Holy Aruosa represents a unique syncretism of Benin traditional religion and Christian influences, creating a distinct religious and cultural institution that has profoundly shaped the cultural landscape of the Benin Kingdom. This chapter examines the multifaceted impacts of the Holy Aruosa on the cultural, social, and religious fabric of Benin society. It explores how the cathedral serves as a unifying force, a preserver of cultural identity, and a platform for social stratification, while also addressing its role in adapting traditional practices to modern contexts. Drawing on historical records, oral traditions, and scholarly works, this chapter analyzes the cathedral's contributions to the Benin cultural landscape, highlighting its significance as a bridge between tradition and modernity.

Historical Context of the Holy Aruosa

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral's origins trace back to the early 16th century during the reign of Oba Esigie, a period marked by significant cultural and religious transformations in the Benin Kingdom. The cathedral was established as a response to the encounter between the Edo people and Portuguese missionaries, who introduced Christian elements to the region². However, contrary to popular belief that it is solely a product of missionary influence, the Holy Aruosa predates extensive European missionary presence and is deeply rooted in the Benin worldview, which emphasizes direct worship of Osanobua, the Supreme Being³.

The cathedral was rebuilt in 1946 by Oba Akenzua II after its destruction during the 1897 British invasion, which had significant repercussions for Benin's cultural and religious institutions³. This reconstruction underscores the resilience of Benin's cultural heritage and the determination to preserve the Holy Aruosa as a symbol of spiritual and cultural continuity. The cathedral's history reflects a deliberate effort by Benin elites to adapt traditional religious practices to new social realities, creating a syncretic institution that blends indigenous beliefs with Christian rituals.

Religious Syncretism and Cultural Integration

One of the most significant impacts of the Holy Aruosa on the cultural landscape of Benin is its role as a center of religious syncretism. The cathedral facilitates direct worship of Osanobua without intermediaries, distinguishing it from traditional Benin religion, which often involves deities such as Ogun and Olokun³, and from conventional Christian practices that rely on figures like Jesus Christ or saints. This direct approach to worship, encapsulated in the doctrine of Godianism, reflects a synthesis of Benin's indigenous spirituality and Christian influences, creating a unique religious identity.

The Holy Aruosa's syncretic nature allows it to serve as a unifying force across diverse religious groups. Unlike typical churches, it attracts Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists, fostering a sense of communal worship under the spiritual leadership of the Oba of Benin⁴. This inclusivity has strengthened social cohesion in Benin City, as the cathedral provides a shared space for religious expression that transcends denominational boundaries. The Book of Holy Aruosa³, a sacred text compiling the teachings and sayings of the ancient Benin Kingdom which was written by the "wise men", further reinforces this syncretism by serving as a moral and spiritual guide akin to the Bible or Quran, but rooted in Benin's cultural heritage.

Preservation of Cultural Identity

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting Benin's cultural identity. As the official worship center for the Oba of Benin and his subjects, it reinforces the monarchy's central role in Benin society⁵. The cathedral's rituals, conducted in the Bini language, incorporate traditional elements such as drumming and singing, which were initially criticized by colonial authorities but have since become integral to its worship practices⁴. These practices ensure the continuity of Benin's linguistic and cultural traditions in the face of Westernization and globalization.

The cathedral's architecture also reflects a blend of colonial influences and traditional Edo artistry, with intricate designs and stained-glass windows that narrate the history of the Benin Kingdom. This architectural fusion serves as a visual representation of Benin's ability to adapt and integrate external influences while maintaining its cultural distinctiveness. By preserving oral traditions and historical narratives through its services and guided tours, the Holy Aruosa educates both locals and tourists about Benin's rich heritage, reinforcing cultural pride and identity.

Social Stratification and Community Organization

The Holy Aruosa contributes to social stratification and community organization within Benin society. The Oba of Benin serves as the spiritual head of the cathedral, with the Crown Prince as his deputy and the Ohen Osa (chief priest) as the third in command³. This hierarchical structure mirrors the traditional governance system of the Benin Kingdom, reinforcing the Oba's authority and the social order. The cathedral's leadership roles, particularly the priesthood, are divinely ordained and approved by the Oba, ensuring that only those deemed spiritually and culturally fit hold these positions³.

The cathedral also serves as a venue for community gatherings and cultural events, strengthening social bonds and reinforcing traditional values. Its services include prayers for the Oba, his family, the palace, and the broader Benin community, fostering a sense of collective responsibility and unity. By providing a space for communal worship and cultural expression, the Holy Aruosa helps maintain social hierarchies while promoting inclusivity across different segments of society.

Adaptation to Modernity and Cultural Resilience

The Holy Aruosa's ability to adapt to modern influences while preserving traditional practices is a testament to its cultural resilience. The cathedral's reconstruction by Oba Akenzua II in 1946 and its subsequent expansion to other regions, such as Onitsha and Umuahia, demonstrate its adaptability to changing social and political contexts³. Despite the challenges posed by the 1897 British invasion and the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), which disrupted its growth, the Holy Aruosa has remained a vital institution in Benin society.

The cathedral's integration of modern elements, such as referencing the Bible and Quran alongside the Book of Holy Aruosa, reflects its ability to engage with contemporary religious discourses while maintaining its unique identity⁴. This adaptability has allowed the Holy Aruosa to remain relevant in a rapidly urbanizing and globalizing world, ensuring that Benin's cultural heritage continues to thrive.

Socio-Cultural Impacts on Benin Architecture and Arts

The Holy Aruosa has influenced Benin's architectural and artistic landscape. Its distinctive design, combining colonial and Edo architectural elements, serves as a model for other cultural institutions in Benin City. The cathedral's stained-glass windows and carvings, which depict stories of the Benin Kingdom, contribute to the preservation of artistic traditions that are also

evident in Benin's famous bronze plaques and ivory carvings⁶. These artistic expressions reinforce the cathedral's role as a cultural archive, preserving historical narratives for future generations.

Moreover, the cathedral's prominence as a tourist destination has spurred efforts to preserve Benin's historical structures, aligning with broader movements to protect the region's cultural heritage. By attracting visitors from across Nigeria and abroad, the Holy Aruosa promotes cultural tourism, which supports local economies and raises awareness of Benin's artistic legacy.

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite its positive impacts, the Holy Aruosa faces challenges in maintaining its relevance and influence. The growth of Western Christianity and Islam in Nigeria has overshadowed indigenous religious institutions, limiting the cathedral's geographical and cultural reach. Additionally, the 1897 British invasion and subsequent colonial policies disrupted the cathedral's operations and led to the loss of significant artifacts, such as the black stone³, which held spiritual importance.

Critics have also questioned the cathedral's syncretic practices, with some arguing that its blending of Christian and traditional elements dilutes the purity of Benin's indigenous religion. However, proponents counter that this syncretism is a strength, allowing the Holy Aruosa to adapt to modern realities while preserving core cultural values.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can easily be said that the Holy Aruosa Cathedral has profoundly shaped the cultural landscape of Benin by serving as a beacon of religious syncretism, cultural preservation, and social organization. Its unique blend of Benin traditional religion and Christian influences has fostered unity among diverse religious groups, while its rituals and architecture have preserved the cultural identity of the Edo people. By adapting to modern influences and

promoting cultural tourism, the cathedral has demonstrated remarkable resilience, ensuring its continued relevance in Benin society. Despite challenges posed by colonialism and globalization, the Holy Aruosa remains a vital institution that embodies the spirit of the Benin Kingdom, bridging the past and the present in a dynamic cultural narrative.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the critical role of the Holy Aruosa Cathedral in Benin City as a nexus of culture and international diplomacy within the Benin Kingdom prior to the British invasion of 1897. Established during the reign of Oba Esigie (c.1504-1550), the cathedral exemplifies how cultural institutions facilitated diplomatic engagement with European powers, particularly the Portuguese, while reinforcing the kingdom's cultural identity. This conclusion summarizes the key findings, details the challenges faced by the Holy Aruosa Cathedral as a diplomatic and cultural institution, and the coping and adaptation strategies employed. This study also provides an expanded set of recommendations for future research, emphasizing the cathedral's enduring significance in precolonial African diplomacy.

Summary of Key Findings

The research highlights some crucial insights into the Holy Aruosa Cathedral's role in culture and diplomacy. First, founded in the 15th century under Oba Esigie, the cathedral was a strategic synthesis of indigenous Edo religious practices, centered on the veneration of Osanobua (the Supreme God), and Christian elements introduced by Portuguese missionaries. This cultural syncretism enabled the Benin Kingdom to engage diplomatically with Portugal while preserving its spiritual and political autonomy. The cathedral's inclusive environment, accommodating Christians, Muslims, and traditional worshippers, fostered a space for intercultural dialogue and diplomacy.

Second, the cathedral served as a diplomatic hub, facilitating trade and ambassadorial exchanges with the Portuguese. Historical evidence, such as Ohen-Okun's mission to Portugal and the depiction of cross-cultural interactions in the Benin Bronzes, underscores the cathedral's role

in strengthening economic and diplomatic ties. These artifacts, looted during the 1897 British invasion, highlight the kingdom's global engagement, with the cathedral as a symbol of cultural and diplomatic openness.

Third, the cathedral's resilience amid colonial disruption in 1897, followed by its rebuilding under Oba Akenzua II in 1945, reflects its enduring significance as a cultural and diplomatic institution. The cathedral's ability to adapt to external pressures demonstrates the Benin Kingdom's strategic agency in navigating precolonial and colonial challenges, cementing its legacy in Edo cultural identity.

Although The Holy Aruosa Cathedral formed significant aspect of the Benin Kingdom history, it faced several challenges before 1897 that tested its role as a cultural and diplomatic institution. First, integrating Christian practices posed a significant challenge to maintaining indigenous Edo religious traditions. The introduction of Christianity by Portuguese missionaries risked creating tensions among traditionalists who revered Osanobua and ancestral spirits, as some may have viewed Christian rituals as a threat to established spiritual practices. Balancing these diverse belief systems required careful negotiation to avoid alienating key societal groups.

The cathedral operated under political and diplomatic pressures from European powers. The Portuguese sought to expand their influence through missionary activities, which could have undermined the Benin Kingdom's sovereignty. The cathedral's role as a diplomatic space necessitated navigating these external pressures while ensuring that trade agreements and ambassadorial missions aligned with the kingdom's interests.

Finally, the growing threat of European colonial ambitions, particularly in the 19th century, posed a long-term challenge. While the cathedral thrived in the 16th century, the increasing presence of British and other European powers in West Africa foreshadowed the 1897 invasion,

which led to the cathedral's destruction and the looting of cultural artifacts, disrupting its role as a cultural and diplomatic institution.

Despite these daunting challenges, the Holy Aruosa Cathedral and the Benin Kingdom employed several coping and adaptation strategies. First, the cathedral adopted cultural syncretism, blending Christian and Edo religious practices to create an inclusive worship space. By incorporating Christian rituals, such as baptism, into existing Edo ceremonies, the cathedral maintained harmony among diverse worshippers, ensuring traditionalists did not feel marginalized. This syncretism also strengthened diplomatic ties with the Portuguese, signaling openness to their cultural influence without compromising Edo identity.

The Benin Kingdom leveraged the cathedral as a diplomatic tool to manage European interactions. Oba Esigie's strategic decision to establish the cathedral allowed the kingdom to control the terms of engagement with the Portuguese, using it as a neutral space for negotiations and cultural exchange. The appointment of trusted figures, such as Ohen-Okun, as ambassadors ensured that diplomatic missions aligned with Benin's interests, mitigating the risk of external dominance.

The cathedral's adaptability was evident in its resilience to external pressures. By maintaining a flexible structure that accommodated multiple religious practices, the cathedral could respond to changing socio-political dynamics, such as shifts in trade or European influence. This adaptability laid the foundation for its eventual revival post-1897, demonstrating the kingdom's long-term commitment to preserving its cultural institutions.

Conclusion

The Holy Aruosa Cathedral stands as a powerful testament to the Benin Kingdom's cultural and diplomatic ingenuity before 1897. By blending Edo and Christian practices, it facilitated trade

and diplomacy with the Portuguese while preserving cultural identity. Despite challenges such as religious tensions, European pressures, and colonial threats, the cathedral's syncretic approach, royal patronage, and adaptability ensured its resilience. This study underscores the cathedral's role as a diplomatic hub and its enduring legacy in Edo culture, offering insights into African agency in global history. The expanded recommendations for future research highlight the potential for deeper exploration of the cathedral's multifaceted role, encouraging scholars to uncover new dimensions of precolonial African diplomacy and cultural heritage.

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