

# Trade and Religion in British-Benin Relations, 1553-1897

Global Journal of Social Sciences Studies

Vol. 4, No. 2, 78-90, 2018

e-ISSN: 2518-0614



(© Corresponding Author)

 **Johnson Olaosebikan Aremu<sup>1</sup>**  
**Michael Ediagbonya<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Department of History and International Studies Faculty of Arts, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

Email: [johnsonolaosebikan@gmail.com](mailto:johnsonolaosebikan@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer 1, Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

Email: [michaediagbonya01@gmail.com](mailto:michaediagbonya01@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

This work examines the British-Benin relations anchored largely on trade and religion between 1553 and 1897. The study documents extensively the features and impact of trade on Benin Kingdom's relations with Britain during the period of study. It further analyses the attendant re-invigoration of Christianity in Benin land by the British in the late 18th century; the cordiality of Benin-British relations and the unexpected British invasion of Benin in 1897 which led to the sudden collapse of the Benin Kingdom. The work relied on both oral interviews and documentary data as primary sources. The secondary sources consist of relevant books, newspapers publications, journal articles, theses, and dissertations. The study found that Benin-British relations started in the sixteenth century. It also found that the relationship was facilitated by trade and religion. It was also found that the C.M.S and Roman Catholic established schools which promoted education in Benin. Finally, it was observed that, in spite of the healthy trade relations between both countries, the relationship finally ended with the British invasion of Benin in 1897.

**Keywords:** Britain, Nigeria, Trade relations, Benin invasion, Religion.

**DOI:** 10.20448/807.4.2.78.90

Citation | Johnson Olaosebikan Aremu; Michael Ediagbonya (2018). Trade and Religion in British-Benin Relations, 1553-1897. Global Journal of Social Sciences Studies, 4(2): 78-90.

**Copyright:** This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)

**Funding:** This study received no specific financial support.

**Competing Interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**History:** Received: 25 June 2018 / Revised: 1 August 2018 / Accepted: 7 August 2018 / Published: 10 August 2018

**Publisher:** Online Science Publishing

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to visit Benin. Available record indicates that Ruy-de Sequeira was the first Portuguese to visit Benin territory in 1472 during the reign of Oba Ewuare, though no meaningful relations were established until 1486 (Eliot, 1973; Orobator, 2002). This was because Oba Ewuare showed little interest in the visitor since he was very busy then with the domestic restructuring of Benin kingdom to enable him has a firm grip of his entire territory. The door of a lasting relation between Benin and the Portuguese was opened by John Affonso d' Aveiro's visit to Benin in 1485, during the reign of Oba Ozolua. Oba Ozolua indeed holds the record of being the first Oba of Benin to receive Europeans at his court (Eliot, 1973). He was ready to allow the Portuguese to trade in slaves and other commodities that may interest them. He was even reported to have sent Ohen-Okun, the Chief of Ughoton, to accompany Afonso d' Aveiro to Portugal as Benin Ambassador in order to learn more about Portugal and its ways of life. This marked the genesis of trade and diplomatic relations between Benin and Portugal; and indeed any European country for that matter.

## 2. THE ROLE OF TRADE IN BENIN'S RELATIONS WITH BRITAIN

Meanwhile, Benin's first contact with the British was in about 1553 when the British sent out two ships, Primrose and Lion (Izuakor, 1987) to the Benin River under the command of Capt. Thomas Wyndham (Izuakor, 1987). A Portuguese, Captain Antonio AnnesPintead, also joined Capt. Thomas Wyndham to pilot the ships to the Benin River. The Oba of Benin, His Highness, Oba Orhogbua, was interested in the foreigners and gave them a warm reception. The Oba of Benin also agreed to sell pepper to them since he was aware that pepper was their special interest apart from other items. The offloading of their goods and the purchase of pepper took place at Ughoton as the commercial town and seaport of Benin for almost four centuries.

Unfortunately, fever wrecked a terrible havoc among the crew members in the ships lying in the river mouths between 1553 and 1556. Many of the crew members, including Captains Wyndham and Pintead and 98 others, eventually died of sickness, probably, malaria (Ryder, 1979). This ill-fated journey of Wyndham and his crew prompted a spontaneous reaction from Queen Mary of England. She prohibited all voyages by her subjects to Benin, in July 1556. However, in spite of these developments, the profits and prospects of the Benin trade encouraged other vessels to come to Benin (ibid: 79).

Although the British made several attempts to trade with Benin despite registering casualties, it was the journey of James Welsh that gave tangible success. Then, the disease was not the problem of the crew and the ship was able to lie in the mouth of the river from 10 January to 27 April 1591 while the merchants gathered a Cargo of 589 sermons of pepper, 150 tusks and 32 barrels of palm oil (ibid: 84). This marked the beginning of a booming British-Benin trade relation.

### 2.1. Benin Articles of Trade

Initially the trade relationship between Benin and the British was boosted by the availability of pepper in Benin. It would be recalled that when the British first came to Benin, their main interest was pepper. The Oba of Benin was particularly aware that the main interest of the British in their early contact was pepper and he was ready to sell to them. Despite the disaster registered during the first visit of the British to Benin in 1553, Allan Burns viewed the journey of Wyndham as a huge success (Burns, 1969). This, according to him, was because, within thirty days of arrival in Benin, they had collected 80 tons of pepper and some quantity of gold and ivory (Burns, 1969).

Slave was another important item of trade between the British and the Benin people. John Adams notes that during the period of the slave trade, English ships acquired slaves regularly from Benin through the Ughoton

seaport (Ryder, 1979). The first English ship arrived Ughoton in September 1724. It began to buy slaves at twice the price the Dutch offered. By the 1730s, English slave traders dominated the slave trade business at the Benin River (Ryder, 1979). Most of these English ships came from Liverpool and belonged to private traders (ibid, 196). Sailing directly from England with merchandise known to be in demand on the Guinea coast, they were always able to undersell the ill-stocked Dutch factory and win the favour of the Benin authorities (Ryder, 1979).

Apart from the slaves, British traders also bought some amount of ivory in Benin which they carried directly for sales to the English colonies in the West Indies and North America. On their return journey, they loaded their ships with colonial produce to complete the final leg of the triangular voyage (Ryder, 1979). Available record indicates that by 1752, five ships sailed from Liverpool to Benin to buy a total of 1,280 slaves. Similarly, on 28 June, 1757, another British ship, Rainbow under the Command of Captain Harrison, who was already well acquainted with Benin, entered the river and stayed for four and a half months. Thereafter, it left for Barbados with 261 slaves (ibid, 197). The main sources of the slaves were the casualties of civil war and the normal course of trade with their neighbouring states. Again some prisoners were sold as slaves. The Oba of Benin sometimes presented slaves as gifts to important persons. Generally, the English slave dealers did not build fortresses on the Delta coast like the Portuguese did, as they transacted their business with the coastal middlemen aboard their ships and the middlemen-cum-chiefs who were paid customs duty known as *comedy* (Izuakor, 1987).

The cloth, which had been the staple of Benin's exports in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, lost its importance and was replaced in outward cargoes by slaves, including male slaves whose sale abroad had been forbidden since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. This regular trade contact between Benin and the British brought abundant prosperity to the Benin kingdom in the eighteenth century, especially during the reigns of Obas Eresoyen (1740-1750) and Akengbuda (1750-1804).

However, from the mid-eighteenth century, the supply of slaves dwindled drastically. A glaring case was in 1798 when English ships were sent to buy a total of 19,450 slaves in the eastern delta e.g. Bonny as against 1,000 in the Benin River and most of these slaves were acquired from among the Itsekiris in the western Delta (Donnan, 1930). Many factors could be adduced for this ugly development. First, there was an embargo on the sale of male slaves by Oba Esigie from the beginning of the sixteenth century and this lasted for about 200 years. The embargo on the sale of male slaves in Benin became necessary because Oba Esigie (1504-1550) faced some military challenges at home. In fact, Benin suffered serious threats of invasion from both the Arhuanhan of Udo and Idah during the period. This made it highly imperative to keep a large army to secure his empire which he inherited from Oba Ozolua. The ban was, however, lifted during the reign of Oba Akenzua I (1712-1740).

Second, there was the issue of medical challenge. Adams, who visited Benin around the 17<sup>th</sup> century attributed the neglect of Benin by slave ships to the alarming sickness rate that affected vessels anchored there (Adams, 1822). Ughoton seaport was soon regarded as a notorious place due to the high death rate among traders serving there. Pacheco Pereira once said that:

All these rivers are very unhealthy because of the fever which does grievous harm to us white men especially in the winter of this country and that Duarte Lopes died in Ughoton a few months after his arrival in 1504.

Third, ports at the mouths of the tributary rivers were reputed to be healthier than inland places such as Ughoton or Ode Itsekiri. Hence, the Benin slave trade suffered from additional handicap as very large ships could not enter the tributary river as only small ones could reach Ughoton. They also had to wait several months to complete their cargoes. This was later compounded by the prohibition of slavery by British ships which led to an almost complete cessation of that nation's trade in the Benin River.

However, the industrial revolution which started in Britain around the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century closed the gap. Ryder maintains that the abolition of the slave trade encouraged Liverpool merchants to develop trade in palm produce on a commercial scale. The abolition coincided with the growth of an industrial demand for oil in the manufacture of soap, lubricants, margarine, candle and pharmaceutical products while the residual kernel cake served as a valuable livestock feed (Ryder, 1979; Ahazuem and Falola, 1987). Ekundare (1973) adds that palm oil also found a large application in the manufacture of tinsplate and that made it largely imperative for the Benin people to increase the production of palm oil in order to cater for both internal consumption in Nigeria and the industrial demand in Europe.

For centuries now, the oil palm has equally been used domestically for a variety of purposes such as supplying materials for food, shelter, fuel and illumination. Henceforth, oil palm produce became an important item of trade between the British and Benin and was indeed one of the earliest Nigerian commodities to enter the European market during the period of legitimate trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It later became a major European export in the latter part of the century (Ahazuem and Falola, 1987). This was popularly referred to as legitimate commerce meant to obtain raw materials from West Africa during the industrial revolution in England (Nigeria Educational Research Council, 1978).

The industrial revolution also brought about changes by the introduction of factories which meant that instead of being produced in homes, goods were now for the first time being produced in factories with the aid of machinery which were power-driven (ibid:62-64). The most important invention of this period was the creation of the steam engine and the discovery of a method resulting in the making of steel. The steam engine paved the way for industrial mechanization and the invention of steel meant that new, stronger tools and machinery could be made in vast quantities (ibid:65). This was further complemented by the development of modern machineries capable of revolutionizing the weaving industry and the agricultural sector.

The British-Benin trade relations got a great boost because of the abundance of palm oil which was vital for her industrial expansion. The British saw palm oil as a major substitute for slave trade hence the trade relationship was strengthened. Bold drew attention to the rich palm oil resource of the Benin area (Bold, 1819). Ryder remarks that from the 1840s, the Benin River was an important centre of the palm-oil trade and played its part in involving the British government in the enmeshed problems of protecting and disciplining its subjects and their property involved in that trade (Ryder, 1979).

It should be noted that in the waterside trade with the Europeans, the Oba had monopoly rights over certain articles the most notable being palm oil and kernels. The only subjects who shared the palm oil trade monopoly privileges with the Oba were a few of the important chiefs in Benin (National Archives Enugu (NAE), 1915). As a further illustration of the abundance of oil-palm products in Benin between 1928 and 1936, the colonial government encouraged the establishment of oil palm plantations which were owned and managed by Nigerians. Most of these plantations were found in the Benin area. Again the government established Oil Palm Research Institute at Evbonaka village which is just five kilometers to Benin City. It was formerly the West African Institute for Oil Palm Research. Its mandate was to embark on relevant research on oil palm production and to offer for sale seedling of high yielding strains or species.

So it was not a surprise when it was said that the British ships reached Ughoton, the seaport of Benin where elephant teeth, palm oil, native cloth and utensils of various kinds were exchanged for European commodities. British economic interests dictated that an alternative to the slave trade must be found. The industrial revolution also accelerated the demand for a wide range of tropical products particularly palm oil. It was for this reason that

the abundance of oil-palm products in Benin rapidly boosted the trade relations between Benin and the British within the period under focus.

The rubber trade was another dimension to the British-Benin trade relations. The availability of rubber product in Benin area was further increased by the British colonial masters during colonial rule. Geary had earlier remarked that the British expedition to Benin in 1897 opened up over 3,000 square miles of rubber forests and other African produce (Geary, 1927). Shortly after the expedition, Britain immediately intensified efforts to exploit the rubber forests in Benin at a commercial level. For instance, Alfred Turner in a letter to the Consul-General, Ralph Moor on 30 April, 1897, reported "that he had been encouraging the rubber trade to the utmost, even giving practical lessons in court having as yet not had the chance of going into the bush" (National Archives Ibadan (NAI), 1899).

The local production of rubber increased substantially thereafter to the extent that apart from the local labourers in Benin, countless Yoruba and Calabar migrants were employed annually for rubber tapping. However, it was in the last quarter of the nineteenth century that Benin experienced the rubber boom which further facilitated the trade relationship between the British and Benin. This period witnessed the invention of the pneumatic rubber tyre by J. B. Dunlop, a Scottish Surgeon, and inventor (Igbafe, 1979). Igbafe further opines that Dunlop constructed the pneumatic tyre for his child's bicycle in 1887 and after being tested, it was patented on 7 December, 1888 (Igbafe, 1979). He explains further that the production of the pneumatic tyre on a commercial scale from 1890 onwards and its successive adaptation first for the use of bicycles and later for cars stimulated and accentuated the desire to penetrate the thick tropical forests where large quantities of rubber-producing trees abounded (Ibid).

This event no doubt encouraged the British traders to promote their trade contact with Benin through their Oba, His Royal Highness, ObaOvonramwen. This was because the Oba had effective control over the Benin forests. So to gain access to these forests, the Oba must give his approval, which he did. But unfortunately for Benin, the British purpose in Benin was beyond trade. Later they extended their interest to effective occupation which eventually led to the fall of the empire.

Timber was another item of trade between the Beninis and the British. The Benin forests contained excellent woods for domestic and commercial purposes. So it is not under the contention that Benin forests contain important timber reserves. Most of this exported timber found its way to Europe particularly to Britain where for instance, mahogany was used for a multiplicity of purposes such as the manufacture of aircraft propellers during the war, furniture, ornamental construction work, paneling, shipbuilding and so on.

It is against this background that the excellent woods from Benin came to prominence. Many species of tropical hardwoods such as Iroko, Obeche, Mahogany, and others abound in Benin which made the area more attractive to the European traders and merchants (Moore, 1899).

Timber indeed played a significant role in the sustenance of economic relations between Benin and the British in the Niger Coast Protectorate as stressed by the Consul-General, Ralph Moore, in a report on 6 October, 1899 (Ibid). Although the reference was the Protectorate, Benin was no left out in this trade promotion because of the presence of these mineral resources. In an interview with Bernard Raji on 16 January 2017, he disclosed that Benin had large forest reserves where excellent woods were produced for local and external needs.

Ivory was another item which attracted the British traders to Benin territory. Among the earliest accounts of the trade is that given by Bold who remarked that ivory was still the chief commodity exported from Benin and that it could be had in large quantities (Bold, 1819). Burns (1969) submitted that in the first British contact with Benin in 1553, the British traders collected 80 tons of pepper and some quantity of gold and ivory. Even in a computation

of imports and exports including shipping by the Consul-General of the Protectorate to Foreign Office for the year 1896-1897, ivory was mentioned in the following report:

The only variations which are noticeable are a decrease of 50 percent in Ivory exported, an increase of 25 percent in rubber and a decrease of 50 percent in coffee (Moore, 1897).

The above evidence shows that the Ivory trade which started in around the sixteenth century lasted till the end of the nineteenth century, and probably beyond. After the capture of Benin by the British forces, the city was looted by the invading forces during which an estimated £800 worth of ivory was taken from the palace as at February 1897 (Moore to Sa Bury, 1897). Earlier on 28 June 1757, Captain Harrison Commanded the Rainbow to the Benin River and purchased 5,400 pounds of Ivory to Barbados. The Oba reportedly claimed one tusk on every elephant killed and invariably bought the second from the hunter. It was in this fashion that the large store of ivory was accumulated which the British found after the capture of the city (Alfred and Ralph, 1897).

In fact, James R. Philips who took over duties as Acting Commissioner and Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate on 19 October 1896 was said to have been motivated by economic interests to visit Benin quickly on assumption of duty. His purpose was to depose Oba Ovonranmwun and thus have full access to the natural resources. Philips had probably envisaged a large collection of Ivory in the King's house which in his view would be sufficient to offset the cost of the operations or attack on Benin. Whatever be the case, however, the above discussions suggest that trade in ivory immensely promoted and enhanced the trade relations between the British and Benin.

Other articles of trade from Benin include Benin locally-made cotton cloth which was even regarded as the staple of Benin's exports in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, Ryder posits that James Welsh exchanged some of his merchandise for cowries in order to buy local produce for his crew who drank plentifully of Benin locally tapped palm wine and ate honey, oranges and plantains and, above all, yams which he warmly commended as a substitute for bread or biscuit (Ryder, 1979).

## 2.2. The British Articles of Trade

In order to facilitate the trade in Benin, the British imported a large number of luxury articles into Benin. Such articles include manufactured goods like rowan canvas, hollandia cloth, bracelets and necklaces, red caps, small glasses, belts, knives, hatchets, coats of mail, small bells, drinking glasses, mirrors, ironware, glass beads, cowries, matches, cutlery, and scissors among others.

## 3. FEATURES OF BRITISH-BENIN TRADE RELATIONS

British-Benin trade presents a number of glaring features. The first was the establishment of trade courts known as Courts of Equity (Dike, 1956). This was one of the structures put in place by the foreign traders in collaboration with the local rulers to protect their trading interests, particularly that of enforcement of business contacts. This soon became a lasting legacy of British-Benin trade partnership. Shaw makes it clear that the English had no objection to supplying arms to Benin (Ryder, 1979).

Another important characteristic of this trade was the active involvement of the Oba of Benin in negotiating with the British merchants. The British traders initially anchored their ships in Ughoton. The messengers from the chief of Ughoton were then sent to Benin City to inform the Oba of the presence of the traders who also conducted them to the palace in order to have an audience with the King. The Oba sent his officials to accompany the traders to Ughoton to organize the transport of their goods or wares to the capital. Ryder opines that when merchants

arrived at Ughoton, the arrangement was made for messengers to carry news of their arrival to Benin City (Ibid.:83). According to him, after about two days, the messengers will return with palace officials and some carriers to convey them and their goods to the capital (Ibid.).

It was after the bargain was struck with the traders by the Oba that plans could be made to make available the request of the British traders. These requests vary from one trader to the other which could be to buy pepper, ivory or slaves, as the case may be. A glaring example was the first British contact with Benin in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Oba Orhogbua (1550-1580). The arrangement was only made to allow the traders to buy pepper when the Oba had inspected their merchandise and had received presents or gifts such as drinking glasses and glass mirrors. It was also after the Oba's satisfaction with the British traders' merchandise that his officials could accompany them to Ughoton to organize the transport of their wares to the capital city.

It is essential to observe that the Portuguese remained the medium of communication between Benin and European traders of all nations (Ryder, 1979). This could not be an exaggeration because some of the Benin Obas from the sixteenth century onwards could communicate in Portuguese. Examples were Oba Esigie and his son Oba Orhogbua and some palace officials.

Like in the Benin-Dutch trade relations, the establishment of the trust system was another feature of British-Benin trade relations. The foreign traders provided a kind of credit facility for Benin traders known as the trust. The trust system involved the provision of a peculiar form of credit by which goods were entrusted to the local middlemen by foreign merchants for periods varying from six months to a year or in some cases, to two years before payment was made (Ekundare, 1973). During this period, the middlemen were required to exchange imported goods for local produce and pay back their European principals the equivalent in palm products, ivory and timber (Ekundare, 1973). As responsible individuals, Benin traders proved highly reliable in the trust system. The following comment lends credence to this assertion.

This commerce, which consists in slaves, ivory and various kinds of cotton cloth, is very slow, the clothes are not found readymade, but they take goods on credit and with these goods, they have the cloths made in at most six months. Although they are heathens and unknown, they faithfully deliver the cloth to the captain of the ship (A.R.N.W.I.C. Vol. 122, Constracten, Met Naturellen, F.F. 74-760).

It is equally important to record that Benin Obas also gave credit to the European traders in the sixteenth century. Oba Orhogbua undertook to load all the vessels of Capt. Thomas Wyndham and Pinteado with pepper within thirty days. He expressed his preparedness to grant them credit until their next voyage to Benin, should their goods not cover the cost of a full cargo during their voyage in 1553. However, there is no record to show that this was sustained by the Benin Obas beyond the 16th century.

Another essential feature of Benin-British trade was the emergence of Ughoton as a commercial seaport city where trade bloomed. As the fallout from this, Ughoton witnessed rapid social, political and economic transformations beginning from the late sixteenth century. This was because of its vantage position as a market which was the hub of economic activities before and after the coming of the Europeans. This was also facilitated by its strategic location beside the Benin River which enabled it to serve as the main port of Benin Kingdom during the period of Benin-British trade relations. Thus, European articles of trade entered into the Benin Kingdom through the Ughoton port where loading and offloading of cargoes took place. The coming of the Europeans stimulated the influx of many traders to Ughoton to participate in this maritime trade. Ughoton quickly became transformed from a small village to a cosmopolitan town due to the influx of people from different areas.

It is interesting to note that while the Portuguese trade with Benin declined by the end of the sixteenth century and that of the Dutch by the late eighteenth century, the Benin-British trade relations continued to the end of the nineteenth century. The then Acting-Captain of Sao Tome had in July 1494 affirmed the great decline in Dutch-Benin trade when he stated in a letter to the king of Portugal that:

If he (Acting-Captain of Sao Tome) were provided with a boat to trade in the slave Rivers, he could send an adequate number of slaves to the Costa da Mina so that it will not be necessary for your majesty's ships to sail down to the slave Rivers unless it is for pepper.

Igbafé succinctly captured an aspect of the expansive mode of British trade relations with Benin in the late nineteenth century when he wrote in 1979 that:

The production of the pneumatic tyre on a commercial scale from 1890 onwards and its successive adaptation first for the use of bicycles and later for cars, in turn, stimulated the demand for crude rubber and accentuated the desire to penetrate the thick tropical forests where large quantities of rubber-producing trees abounded (Igbafé, 1979).

#### 4. CHRISTIANITY AS A FACTOR IN BRITISH-BENIN RELATIONS

Before going into an in-depth analysis of the role of Christianity in cementing British-Benin relations, it is highly imperative to state that Christianity was first introduced to Benin kingdom by the Portuguese in the 15th century when King John II of Portugal sent d' Aveiro to Benin on a trade mission to the kingdom. The event happened during the reign of Oba Ozolua. Oba Esigie who reigned after he was initially receptive to the new foreign religion to the extent that he allowed his son, Orhogbua to be baptized and be taught to read by the missionary. However, the Oba of Benin did not respond enthusiastically as expected by the Portuguese. Benin saw the coming of the Portuguese as only a marginal development insufficient to bring about any major change in the economic pursuits or way of life of the people. Benin culture was too ancient and fully developed to collapse during the first encounter with Christianity. The disappointment the Benin people gave to the Portuguese as regard accepting Christianity was a major setback to strengthening the trade relationship between the Portuguese and Benin.

It is important to add that in spite of the failure of the Portuguese to convince the Benin people to accept Christianity, the reign of Oba Esigie witnessed a little success. Duarte Pires posits that Oba Esigie later found a genuine interest in Christianity hence he ordered his son and two of his nobles to become Christians and to be baptized (Bradbury, 1967). It is also on the strength of this that he instructed the missionaries to build churches at Ogbelaka, Idunmwerie, and Akpakpava during his reign. However, because of the precarious situation, the Portuguese missionaries left Benin and diverted their attention on the Ijaws and Itsekiris (Ogbonmwan, 2005). So the early attempt to introduce Christianity failed because what appeared to have been a solid foundation during the reign of Oba Esigie was stifled and shattered under the reign of Oba Orhogbua who ascended the throne in 1550.

An attempt was equally made again to introduce Christianity to Benin by the British in the late eighteenth century as there was a great movement among English Protestants called the Evangelical revival (Isichie, 1969). The concern for foreign missions led to the establishment of a number of missionary organizations in England two important of which made their debut in West Africa. These were the Church Missionary Society (CMS) founded and run by Evangelical Anglicans established in 1799 and the Wesleyan Missionary Society (Ibid.:65). It was said

that Catholic Missionary revival began perhaps half a century later and the Catholic congregation which had the greatest impact on West Africa were the society of African missions and congregations of the Holy Spirit (Ibid.)

Ayandele (1980) posits that the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nigeria was a fertile ground for Christian missions. This, he said, attracted missionaries who came from Britain with the grandiose dream of sweeping through the country in a matter of years. Ayandele explains further that even before many of the pioneer missionaries set foot on the Nigerian soil, they had wished African traditional religion out of existence and expected it to collapse at the mere shouting of the gospel (Ibid). Unfortunately, this became an utopian wish because a greater proportion of the people of Southern Nigeria refused to patronize Christianity.

By the end of 1892, eight Christian missions were already operating in different parts of Southern Nigeria. Out of these missions, the Church Missionary Society was the largest. It monopolized the Niger Delta region. In a way, Benin was affected because it belonged to the western part of the Niger Delta. Ehianu (2017) opines that with the combined efforts of the white missionaries, catechists, evangelists and commercial agents who were already entrenched in Asaba, Benin City was reached with the gospel by the Roman Catholic Church (Ehianu, 2017). These initial attempts to introduce Christianity to Benin failed. Between the periods of 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries only little success was registered. Ryder maintains that the Benin rulers and peoples were not prepared to flirt at all with Christian missionaries (Ryder, 1961). In Edo, long before the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Obas of Benin had discovered the political danger of the missionary and had on this account restricted and controlled dialogue with Portugal (Ibid.). It was argued that even commercial advantages with the Whiteman were not considered at the expense of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Benin. Hence at the initial period, no white man was allowed to sojourn in the Edo Kingdom and commercial relations were consolidated at Gwato where the Oba had his representative.

Ayandele (1980) argues that there was no question of the Edo welcoming back-emigrants of Benin origin at all. The return of the emigrants resulted in the introduction of Christianity into various Yoruba towns such as Lagos, Ibadan, Ijaiye, Ede. From these centres, Christianity filtered to other towns in Yorubaland in the second half of the nineteenth century. Also, the group of Christian emigrants began to arrive in Calabar. This advantage was not at the disposal of Benin as this could be attributed to the ban on male slaves by Oba Esigie which lasted for 200 years.

Again in British first contact with Benin in 1553, their main interest was to promote trade with Benin and not for the purpose of Christianity. Their first interest was to buy pepper and the Oba of Benin, Oba Orhogbua was interested in them and was ready to sell pepper to them. In both journeys of 1553 led by Captain Thomas Wyndham and that of 1591 under the leadership of James Welsh, there is no record of the presence of Christian missionaries accompanying the voyagers. Unlike the Portuguese voyage of 1486 when the party was led by Afonso d' Aveiro who was both explorer and missionary. Also, it can be argued that the failure of British early attempt to introduce Christianity to Benin could be attributed to a shortage of personnel because of the bad climatic condition of the environment. For example, in the first British contact with Benin in 1553, out of 140 men who set out for Benin via Ughoton, only 40 returned to Plymouth, Wyndham, Pinteado and 98 others died of sickness, probably, malaria, for this reason, they could not reach many of the people. Also, they did not stay for a long duration with the people because of the weather condition.

Furthermore, most of the conversions were hurriedly done and the converts were not adequately catechized. Their faith could not withstand the challenge of the deep-rooted tradition of the people. Also, the condemnation of their much-cherished culture by the early Christian missionaries made the people not to listen to the new religion. The situation was not the same in the twentieth century as the British Christian missionaries registered much success in Benin during this period. Hence Ajayi maintains that after some abortive attempts in the past, Christianity was at last successfully introduced into Nigeria (Ajayi, 1965). It was said that in 1897, the British

punitive expedition conquered and occupied Benin City, facilitating thereby missionary incursion into the area through the enabling environment provided for the enterprise (Ehianu, 2017). The missionaries were encouraged to settle in Benin because of security provided by British occupation of the area.

The spread of the Pentecostal mission in the twentieth century also affected Benin City. By 1900, the Church Mission Society (C.M.S) was already very active in Benin. St. Matthew Church was built and dedicated on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1902 by the C.M.S. It was said that Chief AghoObaseki, who was the Iyase of Benin between 1914 and 1920 became a Christian and attended the services in St. Mathew's C.M.S. Church regularly (Ogbonmwan, 2005). St. Matthew became the Citadel of the C.M.S from where other branches in Benin City and its environs sprang. The C.M.S also promoted education in Benin by establishing a number of primary and secondary schools, prominent among which are Eghosa Grammar School, Benin and Anglican Girls' Secondary School, Benin, established in 1957. Attempts were made to re-establish Catholicism in the twentieth century as a result of the failure to Christianize the Benin people. Holy Cross Cathedral was established in 1926 and St. Joseph Catholic Church came into existence in 1970.

Late Bishop Patrick Kelly was the first Catholic Bishop of Benin City till 1973 when Patrick EboseleEku took over. By March, 1994 the Diocese of Benin was elevated to an Archdiocese. The present Benin City Archdiocese is divided into five deaneries. Ogbonmwan notes that the Deaneries and Parishes in the Archdiocese of Benin City are about twenty-six in number (Ibid).

The Catholic Missions in Benin established primary and secondary schools to promote education in the area. The celebrated Edo College was established by Roman Catholic in 1937. This College is known for high standard and has produced great men and women who are contributing meaningfully to the development of this country. The Roman Catholic also established St. Maria Goretti and Immaculate Conception College (ICC). The Roman Catholic Fathers approached the Oba for land for the establishment of a secondary school which the Oba gladly gave. It was that land Immaculate Conception College was then established and opened in 1943. Other missions like the Baptist Mission Methodist Mission and other denominations also extended their influence on Benin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

##### **5. BRITISH COLONIAL INVASION OF BENIN IN 1897**

In spite of the healthy trade relations between Benin and the British, the relationship finally ended with the British invasion of Benin in February 1897. As Philip Koslow argues, initially the advent of new trading partners' promised benefits for the Edo and other Africans but before long, the interplay between Europe and Africa assumed a sinister and destructive nature (Koslow, 1995). It is no more under the contention that the Niger Coast Protectorate officials which included, Major Copland Crawford, Mr. Locke, Captain Boisragon, Captain Maling, Mr. Kenneth Campbell, Dr. Elliott Lyon and two representatives of European trading firms led by the Acting Consul-General James Philips ran into an ambush at Ugbine. They were all killed except Boisragon and Locke who ran into the forest and later escaped through Ughoton Creek. When the party arrived at Gilli-Gilli, the first Benin village on the Gwato Creek, popularly called Ughoton waterside (WHEN), the messengers sent to Oba Ovonwawmen to announce the coming of the European visitors were informed by the Oba to tell Philips and his team that he could not see them at that period because he was celebrating Ague Festival and cannot see strangers as the tradition demanded. Instead of complying, Consul Philip replied thus:

The Acting Consul-General had received the King's message and was very pleased to hear that his friend, the King of Benin has been gratified with the present sent to him... He could not wait two months, as the King suggested but he had so

much work to do in other parts of the protectorate that he was obliged to come up now, as there were several matters he wished to talk over with the King (Boisragon, 1898).

One wonders why such provocative reply to such a polite message from Oba Ovonramwen. Hence in spite of the warning from Oba Ovonramwen to the Benin warlords not to kill the protectorate's officials, the strike force organized by the Iyase, the war chief under the command of Ologbosere, a senior army commander saw this visit as a signal of war and so ambushed and killed them. In fact they ran into an ambush where they were all killed except few carriers with Boisragon and Locke who hid in the forest for some days and escaped through Ughoton Creek.

The aftermath of that massacre of the officials of the Niger Coast Protectorate was the British invasion of Benin. Angry at the manner of the sudden death of the highest British Officer of the Niger Coast Protectorate, the foreign office completely abandoned its long-standing view against the use of force on Benin. As a matter of fact, the British officers took immediate steps to assemble a formidable force to crush Benin (Igbafe, 1979). General Ralph Moore was quickly recalled from leave to the Protectorate to make the arrangement for an attack on Benin. By the end of the first week of February 1897, some 1500 men including sailors, marines and Protectorate troops were assembled for the assault on Benin. Real Admiral Harry Rawson was later appointed to lead the invasion on Benin. The invasion was planned to take place from three fronts or columns. The first front was to advance by way of the Ologbo Creek. The second column was to advance by way of the Jamieson river line up to Sakponba while the third column was to maintain a joint attack through the Ughoton Creek.

This invasion finally started on 10 February 1897 and eventually led to the fall of the Benin Empire. Ryder maintains that the Kingdom of Benin ceased to exist as an independent entity in 1897 when it was annexed to the Niger Coast Protectorate. That is not to say that the Benin soldiers folded their arms and allowed their empire to be demolished. In fact, they put up a stiff and heroic resistance. It can be argued that the Benin soldiers fought with bravado, desperation, doggedness, determination and courage to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Kingdom from the invaders. However, Benin Empire fell to the British invasion largely because of the superiority of the war weapons of the invading army. A major fallout of that invasion in 1897 was the carting away of Benin's precious artworks. Elizabeth Isichei notes that after its defeat, the entire city was accidentally destroyed and the superb art works taken as plunder to Europe (Isichie, 1969). The Oba of Benin, Oba Ovonramwen was deported to Calabar where he died in 1914. His Kingdom was governed henceforth by a Native Council instead of an Oba. It was the British Resident, Alfred Turner who established the Benin Native Council to replace the institution of the monarchy.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Benin-British relations started in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Benin's first contact with the British was in about 1553. This first contact, motivated by trade, was a failure because of the high death rate among the crew due to the sickness of a malaria attack. However, the journey of James Welsh of 27 April, 1591 was very successful. This marked the beginning of a trade relations between Benin and Britain. Many articles of trade were involved on both sides. For the Binis, the main articles of trade were pepper, slaves, palm kernel and oil, rubber, local cloth ivory, timber and so on. The British brought to the country matches, cutlery, scissors, roven canvas, hollandia cloth, necklaces, red caps, small glasses, knives, hatchets, small bells, drinking glasses, mirrors, iron wave, glass beads, and cowries.

The Benin-British relation was further facilitated by the introduction of Christianity into Benin by the British Christian missionaries. Although an attempt was made to introduce Christianity to Benin between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>

centuries, it failed because the Benin culture was too ancient and fully developed to collapse on their first encounter with Christianity. Indeed, the preaching of the Roman Catholic Mission against Bini's inherited and cherished culture did not help matters. However, it is important to put on record that in the twentieth century much was achieved by British Christian Missionaries especially the Roman Catholic Missions and Church Missionary Society (CMS). Part of the reason for this success story was the British occupation of Benin after the 1897 invasion. This motivated the missionaries to migrate to the area and settle there because of the relative security provided by the British colonial government.

For centuries, there was a healthy relationship between Benin and the British. The relationship was sustained and strengthened by trade and religion. However, it is unfortunate and pathetic to note that the relationship finally ended with the British invasion of Benin in February 1897. This invasion led to the fall of the Benin Empire. The Kingdom of Benin ceased to exist as an independent entity in 1897. It was annexed to the Niger Coast Protectorate the same year.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, J.A., 1822. Sketches during ten voyages to Africa between 1786-1800. London: Longman.
- Ahazuem, J.O. and T. Falola, 1987. Production for the metropolis: Agriculture and forest products. In Falola, T. (Ed.), Britain and exploitation. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Ajayi, J.F.A., 1965. Christian missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891. London: Longmans.
- Alfred, T. and M. Ralph, 1897. National archives, Ibadan. File No. 6/1 iii.
- Ayandele, E.A., 1980. External relations with Europeans in the nineteenth century: Explorers, missionaries and traders. In ObaroIkime (Ed), Groundwork of Nigerian history. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Boisragon, A., 1898. The Benin Massacre. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.
- Bold, E., 1819. Merchants and mariners: African guide. London: Longman.
- Bradbury, R.E., 1967. The Kingdom of Benin: The historical and territorial background. In Daryll Forde and P. M. Kaberry (Eds.). West African Kingdom in the nineteenth century. London: Oxford University Press.
- Burns, A., 1969. History of Nigeria. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Dike, K.O., 1956. Trade and politics in the Niger Delta: 1830-1885. London: Oxford Press.
- Donnan, E., 1930. Documents illustrative of the history of the slave trade to America. Washington D.C: Government Press.
- Ehianu, W.E., 2017. Christian Churches in Benin: From early missionaries To 2000. Esimaje, A., Eddy Erhagbe Okoduwa (Eds.), Perspectives on the humanities in honour of Philip. A: Igbafe. Benin: Oliver tree Publishing Ventures.
- Ekundare, R.O., 1973. The economic history of Nigeria, 1860-1960. London: Methuen.
- Eliot, K., 1973. Benin. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Geary, W.N.M., 1927. Nigeria under British rule. London: Longman.
- Igbafe, P.A., 1979. Benin under British administration. London: Longman Group Limited.
- Isichie, E., 1969. History of West Africa since 1800. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Izuakor, L.I., 1987. Patterns of pre-colonial exploitation. In Falola, T. (Ed.), Britain and Nigeria: Exploitation or development? London: Zed Books. Ltd.
- Koslow, P., 1995. The Kingdoms of Africa, Benin Lords of the River. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Moore, R., 1897. Draft Report to Secretary of State. CSO1/13/19, No. 120, 18-10-1897. National Archives, Ibadan.
- Moore, R., 1899. National archives, Ibadan. No. 171, CSO13/15, 7.10: 590-591.
- Moore to Sa Bury, 1897. CSO1/13, 7. Ibadan: National Archives.

- National Archives Enugu (NAE), 1915. Conf. C. 178/14, Raikes, R. Commissioner Benin Province to Secretary Southern Province, 10 April, 1915.
- National Archives Ibadan (NAI), 1899. Cal Prof. 61 i. iii. A Draft to Secretary of State by Ralph Moore CSO1/13/19, No. 120.
- Nigeria Educational Research Council, 1978. Teacher education material production project: Social studies. London: Oxford University Press.
- Ogbonmwan, F.N., 2005. Early catholic missionary activities in Benin City. Port-Harcourt: Josemaria Prints.
- Orobator, S.E., 2002. Trade of imperial Benin with the Portuguese and the Dutch. In O. N. Njoku (ed.), Pre-Colonial Economic History of Nigeria. Benin City: Ethiope.
- Ryder, A.F.C., 1961. The Benin missions. Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, 2(2): 231-259. [View at Google Scholar](#)
- Ryder, A.F.C., 1979. Benin and the European. London: Longman.

*Online Science Publishing is not responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability, etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content. Any queries should be directed to the corresponding author of the article.*