

powers and influence of the Benin monarchical institution. With the consolidation of British authority, the Benin chiefs were compelled to adjust and adapt themselves to the changing political environment. Rather than defend tradition, some of them decided to find a place in the new dispensation and were used as ‘warrant chiefs’⁴ by the British.

After the infamous British expedition, a consequence of the attack on and killing of some members of the British party earlier in January 1897, and the subsequent deportation of Oba Ovonramwen to Calabar, the British had to find an alternative system of ruling Benin. They found an answer in the establishment of a Native Council. Having decided to set up the Native Council, the British were faced with the problem of the redistribution of power in Benin because they needed administrative assistants. They found a solution in the selection of some chiefs as members of the Benin Native Council (B.N.C.). The selection was, however, not determined by the existing tradition, but was based on chiefs who made an easy submission to the British officials.

The Native Council set up in 1897 consisted of the following chiefs: the *Iyase, Osodin, Obaseki, Ine, Uwangu, Ihaza, Ima, Obahiagbon, Osague, Ezomo, Ehonlor, Ero* and *Ayobahan*.⁵ This Council was different in composition from the *Oba's* council of the pre-British era. Not all those who sat on the *Oba's* council were now appointed to the Native Council.⁶ The traditional order of seniority of those chiefs appointed to the council was not respected. For instance, Chief *Osague* who was the head of the *Oba's* council was not regarded as such by the British officers. Instead, the *Obaseki*, a junior chief, was made the vice-president of the Native Council. According to Igbafe, it would appear that each chief was selected because he was reckoned potentially useful to the administration.⁷

This Native Council formed the main instrument of government during the interregnum. It represented a few chiefs of the nobility in Benin. It combined judicial functions with legislation and was directly controlled and presided over by the political officers who were responsible for most of its administrative decisions. The Native Council represented a centralisation of power in the extreme, totally at variance with Benin traditional practices. Unlike the Native Council, the pre-British central council in Benin left much of the local issues to the villages under their *Enigie* and *Edionwere*.⁸

The deportation of Oba Ovonramwen, as we have seen, is significant in evaluating the changing fortunes of the Benin chiefs in the new administrative structure. The exit of the *Oba* created a vacuum in the pre-British hierarchical political system for the institution of the monarchy. It turned the chiefs to stooges of the British as they easily succumbed to alien rule and undermined their positions and the traditions of Benin. It became clear to the chiefs that their roles in the traditional political structure had been distorted by the incursion of alien values and system of government, and that they were to adjust themselves to the changing situation. Even before the deportation of the *Oba*, the realities of the situation were made known to the chiefs.

Before *Oba* Ovonramwen and the chiefs who were assembled at the consular court on 7th September 1897, the Consul-General, Sir Ralph Moor, made the following public declaration:

... now this is the Whiteman's country, there is only one king in the country and that is the Whiteman ...Overami is no longer king of this country. The Whiteman is the only man who is king in this country and to him only service is due ...⁹

With this pronouncement, Moor defined in very clear terms the position of the traditional authority in Benin vis-a-vis the new British officers who represented the conquering power.