



THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BENIN METALWORKING FROM PREHISTORY TO THE EMPIRE
STATUS

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Abstract

This paper re-examines the origins and evolution of metalworking technology in the Benin Kingdom, challenging colonial-era narratives that attributed bronze casting to external diffusion from Ife or Portuguese introduction. Through critical analysis of archaeological evidence, metallurgical studies, and oral traditions, the study demonstrates that Benin metalworking emerged from indigenous technological innovation rooted in the pre-dynastic Edionwere system and the subsequent Ogiso dynasty (c. 355 BC–1092 AD). The research systematically deconstructs the prevalent Oguola-Igueghae tradition, which credits the introduction of bronze casting to the reign of Oba Oguola through Ife intermediaries, by presenting scientific evidence including carbon-14 dating, alloy analysis, and linguistic studies that confirm local origins predating European contact by centuries. The paper further examines the institutionalization of the Igun Eromwon guild under Ogiso Ere as a deliberate political strategy to consolidate monarchical power through economic centralization, illustrating the inextricable relationship between technological development and state formation. The analysis traces the industry's flourishing during the reigns of Oba Ewuare and Oba Esigie, demonstrating how royal patronage, economic prosperity, and administrative sophistication enabled the transition from small-scale production to world-class artistic achievement. By integrating interdisciplinary approaches from archaeology, art history, and political economy, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize African historiography, reclaiming indigenous technological agency and repositioning Benin metalworking within its proper context as an autonomous African innovation that selectively incorporated external influences while maintaining distinct local characteristics.

Keywords: Political Economy, Benin Metalworking, Prehistory, Empire Status.

I. Introduction

The history of the Benin bronze industry represents one of the most significant yet contested narratives in African art historiography. For decades, colonial and early post-colonial scholarship propagated conflicting traditions regarding the origins of metalworking technology in the Benin Kingdom, with explanations ranging from Ife antecedents to Portuguese introduction. These irreconcilable accounts, formulated largely during the colonial period, reflected not merely academic disagreement but fundamental epistemological gaps stemming from insufficient archaeological evidence and inadequate scientific analysis of casting traditions. The persistence of the Oguola-Igueghae tradition—crediting the introduction of bronze casting to the reign of Oba Oguola through Ife intermediaries—exemplifies how oral traditions became fossilized as historical fact without critical interrogation. However, subsequent scientific analyses, including metallurgical studies and carbon-14 dating, have systematically dismantled these colonial-era hypotheses, revealing an indigenous metalworking tradition predating European contact by several centuries. This paper examines the origin and evolution of the Benin bronze industry through an interdisciplinary lens, integrating archaeological evidence, scientific metallurgy, and critical historiography to demonstrate that Benin metalworking emerged from local technological innovation and socio-political development rather than external diffusion. By repositioning the Ogiso dynasty and the institutionalization of craft guilds at the center of

this narrative, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize African art history and reclaim indigenous technological agency.

Colonial Narratives versus the Archaeological Evidence of the Origins

Like every history of a pre-literate people, there are several traditions of the origin of bronze working technology in Benin and most of them are incoherent and irreconcilable. Some of these traditions trace the technical knowhow to Ife, others opine that it has its origin further North to the Niger and Nok cultural areas while some credit it to the Portuguese and others to Oba Ewuare, the great. These irreconcilable explanations leave unexplained an entire series of other opinions that are gathered “together under the single name, Lower Niger bronze industries.” It is important to state that these conflicting explanations were formulated during colonial rule when sufficient systematic analysis has not been carried out. Thus, they were occasioned by shortage of knowledge especially the dearth of archaeological evidence and inadequate scientific analysis of the casting tradition and properties of the artefacts.

The most widespread of these traditions is the Oguola – Igueghae tradition of origin of the Benin bronze working technology. This tradition holds that Oba Oguola (ca. A.D. 1280 or 1380) wished to introduce brass casting into Benin to produce works of art like those sent to him from Ife. The Oni of Ife in response to the Oba’s request sent Igueghae, who is today worshipped as the patron saint of the Benin craft. It would be surprising if this prevalent tradition would mention any area other than Ife as the direct antecedent of Benin casting considering the strong cultural links between the two areas. Oral traditions collected in Benin City by Philip Dark in the middle of the twentieth century supports the view that the people of Benin learnt the technique of metal work from Ife and that this occurred before the advent of the Portuguese. This tradition of the origin of metal working technologies in Benin, therefore, credits Oguola, the sixth Oba of the second dynasty with the introduction of bronze casting to Benin. Jacob Egharevba reports that Oguola, who ruled at the end of the 13th century sent to the king of Ile-Ife an artist who can teach his people how to cast in bronze and an artist called Igueghae was sent to Benin and he set up the first bronze making workshop in Idunmwu Igun Eromwo. When he died, he was deified and is worshipped. This version is amplified further thus that “oral tradition says that Ewedo’s successor brought brass workers from Ife to establish the craft in Benin. The first brass-smith sent was Igueghae, who was later deified as the patron saint of the guild. He established his workshop in Igun Street and the street remains the traditional brass casters’ neighbourhood till date. Analysis of the metals found in Benin royal art indicated that the earliest were made of tin bronze, while the later objects were brass.

Scientific analyses have since disproved the Oguola – Igueghae tradition of origin of the Benin bronze working technology using strong scientific evidence. First, linguistically, Igueghae is Benin or Edo group of languages and not Yoruba to which Ife is grouped and therefore could not have been Ife. Secondly, scientific analysis of the materials used identified two cultures of bronze working technologies in Benin and indicated that in the earlier culture, objects were from African sources, while the later used Portuguese coins as source materials. Ife has one bronze making technology, which coincided with the latter Benin bronze technology. Thus, the materials used by Ife were all Portuguese coins and they came to Ife through Benin. It has been ‘asserted that the Edo culture was creating lost-wax castings six hundred years before the first Portuguese visited Benin City in 1482. The internal evidence of the exquisite style and thinness of the earliest Benin bronzes demonstrated a long heritage of metal working that would deny the hypothesis that the artisans had recently learned the art from outsiders in the sixteenth century. Although, the Benin bronze industry flourished between the 15th and 17th centuries with social-political development introduced in the reign of Oba Ewuare, the Great (c.1440), there is strong evidence that it has been in existence during the Edionwere system of administration that existed before the Ogiso dynastic, c.355BC-1092AD. Oba Oguola, there were brass working

culture in Benin during the reign of the Ogiso kings who “produced small objects such as bracelets and bells” Similarly, the version of oral tradition that credited Oba Ewuare for introducing the casting of commemorative heads and larger objects in the fifteenth century has been found to be incorrect as archaeology dates the Benin bronzes to about thirteenth and fourteenth century. Irwin Tunis explains that, “it is paradoxical to label the Ife finds as having been made in Ife without any evidence of a brass-casting industry ever existing, and the Benin artefacts as belonging somewhere else when they were found in Benin, and there is a current industry which stretches back centuries.” The greatest prove of origin of the Benin arts came with “the accidental discovery of carbon dating, during the experiments connected to the production of atomic bomb. The carbon-14 dating process when applied to the Africa art items showed that most artefacts had been produced centuries before contacts were made with the Europeans.”

Difference in the periods of metal works in Benin has also been used to determine plausible origins. Scientific evidence shows two distinct traditions of iron casting in Benin and each has its own distinct epoch. This evidence, according to Irwin Tunis indicates that there were two Benin metal working traditions: the earlier or bronze period from Oba Oguola to Ewuare, and the later or brass period, which began in the reign of Esigie.” To further show the incoherency of the Oguola-Igueghae tradition, the argument has been canvassed that ‘there is extreme difficulty in reconciling the present Ife, 150 kilometres northwest of Benin, with the Oguola tradition. Ife has neither oral traditions nor guilds in connection with brass casting. No archaeological evidence has been uncovered which links a casting industry to the area.’ Alan Ryder furthered reports that ‘Ife has no tradition of brass-casting, nor any guild of brass-smiths, whereas these still persist with certain vigour in Benin City.’ The famous Ife brass and copper artefacts were initially found as the result of either building or funeral site excavations to which the Ife kings voiced no objections.

To further give credence to this view, “an examination of the alloy content and lead isotope ratios of Ife and Benin sculptures indicate different copper alloys. A visual examination of the Ife heads and those from Benin, reputed to be the earliest, re-echoes the alloy findings.” The overall evidence favours a more northerly origin, to the dynasty. The Nupe-Igala area straddling the confluence of the Niger and Benue emerges as the key area in such a reconstruction of Benin dynastic affiliation. A comparison of the true bronzes found in Benin during the British 1897 expedition and now labelled ‘Lower Niger’ with those found in the ‘Tsoede’ Niger area show “similarities in alloy content and morphology.” It is alleged herein that these ‘bronzes were probably among the earliest Benin castings, or were prototypes used by the Benin craftsmen.

The bronze era was from “Oba Oguola to Ewuare and the second more lengthy tradition from Obas Esigie until Oba Osemwede.” The scarcity of true Benin bronzes from the earlier period may be indicative of a late full-scale introduction from the Portuguese advent in 1486, or continuous remelting and mixing with the later bronzes, or even a combination of both. Oral tradition does refer to the encouragement and improvement in brass casting during the reign of Oba Esigie. Douglas Fraser theorised that Benin styles had a direct connection through the Nok culture, deriving their “extra-African” motifs by way of trade routes to the Mediterranean. Both Shaw and Fraser argued that Ife and Benin developed parallel artistic traditions. Perhaps Jacqueline Delange was closest to the right answer when suggesting that from the beginning artistic relations existed between the many cultures, and artists came and went between population centres. Prior to the Portuguese presence Benin was a highly “structured culture which more than probably produced works of art and had a previous metal casting or working tradition. Also, ivory and wood relief carving as well as pottery and even weaving were known.”

Also, Igueghae, who is said to have “initiated the on-the-spot brass casting in Benin” and honoured with the tiled, ‘Ineh’ by Oba Oguola cannot possibly be the first bronze artist in Benin as the art predates his period. Thus, Ben-Amos pointed out that there were brass smiths in Benin before the time of Oba Oguola. The awards of titles were likely dependent on

the incorporation of families into guilds, the introduction of a technique or a particular artistic form.” Oba Oguola deserves to be acknowledged as it was due to his request for a bronze smith from Ife to teach the Benin how to cast bronze heads that Igueghae became prominent. Ben-Amos ascertained that the Oba succeeded in enticing the brass smith to stay permanently in Benin. This single act could probably be another contribution to the decline of brass casting in Ife. There were brass smiths in Benin during the reign of Ogiso dynasty, over three centuries before Oba Oguola’s reign and they produced small objects such as bracelets and bells. Another version of the oral tradition credited Oba Ewuare for introducing the casting of commemorative heads and larger objects in the 15th century but archaeology dates the Benin bronze to about thirteenth and fourteenth century.

Zainab Sogbesan has also explained that ‘Oba Oguola’s request for a brass casting smith however, can be held as one possibility of how the Ife bronze making technique and stylisation infiltrated and influenced Benin bronze castings’ and that it should not be mistaken for the origin. According to Philip Dark, the knowledge of working iron appeared to have been present among the Benin people ever before the introduction of brass-smith’s art from Ile-Ife.” William Fagg observes that the Benin royal art can be divided into three periods: the first and the earliest was the thin walled castings of around the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which revealed stylistic similarities with the brass objects of ancient Ife. As it appears, these casting did not last for a very long time. In the middle period- probably of around seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries- the artistic designs departed completely from those that came from Ife and those that were earlier casted in Benin. He further claims that this is the classic period of Benin art. The sculpture became increasingly schematic, with a high degree of expressiveness and independence. The third period which may have begun around the mid-eighteenth century, witnessed a decline in the political and cultural affairs of the Benin Kingdom which resulted in a corresponding deterioration of the arts.

The British scholars, Philip Dark expanded on Fagg’s method for establishing the chronology of heads. According Dark, they are five types of heads. The first two types are noticeably smaller than the later. They are thin-walled and have relatively naturalistic facial features (early fifteenth and sixteenth century). The full face can be seen in type one. The collar is made of coral bead strands closely hugging the neck and throat but does not go over the chin. The type three heads are larger and heavier, with high collars of coral beads ending just below the mouth. The swollen cheeks and large eyes are particularly striking’ It has been opined ‘that although only made popular after the British punitive expedition in the 19th century Benin art has been in existence since at least 500 BCE’

The Evolution of Statehood and Bronze Technology in Ancient Benin

The Ogiso origin is widely believed among historians as against these incoherent versions. This is because the histories of the Benin bronzes, of Igun Eromwon, the craft guild of professionals that made them and of the Ogiso dynasty, the first dynasty and central administration following the unification of the kingdom are inseparable. Previous research works have shown that the origin and development of crafts and craft guilds relates to the unification of the kingdom in about 900AD from a conglomeration of autonomous groups. It is, therefore, not plausible to analyse history of the bronze industry without recourse to the socio-political development that necessitated it in the last century of the first millennium. Before that century, each Benin group was sovereignty and free from outside control of its political life. A Benin autonomous group of that period was the aggregate of households, farming groups, families and different lineage which reflected a settlement pattern of either blood tie or lineal decent. The family or extended family played a vital role in the conception of authority, which was manifested in the structures and processes of group administration. Political authority rested on the most senior member of the Edionene, known as the Odionwere or Okaevbo while the other three members were his deputies. The most famous Odionwere in the pre-dynastic period was Igodo and a special feature of this pre-dynastic

Edionwere system of administration in Benin was the lack of any centralised institutions or governance. Rather, each group maintained its rules, secures its territories and was only related to other Benin groups through similar language and territorial proximity and pattern of administration. The Ighele groups were the workforce responsible for implementing and executing the decisions of their respective communities.

The first expression of central idea was the move by one of the Edionwere, Odionwere Igodo in “creating Odibo-odionwere, which was a group of reliable and conscientious assistants as private guards,” which he selected from several of the autonomous unites. It was this group that aided the unification of Benin groups under the authority of a single Odionwere who became the first King of Benin. The Odibo-Odionwere of Igodo was also the strongest group at the time. Osarenren Omoregie avers that “when Igodo open his mouth to speak in the mist of his peers, every other mouth will shut up. Igodo took advantage of this towering situation to change the philosophy of his ascendancy as the leader of the people.”²¹ The legitimacy of his authority as king was the link with the sky God. Hence, he adopted the title of Ogiso, king with authority from above or the sky. Thus, the emergent of kingship and the integration of the cluster of villages into a single political unit was due to the political insight of Igodo, who was a product of the gerontocratic system of the Edionwere and was “succeeded by Ogiso Ere and to him goes the credit of creating the guild system” including the Igun Eromwon guild of bronze casters.

The Igun Eromwon guild, like other professional guilds began with the effort of Ogiso Ere to make the nascent monarchical system secure and to successfully wrestle power from the various communities that were newly amalgamated to form the new emerging kingdom, who were neither familiar with the idea of a central government nor the supremacy of such government. The products of the various professionals particularly, iron smithing within the communities were directed to the respective edionwere without regards for the Ogiso. Ogiso Ere consider this act as a threat to the monarch because weapons, economic resources and other elements of power were still concentrated in the hands of the Edionwere and not the Ogiso. Since iron was used by other professions such as in carving, weaving, pottery, farming and warfare, it was believed that the possession of iron by the Benin people in this early period must have led to the political exploits and formation of the kingdom. It can easily be seen that it was one of Ogiso Ere’s concern to organize the crafts of iron smithing which the Igun Eromwon guilds belong so that supplies can be made first to the new monarchy before the Edionwere.

The traditions of the Ogiso origin stipulates that the desire to ensure power necessary for the survival of the new monarchy and the Kingdom as well as the need to organise the economic aspect of life of the communities made Ogiso Ere embark on creating centrally patronized professional groups for the development of each of these economic activities. This arrangement of professionals into specialised groups evolved into what is now commonly referred to as the craft guilds system of the Benin people or professional guilds. These guilds were associations in “various trades given monopoly rights by the reigning Oba, who saw the needs of such groups to produce, market, standardize and attend to their products.” The *raison d’être* of these professional groups was for each to supply some of their products to the state and they were so many that they reflected virtually all aspects of the economic needs of the kingdom. In 1939, H.E. Marshal counted sixty eight some of which include guilds of brass casters, carpenters, cattle keepers, doctors, bronze casters, butchers, ritual specialists, drummers, town criers, ceremonial executioners, diviners, land purifiers, perfumers of funeral ceremonies for the Oba, guardians of Oba’s wives, repairers of the harem, river due collectors and even acrobats. Twelve out of these sixty eight guilds dealt with either arts or crafts and they are referred to as the craft guilds. They include bronze casters, architects, carvers, carpenters, blacksmiths, brass casters, costume designers’ beavers, tanners, potters, weavers and cosmetologist. While the blacksmiths provided metallic tools needed in the palace and the kingdom, “the brass casters support for the throne was more of recording events akin to taking photographs or painting pictures” as

their works were not merely working of art and display but recording of events.” Membership of the craft guilds expanded over the centuries and were organised on family basis thereby ensuring that the needs of each of the Oba is met. When new needs arose and no guild for the purpose existed, the problem was resolved by the emancipation of slaves to form new guilds for the purpose. Slaves were also absorbed into old guilds to swell their membership if need be and help in the production process.

Scholars of Benin history agree that the golden age of the kingdom’s civilisation and of the craft guilds of bronze makers began from the reign of Oba Ewuare, the great (Ca. 1440-1473), responsible for transforming the physical outlook, administrative organisation and the expansion of the Kingdom. The economic growth was also facilitated, and the members of the guilds were administratively organised into two age-grades – the Eniola, junior’s age grade and the Edion, elders’ age grade. The Edion group consisted of title holders, who formed the Guild Council and were responsible to the Oba for the smooth administration of the guilds, which they represented. At the head of the council was the headman, who oversaw both council and the specific guild he belonged to. The quarters or territory occupied by the guilds were named after it. This success during Ewuare reign, therefore, was the result of the high-level internal organisation of the kingdom. Since the guilds were territorial, the internal order maintained within the guilds reflected the political organisation at the lowest level of hierarchy where order and peace were maintained.

Another important factor that enabled specialisation, which also led to the emergence of a world class technology during this period was economic growth brought by authoritative monarchy. The history of Benin is full of praises of its powerful monarchy, with the centralised system of government with in-built checks and balances for promoting healthy competition among the political institutions’ and intelligent control of economic activities, which ensured widespread access to natural resources and other factors of production throughout the empire. Uyilawa Usuanlele explains that the near absence of landlessness and the access of most people to other means of production enabled most members of the society to achieve self-sufficiency in their basic needs. The monarch regulated the economy not only for his own benefit but that of the general well-being of the people of the kingdom. During the reign of Ewuare, for instance, several towns and houses were incorporated into the Benin Empire to create large region properly secured and this prompted trade and prosperity. Its populations enjoyed high standard of living with good infrastructure consequent of the pleasing economic indices that were unrivalled in the whole of the region. In his study and coverage of ancient cities, Mawuna Koutonin reports in the Guardian of London that good roads, houses, streetlights, galleries, public buildings and other indexes of economic and social development in ancient Benin Kingdom were outstanding in the Guff of Guinean. Benin City, according to the report, was one of the first cities in the world to have a “semblance of street lighting.” Consequent of the economic prosperity enjoyed by the kingdom and the resultant luxury of specialization, members of Iguneromwon guild of bronze manufacturers became experts in their profession. They were further motivated by the various Oba, who reign from the 15th to 19th centuries during which they created titles for the bronze manufacturers.

In the second half of the 15th century, Benin kingdom established a cordial diplomatic relation with Portugal that included the exchange of ambassadors and social-economic ideals and commodities such as language, religion, regalia, spices and metal wares. A large corpus of copper was imported to Benin and this gave a new dimension to the art of the Iguneromwon guild of manufactures. With the availability of copper, Ewuare, the Great introduced the casting of commemorative heads and other large objects into the industry. By the time the Portuguese arrived at the Empire, the Iguneromwon guild of bronze artists had already attained a level of high professional development with excellent works that awed the visitors, “who recorded accounts of the city as one of the most prosperous and best organised cities south of the Sahara.” Their records included the powerful city craft guilds and they mentioned the carpenters, iron workers, wood carvers, weavers, bead workers and brass

workers. The ship captain, the crew and the nobility back home, also recognised and patronised the Benin guilds as they sort for some of their works through trade. The items of trade were coral beads, fabrics for ceremonial purposes and a great quantity of brass which were in exchange for slaves, pepper and ivory. The brass and iron manillas supplied created a great boom to the brass casters in Benin. The availability of raw material for the brass casters enabled them to introduce new designs and forms that made the 15th century outstanding for craftsmanship in Benin; “when the finest of all the works was produced.” The traders and sailors patronized Benin artworks, and craftsmen were then allowed to produce for the foreigners. This European experience resulted in the production of excellent art works including ivory spoons with handles beautifully carved in animal and bird motifs, the magnificent saltcellars, and hunting horns, all of which were sold to the sailors for Portuguese nobility. These artworks were indeed great contrast to what were designed prior to the contact with Europeans and they reflected “great skill of Benin craftsmen to imbibe new ideas.” Also, Philip Dark explains that “the designs introduced at this time endures today and that the Portuguese themselves were also represented in the Benin art works” and these include Portuguese heads as well as full figurines cast on brass, floral motifs and musketeers amulets and ivory tusks and several brass plaques. The Portuguese contact also brought European fabric into the Oba Palace compound, such as velvet, fine silk, red flannel and cotton, which influenced the weavers and the volume of their works. Thus, within a few decades of this trade relation, the cotton weaving became prominent, and the clothing styles changed and became more elaborate. When Eresonye became Oba (Ca. 1737-50), the art underwent significant changes. He “instigated a resurgence of bronze casting, even commissioning a more elaborate version of Esigie's erhe stool” and the art industry went through significant changes and flourished.

II. Conclusion

The history of the Benin bronze industry, when examined through the lens of scientific archaeology and critical historiography, reveals a narrative fundamentally at odds with colonial-era interpretations that privileged external diffusion over indigenous innovation. This study has demonstrated that metalworking in Benin emerged not from Ife tutelage or Portuguese intervention, but from deep-rooted local technological traditions extending to the Ogiso dynasty and the pre-dynastic Edionwere system. The institutionalization of the Igun Eromwon guild under Ogiso Ere represents a deliberate political strategy to consolidate monarchical power through economic centralization, rather than a passive adoption of foreign techniques. The subsequent flourishing of bronze casting during the reigns of Oba Ewuare and Oba Esigie illustrates how technological development in pre-colonial African societies was inextricably linked to state formation, economic prosperity, and administrative sophistication. Furthermore, the evidence presented herein underscores the necessity of decolonizing African art history by subjecting oral traditions to rigorous scientific verification rather than accepting them as unproblematic historical facts. The Benin bronze industry stands as testament to the capacity of African societies to generate complex technological systems and artistic traditions independently, while remaining sufficiently adaptive to incorporate external influences—such as Portuguese copper imports—into existing indigenous frameworks. Future scholarship must continue to prioritize interdisciplinary approaches combining metallurgical analysis, archaeological excavation, and historical linguistics to further illuminate the autonomous development of African material cultures and challenge persistent narratives of technological dependency.

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