

At this juncture, the question arises: What are the challenges and lessons that can be learnt from the British Expedition of 1987 to Benin? The next section will now focus on this.

Challenges and Lessons of the 1897 British Expedition

There was a period of interregnum which lasted for seventeen years (1897-1914). During this period, the paramount chiefs created by the British administrators occupied the hitherto cherished position of *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* (palace chiefs). Tributes were no longer going to the *Oba* who was now in Calabar, but to the British. There were no more pages to go to the districts for the purpose of getting supplies of food for the *Oba*. The *Oba's* farm, which was manned by free labour and supervised by the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* (town chiefs) was now left to be plundered by the people.

Many of the chiefs became poor as the sources of extra wealth were now blocked by the British. Even the daily *Eguaematon* (court) was cancelled. In its place, the Native Council was created. Only the paramount chiefs were allowed to attend the Native Council. The British took over the control of the affairs of Benin and abused the traditions by the change in power structure and administration. The selected or chosen chiefs became wealthy and power drunk as they became popular before the British administrators, but very unpopular before the majority of the people.

Since the British administrators did not consider the laid down institutions of title-groups and grades in Benin, those who would serve them faithfully and loyally struggled to be seen in order to be promoted. Hence, the privileged paramount chiefs devoted their lives to the services of the Whitemen in order that they might be seen and honoured: one of such hardworking chiefs was Agho Obaseki, who was made a paramount chief, among several others, in the created institution of paramount chiefs¹⁰ during the interregnum. This was the time Chief Agho Obaseki came to the notice of the British.

The new structure of administration typified by the Native Council and the policy of paramountcy culminated in the rise and elevation of Chief Agho Obaseki.¹¹ The role played by Agho Obaseki was a great challenge to the institution of monarchy in Benin. It was also one in which great lessons were learnt. But even more important was the fact that the force of tradition withstood the storm and the monarchy was restored with time. Herein lies the thrust of this paper as we shall see later.

It is worthy of note that Chief Agho Obaseki, given the new dispensation, dominated the Benin Native Council. By sheer strength of character, sterling qualities of leadership, outstanding ability to control men and willingness to carry out the wishes of the British officers, Chief Agho Obaseki rose to the position of being the 'mouthpiece' of the other chiefs. However, he was to become a stumbling block to the restoration of the monarchy.

Indeed, by 1914, the British officials realised that the government in Benin had become isolated and could not really identify itself with the people. Therefore, they decided to reinstate the monarchy for a number of reasons. First, the substitute of a Native Council to replace the *Oba* and perform his duties had not worked. Second, the Warrant Chiefs so created did not receive the favour of the people. Third, the British were faced with the difficulty of making the newly favoured chiefs acceptable to the people. This political reality, posits Igbafe, in many ways compelled a change in the administrative structure in Benin.¹² The people demanded for a change of administration basically because the paramount chiefs were corrupt. For instance, some of the chiefs were accused of illegal exaction of tributes, financial mismanagement, abduction of women and the organisation of unauthorised courts,¹³ which were hitherto not the case in the pre-British era where the *Oba* exercised traditional restraint. The absence of such a check by the *Oba* during the interregnum encouraged corruption, which characterised the administration of the paramount chiefs in their districts.