



**Matriarchs in African Societies:
Examining the Roles of Queen Amina of Zazzau and
Queen Idia in State and Empire Building in
Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

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Abstract

In precolonial African societies, women played an active role in politics, mostly through the position of either queen mother or queen. Queen mothers regularly served as stabilizing factors in the reign of their sons. Equally, women who became queens in precolonial African societies demonstrated wit and valour in the exercise of authority, especially during periods of warfare and crisis. This paper introduces two prominent matriarchs, Queen Amina of Zazzau in Northern Nigeria and Queen Idia of the ancient Benin kingdom in Southern Nigeria, and explores matriarchal roles they played in the administration of, respectively, their state and kingdom. Using qualitative research methodology and close reading of available data, the paper investigates their military leadership, the type of warfare in which they engaged, and the strategies they deployed in restoring peace and order to their societies. The paper further scrutinizes narratives that project only men as warriors; they lead to a false absence of women in the history of warfare and the empire/ kingdom or state-



building process in precolonial Africa. The overarching argument of the paper is that women were accepted in positions of political and military leadership, including prosecuting wars, and wielded great power and influence in Africa's precolonial period.

Keywords: Matriarchy, Queen Amina, Queen Idia, precolonial kingdoms, Nigeria

Résumé

Dans les sociétés africaines précoloniales, les femmes jouaient un rôle actif en politique, principalement en exerçant le rôle de reine mère ou de reine. Les reines mères servaient régulièrement de facteurs de stabilisation dans le règne de leurs fils. De même, les femmes qui sont devenues reines dans les sociétés africaines précoloniales ont fait preuve d'intelligence et de courage dans l'exercice de l'autorité, notamment pendant les périodes de guerre et de crise. Cet article présente deux matriarches éminentes, la reine Amina de Zazzau au nord du Nigeria et la reine Idia de l'ancien royaume du Bénin au sud du Nigeria, en explorant les rôles matriarcaux qu'elles ont joués dans l'administration de leur États. À l'aide d'une méthodologie de recherche qualitative et d'une lecture attentive des données, l'article explore leurs contextes personnels, leur leadership militaire et le type de guerre dans laquelle elles se sont engagées. L'article étudie en outre le changement dans les récits qui présentent uniquement les hommes comme des guerriers, ce qui conduit à une absence de femmes dans l'histoire de la guerre et dans le processus de construction d'empire/royaume ou d'État dans les sociétés africaines précoloniales. L'argument principal de l'article est que les femmes matriarches occupaient des postes de direction politique et exerçaient de grands pouvoirs et influences, y compris la poursuite de la guerre, au cours de la période précoloniale.

Mots clés : Matriarcat, reine Amina, reine Idia, royaumes précolonial, Nigeria

Introduction

Since women have been perceived by men as 'weaker vessels' and patriarchy presumed to have dominated the political sphere, discovering the existence of matriarchs in the precolonial era of Nigeria changed the historical narrative. Extant literature shows that women were not excluded from the political sphere, but rather, that they featured prominently in the political evolution of their societies. The overarching argument of this paper is that despite the patriarchal nature of political institutions in most African societies, some roles were assigned to and/or reserved for women. This enabled them to play significant roles in the traditional political institutions of governance in these precolonial societies. We contend that although women's political roles in precolonial African societies were not equal to those of men, they played complementary roles in the

administration of their states. These roles enabled them to occupy leadership positions in political institutions, such as Queens or Queen Mothers.

The paper is divided into six sections. This first section introduces the subject matter, with comments identifying Zazzau and Benin Kingdoms, the two polities features here, and a brief look at matriarchs and women's roles from a variety of African societies. The second and third sections present our research methodology and literature review. The fourth section examines the emergence and the role played by Queen Amina in the development of Zazzau in Hausaland. The fifth section focuses on *Iyoba* Idia in Benin Kingdom and her contributions to the kingdom during the reign of her son, *Oba* Esigie; the sixth section is the conclusion.

Zazzau Kingdom is the southernmost state of the first seven Hausa Bakwai (Seven True Hausa States) founded by King Gunguma between 1000 and 1200 CE in the savanna area of present-day Northern Nigeria. The city of Zazzau was founded during the first half of the sixteenth century by King Nikatau Nohir. On his demise, circa. 1566, his wife Queen Bakwa Turuku, mother of Queen Amina, assumed the throne of the city-state. Her reign is known as one of peace and prosperity; war was absent to such an extent that the warriors complained that their blades had become blunt. Nevertheless, Zazzau Kingdom reached the height of its influence under Bakwa Turuku's daughter, Queen Amina (see below). She established Zazzau city as the capital of Zazzau Kingdom and changed the name of the city-state to Zaria, after her younger sister and successor to the throne. By the end of the century, Zaria military might diminished and it came under the control of the Jukun Kingdom; during the eighteenth century, it became a tributary state of the Bornu Kingdom. The Zazzau Kingdom still exist today, albeit in a sharply diminished form and subject to the state of Nigeria; the ruler of the modern-day Zazzau Emirate is called *Sarkin* or *Emir* Zazzau, that is, king of Zazzau (Zaria).

Benin Kingdom was one of the earliest and most prominent kingdoms in the southern forest region of Nigeria; it was ruled by the *Oba* from his capital, Benin City. *Oba* is the title of a position equivalent to that of king; during his reign, *Oba* Esigie created the title of *Iyoba* (*Iya Oba*, Queen Mother) for his mother Idia. Benin Kingdom flourished between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; during this period, the *Oba* of Benin was the political, temporal and spiritual head of the kingdom.¹ Today, Benin Kingdom is confined to the boundaries of Benin City and subject to the state of Nigeria; it is not related to the current Republic of Benin. Nevertheless, the kingdom remains the seat of its current ruler, *Oba* Ewuare 11.

¹ S. E. Orobator, "Trade of Imperial Benin with the Portuguese and the Dutch," in Onwuka N. Njoku (ed.), *Pre-Colonial Economic History of Nigeria*, Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 2002, 109.

The people of Benin Kingdom engaged in the trade of slaves, palm oil, palm kernel, ivory, and other products. The kingdom was rich in tree species, such as Obeche, Iroko, and rubber, and thanks to these, lumber and timber processing allowed a major centre of bronze casting to thrive along with woodworking products. Fertile soil made farming activities to be one of the mainstays of the economy. Agricultural production, trade, and handicrafts were foundations of the stature and influence of the kingdom.

Some royal women were actively involved in politics and held decision-making roles in the governance of their states in different West African states.² Examples of African women who occupied positions of power and influence in their societies – along with Queen Amina and *Iyoba* Idia – include Queen Yaanial in Ghana, Queen Ndaté of the Waalo Kingdom in the present Republic of Senegal, Queen Nzinga of the Ndongo and Matamba kingdoms in present-day Luanda in Angola, Empress Zewditu of Ethiopia, Queen Edimini Kambasa in the Bonny Kingdom, Queen Yaa Asantewaa of the Asante Kingdom, Pharaoh Hatshepsut, Pharaoh Nefertiti, Queen Moremi, a courageous and brave leader of Ile-Ife who saved her kingdom from attacks by the neighbouring Ugbo Kingdom, Fatim Beye, Ndoye Demba and Nadate Yalla Mbodji in Senegal, Yennenga of Burkina Faso, Hangbe of Benin, Makeda and Embet Ilen of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Nandi of South Africa, and the female chiefs among the Mende and Serbo of Sierra Leone.³

Although the traditional political institutions were largely patriarchal, political power was diffused and some political roles were reserved for and/or assigned to women. Examples of powerful roles for non-royal women in precolonial Yoruba society were *Iyalode* or *Madam Tinubu* (market leader), *Iya Afin* (mother nature), and *Erelu*, a women member of the council of kingmakers. These roles have been preserved and are still occupied by women in contemporary Yoruba society. In Igbo society, there was the *Umu Ada*, the 'daughters of the clan' who were married either within or outside the community; they played well-defined and significant social and political roles in the socio-political institutions of Igboland. These roles suggest that women played significant complementary roles in the political administration of their community despite the predominance of patriarchy in African societies.

It is not confirmed whether or not matriarchal political institutions ever existed in African societies, but at one time or another, there existed prominent women who wielded enormous power and authority. They left indelible impacts on their societies, such as

² Adedayo Oluwaseun Adefemi and Ayodehi Temitope Agunbiade, 'Women's Political Participation and Representation in State Legislatures, Southwest, Nigeria,' *Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs*, vol.7 (2019), 2.

³ Justus Nnemeka, 'Position of Women in Pre-colonial Africa,' Ikpe, E.B. (ed.), *Women and Power in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. Lagos: University of Lagos Press, 2009, 33-4; see Emmanuel Akyeampong and Fredrick Hippolyte, 'The Contribution of African Women to Economic Growth and Development: Historical perspectives and Policy Implications, Part 1: The Pre-colonial and Colonial Periods,' *Policy Research Working Paper*, 2012, 2-3.

Queen Amina of Zazzau, who was pivotal to the growth and development of an empire. She embarked on an expansionist programme of conquest, subjugation, dominion and the incorporation of vassal states into her kingdom.

In some situations, the matriarchs were not even direct leaders themselves but exerted a strong influence because of the relationship they had with the male rulers, as evidenced in the existence of queen mothers in precolonial African kingdoms, empires and states. The term 'Queen Mother' had a variety of meanings. For example, in the Benin Kingdom, she was the mother of the king, while in Ghana, the queen mother was selected from the royal family of each town. In Asaba, Onitsha, and Osamala of Igboland, they were *Omu*. Their duties and responsibilities also differed in each society.

Scholarship has shown that women were actively involved in all stages of empire-building as warriors, peacemakers and suppliers of wartime materials. Women's role in empire-building could go beyond serving as political advisers, as, occasionally, they were the main political and military leaders of their societies and states. The extent of most women's participation in politics and governance was dependent on the organizational structure of the political institutions of such societies. Some states practiced centralized or monarchial political systems, such as the Benin Kingdom, Bornu Empire, Ashanti Kingdom and so on, while others evolved a decentralized or republican system, such as the Igbo in present-day southeastern Nigeria and the Tiv ethnic group in north-central Nigeria.⁴

The Zazzau state in present-day northwestern Nigeria practiced a centralized political system. In the Benin Kingdom, *Iyoba* Idia played the role of Queen Mother during the reign of her son, *Oba* Esigie and successive kings that ruled after *Oba* Esigie had *Iyoba*. In southwestern Nigeria, paramount rulers such as the *Alaafin* of Oyo and *Ooni* of Ile-Ife reigned without a Queen Mother. The complementarity role of Queen Mother was non-existent in some West African societies, excluding even some women from positions of authority.

Against this background, this paper examines two matriarchs: Queen Amina of Zazzau and *Iya Oba* Idia of the Benin Kingdom in what would later become the present Northern and Southern Nigeria. It explores the trajectory of the two matriarchs by assessing their contributions to the local political development of their states, highlighting their experiences, and showing how they wielded enormous political power and influence.

Research Methodology

This paper employs a historical research methodology in which the data was collected mainly through secondary sources. This involved a close reading of extant literature on

⁴ Adefemi and Agunbiade, 2.

kingdoms, empires and state-building for matriarchy in Nigeria and the wider African continent. The data comprised articles in journals, chapters in edited volumes, and dissertations (see footnotes 7 and 8). Contemporary publications by scholars on matriarchy were vital sources of data. These secondary sources were critically analysed for women's roles in historical narratives. The works of Okonjo, Achebe, Amadiume and Oyewumi were particularly significant for examining the dual-sex political institutions in Igbo and Yoruba societies in southern Nigeria in which women possessed political power and authority in the administration of their societies.

In African historiography, there is a preponderance of works that focus on the empires, kingdoms, and state-building of male kings, while the matriarchs who occupied prominent positions in political institutions and the governance of their societies were forgotten, fictionalized, or believed not to have existed. They are seen as impossible because of the patriarchal nature of contemporary society: it has become unimaginable to have a female ruler to whom men will be subordinate or answerable. The pervasiveness and popularity of patriarchy tends to rule out the earlier existence of women's leadership.

The historical process of women losing the opportunities that were available to them began with the colonial era. During the period, women lost power and influence as their traditional political structures were either ignored or undermined and replaced with male-occupied structures and positions. Colonialism alienated women from the political space in African societies and reinforced the ideologies of patriarchy,⁵ and it privileged the political institutions headed by men against those held by women. Colonialism further oversaw the decline of the fortunes of African women by eroding the complementary dual-sex political system that was practiced in the precolonial period that empowered and accorded women higher status in society than they can achieve today. In the post-independence era, African governments have solidified and entrenched gender discrimination and failed to restore the traditional powers and influence of women that were swept away by colonialism.

Literature Review

Historically, women warriors who possessed political power and authority in West African societies have been studied and documented in the works of Clarke (1984), Farrar (1997), Achebe (2011), and Bouilly (2016), among others.⁶ The extant literature has tended to focus

⁵ Fredoline O. Anunobi, 'Women and Development in Africa: From Marginalization to Gender Inequality,' *Africa Social Science Review*, Vol. 2 (1), 2002, 49-50.

⁶ John Hendrik Clarke, 'African Warrior Queens' in Ivan van Sertima (ed.), *Black Women in Antiquity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984; Tarikhu Farrar, 'The Queen-mother, Matriarchy and the Question of Female Political Authority in Pre-colonial West African Monarch' in *Journal of Black Studies*, Sage Publications, Vol. 27, No. 5 (May 1997), 579-80; Nwandu Achebe, *Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe*. Indiana University Press, 2011; Emmanuel Bouilly, 'African Women's

on the men, while the women - who played immense roles in their societies - generally have been marginalized in historical scholarship. This is seen in publications such as those by Okonjo (1997/2002), Amadiume (1993/1997), Achebe (2011), Oyewumi (1997, 2002), Okome (2002), Ikpe (2004), Okonkwo (2013), Esogbue (2016), and Mfon (2017), among others.⁷

Matriarchy in ancient and precolonial Africa has attracted the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, as evident in the works of Clarke, Cohen, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Marvin Harris, among others. An Afrocentric scholar (scholars whose studies focus on African history), Clarke (1984) traces the origin of matriarchy to the primordial family form found during the ancient times of Africa and maintains that it is older in Africa than anywhere else in the world.⁸ Meanwhile, Cohen's work focuses on the phenomenon of the African queen mother. He argues that there was a prevalence of these female title-holders who occupied the highest levels of political institutions in ancient and precolonial African societies. Cohen contends further that the office of queen mother was generally a ceremonial one which served as a fulcrum around which potential opposition to the king could be safely and non-divisively collected. He states that this is because the queen's mother did not possess real political authority; rather, true political power was held by the king.⁹

Cheikh Anta Diop argues that the origin of matriarchy in African cultures began in the earliest times and was created by women. He posits that patriarchy replaced matriarchy in Africa as a result of external influences such as the advent of religion (Islam, Christianity), and colonialism.¹⁰ However, Marvin Harris dismisses the historicity of matriarchal societies in Africa and claims that there is no evidence to prove their existence. Rather he asserts

Struggle in Gender Perspective,' *Journal Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2016), 338-49.

⁷ Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Books Ltd, 1993; Ifi Amadiume, *Afrikan Matriarchal Foundations: The Case of the Igbo Societies*. London: Karnak House, 1995; Mojbol Olnk Okome, 'Domestic, Regional, and International Protection of Nigerian Women Against Discrimination: Constraints and Possibilities,' *African Studies Quarterly*, 6:3 (2002); Eno Blankson Ikpe, 'The Historical Legacy of Gender Inequality in Nigeria' in Solomon Akinboye (ed.), *Paradox of Gender Equality in Nigeria Politics*. Lagos: Concept Publications Ltd., 2004; Okonkwo (2013); Emeka Esogbue, *A Short History of Omu: An Account of a Female Traditional Institution in Anioma*. Ibadan: Carophen Communications Ltd., 2016; Etim Ekpenyong Mfon, 'The Marginalization of Women in Governance in Edo State Nigeria, with a Focus on the Coronation Ceremony of an Oba in the Benin Kingdom,' *International Journal of Research*, 4:10 (2017), 947-55.

⁸ Clarke, 123-34.

⁹ Ronald Cohen, 'Oedipus Rex and Regina: The queen mother in Africa,' *Africa*, 47:1 (1977), 14-30, as cited in Farrar, 579-80.

¹⁰ Cheik Anta Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, Chicago: Third World Press, 1978 (Original work published 1959); Cheik Anta Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press 1987 (Original work published 1960); Cheik Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism*. Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill, 1991 (Original work published 1981).

that matriarchy is based on myth and legend and is, therefore, a mere figment of feminist imaginations.¹¹

Refuting the dismissal of historical matriarchy, Tarikhu Farrar (1997) and others affirm the existence of matriarchy and posit that scholars such as Diop, Harris, and others are confusing matriarchy with matrilineality. Matriarchy refers to governance by women over family and society in the early stages of society; it is a social order, where women are in charge and the oldest females are recognized as the heads of families, with power, lineage and inheritance passing, where possible, from mothers to daughters.¹² A matriarchal society is based on mother rights and features a political system in which women dominate the political institutions of their societies. It entails female domination, where women have authority over men. Matrilineality, however, refers only to lineage and denotes societies in which descent is traced through the female rather than the male line; property is often (but not always) inherited in the same way.¹³ In other words, it is the tracing of kinship through the female lineage.

Farrar's work aims at understanding the nature of women's political power in ancient and precolonial African societies. He looks at the early history of queen-motherhood and other female political titles, and female political hierarchies, as well as the prevalence of these phenomena in ancient and pre-colonial African political institutions.¹⁴

Queen Amina of Zazzau

Historical records of the ancient Zazzau Kingdom reveal popular reverence for a single woman: Queen Amina. There is little historical documentation about her life, though, with much of which follows speculative. Thought to have been born circa. 1533 to Queen Bakwa Turuku, whose other children were a boy (Karama) and a girl (Zaria), Amina succeeded her brother Karama as ruler and was followed by Zaria on the throne. As a child, Amina became interested in the activities of the palace court, crawling to meet her grandfather, King Zazzau Nohir, in the palace court. As a result of his love for her, he would carry her and allow her to sit with him all through many important meetings with chiefs. She grew to love politics and hanging out in the court since important decisions were made there. Although her mother, Queen Bakwa Turuku, tried to focus her attention

¹¹ Marvin Harris, *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*. New York: Random House, 1974.

¹² Peggy Reeves Sanday, 'Matriarchy.' *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*. (Electronic version). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 1.

¹³ Camilla Nelson, 'Friday Essay: Matrilineal Societies exist around the World – It's Time to Look Beyond the Patriarchy,' *The Conversation*, 23 March 2023. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-matrilineal-societies-exist-around-the-world-its-time-to-look-beyond-the-patriarchy-200825>, Accessed on 20 July 2023.

¹⁴Farrar, 579-580.

on learning the responsibilities and roles of womanhood, Amina simply had a flair for politics. Amina loved the sword as a young girl and later trained with the soldiers, which sharpened her military skills.¹⁵

At the age of sixteen, when her mother ascended the throne of Zazzau, Amina was made the *Magajiya* (heir apparent) and was given forty slaves to serve her. Queen Bakwa died circa. 1566 and was succeeded by her son, Karama. Though her eldest daughter was *Magajiya*, the people demanded that primogeniture be followed and that Karama rule. However, during her brother's reign, Amina distinguished herself as a soldier. For example, when a neighbouring Hausa king named Kamajeji attacked and defeated Zazzau due to the innovation of using metal to make helmets, Amina participated in the war and took this innovation home, ensuring that helmets and metal suits were made for her warriors. As a result, her army emerged victorious in their own wars of conquest against neighbouring states such as Nupe, Kwararafa, Katsina, Narasarawa and others. Also thanks to importing this innovative technology, Amina became referred to as *Yar Bakwa Ta San Rama*, which, translated literally, means 'a woman even more capable than a man.' Karama's reign lasted for ten years. When he died, it was obvious that Amina would be the best fit for the throne because with her mastery of political administration and military command; she had proven herself to be capable.¹⁶

Amina was crowned the *Zaruniya* (Queen) of Zaria in 1576 and was credited with establishing the first formal political institution in Hausaland. During her reign, products of the western Sudan, such as salt, were brought to Hausaland in exchange for slaves and grains.¹⁷ Any city she conquered, she ordered the construction of a surrounding wall. With the trans-Saharan caravan trade thriving, she built *Ganuwar Amina* ('Amina's Walls'): extensive walls (including a fortress) around Zazzau, the remnants of which still stand today around Zaria. Politically, walls were considered a measure of a ruler's capacity to command his or her subjects. The ruins of her walls remain today in other cities, standing as proof of Queen Amina's glorious reign. Amina died after 34 years of rule. Her place of death is not certain; some say she died at Atagara, while others believe she died at Dekina in a 1610 battle.¹⁸

¹⁵ Abubakar Sa'ad, 'Queen Amina of Zaria,' in *Women in Historical Perspective*, edited by Bolanle Awe, Lagos: Sankore Publishers; Ibadan: Bookcraft, 1992, 13-23.

¹⁶ Wardah Abbas, 'The Importance of Documenting Muslim Women in History and Now: Honouring the Leadership Legacy of Queen Amina of Zaria,' *Amaliah*, April 2021. www.amaliah.co..post.muslim.... Accessed on 26 July 2023.

¹⁷ Richard Palmer, 'The Kano Chronicle,' *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 38 (January-June 1908), 58-98 (75). Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2843130>. Accessed on 5 May 2021.

¹⁸ Toyin Falola and Ann Genova, *Historical Dictionary of Nigeria*, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2009, 34.

Queen Amina's Contribution to Empire Building

Amina contributed greatly to the building of the Zazzau in several ways, the greatest of which was territorial expansion brought by military conquest. She was known to be a great and powerful warrior who went often to war and returned victorious. As Queen, she established a standing army of 20,000 soldiers; with them, she conquered the Hausa states of Katsina, Kano, Bauchi, Rano, Gobir, and Katsina, as well as the non-Hausaland states of Kwararafa, Nupe, Bauchi and Yauri. The tribute they sent to her was substantial, including forty eunuchs and ten thousand kola nuts from the *Sarkin* (king) of Nupe – the first of either in Hausaland. Slaves, whether among the conquered or sent for tribute, became part of her army or Zazzau's labour force.¹⁹ The improved economic activities of Zazzau under her rule were primarily linked to the benefits of military conquest; Amina exerted control over the trade routes around the Saharan region as a result of her victories.

Thanks to their stronger economy, Zazzau became a trading centre in Southern Hausaland; the main trade took place in metals, salt, kola nuts, clothes, and imported leather from the East. Perhaps inspired by the *Sarkin's* tribute, Amina was also responsible for introducing the kola nut trade in Hausaland. It later became a primary trade commodity of the Hausa people, who had a monopoly in the kola nut trade.²⁰

Queen Amina developed a well-trained, equipped and formidable military, allowing her to embark on wars of expansion; these resulted in the military conquests and territorial expansion of Zazzau. She introduced the use of metal helmets and armour for her soldiers which shielded them from the swords of their enemies and enhanced their victory in the battles. Leading by example, this well-trained warrior inspired an army of soldiers who were brave, disciplined, and fearless. Amina also introduced the idea of military encampment behind the fortress walls and constructing camps as a way of securing the military against potential enemies. These tactics helped her win every battle during her long reign of thirty-four years. Her commitment to Islam also led her to encourage Muslim scholars and religious leaders from Kano and Timbuktu to visit Zazzau. Queen Amina's legacy to Zazzau was an expanded territorial empire, a strong economy, and intellectual & spiritual vigour.

¹⁹ Palmer, 75.

²⁰ Paul Lovejoy, 'The Hausa Kolanut Trade 1700-1900. A Commercial System in the Continental Exchange of West Africa.' Unpublished PhD. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1973.

Queen Idia of Benin Kingdom

Queen Idia was a wife of *Oba* Ozulua, whose reign of the Benin Kingdom took place in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; Queen Idia became the first *Iyoba* (queen mother) of the polity. She stands out among the other queens and queen mothers of West Africa because of her great exploits on behalf of the kingdom, playing a very significant role in the rise and reign of her son, *Oba* Esigie. *Iyoba* Idia was a famous warrior who became even more popular after the Benin-Idah War because she led the victorious army.²¹ As well as being renowned as a warrior queen, *Iyoba* Idia was a skilful and astute administrator.²²

Idia's title as the first *Iyoba* was bestowed upon her when her son created the position as gratitude to her for securing his position as the sixteenth *Oba* of the Old Benin Kingdom. This son, Prince Osawe, who later became *Oba* Esigie, was given birth a few hours after another prince had been born. One of her co-wives had given birth to the giant prince, Prince Arhuanhuan, but did not notify the palace on time because the baby did not cry. It was a tradition that when a child was born, the palace would be notified immediately; this was for record-keeping, because the *Oba*'s pregnant wives were usually taken out of the palace, even the capital, to villages where they received care until the baby's birth. Queen Idia reported the birth of her son first and he thereby became heir to the throne.²³ As a result of this, Prince Arhuanhuan and his mother engaged in a series of disputes which eventually led to a war for the crown. *Iyoba* Idia ensured that her son won the war by raising an army for him and rumoured to have wielded unusual supernatural powers to defeat her enemies.

Before *Oba* Esigie ascended the throne, it was forbidden by tradition for the mother of the *Oba* to be alive while her son became a king. It was believed that the queen mother would command the same authority as the *Oba*, so she was murdered in order to prevent any competition. However, *Oba* Esigie abolished the tradition for his mother's sake and because of the sacrifices she had made for him.²⁴ Instead, he built a palace for her at Uselu and bestowed upon her the first-class chieftaincy title of *Iyoba* (Queen Mother). She was the first woman to be given this title. She enjoyed the exclusive privileges of recommending her choice of chiefs to the *Oba*, who conferred a title on them thereafter. She had the right to a throne, the right to wear special ornaments and coral beads, the right to adorn herself with a distinctive dress made of a special cloth and the right to bear

²¹ Ingyoroko, M. *et al*, 'The Nigerian Women and the Reformation of The Political System: A Historical Perspective,' *Journal of Socialomics*, 6 (2017), 2.

²² Monica O. Aneni, 'Politics and Power in the Courts of Two Queens: Cleopatra of Egypt and Idia of the Old Benin Kingdom,' *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4:6 (2016), 23-4.

²³ *Ibid*.

²⁴ Mfon, 947.

a sword of office. Since then, other queen mothers have enjoyed the same privileges. These rights were previously ascribed to only men who were chiefs in society.

In the military sphere, *Iyoba* Idia led her troops in the Benin-Idah War of 1515-1516, said to have been caused by the unfaithfulness of a woman influenced by beads. On one faithful day, the *Oliha*, the leader of the seven councillors or kingmakers, bragged to the king that he had the most beautiful and faithful wife in the kingdom. *Oba* Esigie, wishing to prove her unworthiness, asked one of his messengers to entice her with agate and coral beads. She fell for it and had a relationship with him for weeks. The message was related to the *Oliha* and his wife confirmed it. Out of anger, he ordered her to be strangled. To revenge himself on *Oba* Esigie, the *Oliha* sent a servant to the Igala king at Idah, the capital city of Igala Kingdom, with the message that *Oba* Esigie was preparing to invade Idah. He also sent another servant to inform the *Oba* that the Igala warriors were marching to Benin. War ensued.

Disguised as a man, *Iyoba* Idia bravely fought alongside her son. During this war, she is said to have employed the mystical tactic of making dummies look like real Benin soldiers. When the Igala soldiers attacked them, the pseudo-warriors of Benin responded, leading to some Igala soldiers fleeing out of fear. Amid the confusion, Benin soldiers came out of their hiding spots and opened fire on the confused Igala soldiers, defeating them. *Iyoba* Idia also killed the chief native doctor of Igala Kingdom, who had been sent to spy on the Benin kingdom.²⁵

As well as supporting her society militarily, *Iyoba* Idia introduced artistic features to the Benin culture. For example, she created the *Ukpe Okhue* or the Parrot's Beak *Iyoba*'s cap. It was curved, conical and covered with a network of beads. She also introduced the *Ekasa*, a special dance which forms part of the royal ceremonies to date. After her demise, her son instructed brass casters and ivory carvers to produce an ivory mask in memory of his mother (see Image 1). The Nigerian government also used her face as the emblem for the Second Black Festival of Arts and Culture, FESTAC'77, hosted in Lagos in 1977. Her tomb is located at Egua *Iyoba*, Uselu, Benin City.²⁶

²⁵ Ila Pelky Pokornowski, *Social Significance of African Beads: Case Studies of the Yoruba and Bini Peoples*, M.A Thesis, Michigan State University, 1974, 98; Benson Osadolor, *The Military System of Benin Kingdom, 1440-1897*, PhD Thesis, University of Hamburg, Germany, 2001, 99.

²⁶ Farrar, 580-581.



Image 1: Commemorative Head of *Iyoba* Idia. Commemorative head of Queen Mother; lost-wax cast in brass. Naturalistic, almost life-size female head with curving conical hairstyle covered with openwork coral bead net; long strings of coral beads at sides and back. Wears high coral bead collar. Two vertical marks on forehead originally inset with iron; four scarification marks above each eye. Pupils inlaid with iron. © Trustees of the British Museum.

***Iyoba* Idia's Contributions to the Development of Benin Kingdom**

Iyoba Idia's love for her son, *Oba* Esigie, enabled him to ascend the throne of the Benin Kingdom and remain there. Apart from assisting her son to be victorious in his accession to the throne, she made giant strides in the development of the kingdom during her son's reign. Firstly, she helped to consolidate the power and influence of Benin Kingdom as one of the most powerful kingdoms in the rainforest region of West Africa. Secondly, she participated in the Benin-Idah war by raising an army for her son, leading her own regiment and employing supernatural powers to ensure her son's victory.²⁷ It is believed that war was won spiritually before it even began physically.²⁸ The victory over Igala not only eliminated a potential threat but enabled the Benin kingdom to consolidate its imperial power in the north-south Niger river trade, which stretched as far as the Songhai empire and the Atlantic Ocean.

After Idia, other women began to accompany their husbands to the battlefield. For example, *Iyoba* Idia was said to have tutored Queen Elaba, the wife of *Oba* Esigie, on military strategy and magical powers, supporting Elaba's accompaniment of the *Oba* to the battlefield.²⁹

²⁷ Osadolor, 9.

²⁸ Anthonia Makwemoise Yakubu, 'Against Her Kind: The Phenomenon of Women Against Women in Ovia Cult Worship,' *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 5:5 (2014),135-36.

²⁹ Oludamola Adebowale, 'The Untold Tale Between *Oba* Esigie and *Iyoba* Idia of Benin,' *The Guardian Nigeria News-Nigeria and World News*, 4th June, 2019. Available at <https://guardian.ng/life/the-untold-tale-between-oba-esigie-and-iyoba-idia-of-benin/>; accessed 17 April 2024.

In addition, Idia's life ended the age-long tradition of killing the mother of an *Oba* before his coronation. This was a huge victory for royal women, as they now had the right to live and enjoy their sons' reigns. She also brought respect to the title Queen Mother. After Idia, Queen Mothers came to be considered as instrumental for the protection, well-being, and survival of the *Oba* and his kingdom.³⁰ This belief and the title *Iyoba* has continued to the present time in Benin's political institutions.

Image 2: Queen Mother pendant mask: *Iyoba*. The pendant mask is believed to have been produced in the early sixteenth century for *Oba* Esigie, the king of Benin, to honor his mother, Idia. The *oba* may have worn it at rites commemorating his mother, although today such pendants are worn at annual ceremonies of spiritual renewal and purification.

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Iyoba Idia and Queen Amina contributed greatly to the political, economic, and military development of their societies. Their stories support a growing awareness that in the pre-colonial political history of Nigerian societies, women were not excluded from the political sphere. Rather, they featured prominently in the political evolution and development of their societies. This paper presents a narrative of the two matriarchs who made outstanding legacies to their kingdoms, thereby laying the foundation for the enthronement of women into positions of political authority in the contemporary time. There emerged some women heroines who were appointed to prominent positions to represent their people in the modern political system.

Conclusion

This work contributes to our understanding of the dynamics of state formation in West African history, and in particular, the study of the women warriors in Benin Kingdom and Zazzau state. In precolonial Nigerian societies, not only kings were responsible for creating political institutions; we have shown here that women were also actively involved in the kingdom or empire-building as warriors, political leaders and advisors to leaders.

It is obvious from the evidence that Queen Amina of Zazzau and *Iyoba* Idia of Benin Kingdom share some similarities as queens, although located in different geographical locations. Queen Amina learned the art of politics and governance at an early age and

³⁰ Giorgio Danese, *Matrilineality and Matriarchy in Africa: An Advancement for Gender Equality or Utopia for Western Democracies?*, Unpublished thesis at LUISS University, Spain, Department of Political Science, 2020, 7-9.

adopted them when she ascended the throne of Zazzau; *Iyoba* Idia played a significant role in the Benin Kingdom during the reigns of her husband, *Oba* Ozuola, and son, *Oba* Esigie, by influencing administrative decisions and inspiring reverence for the position of queen mother.

Both women were warriors who personally fought in wars and led men to war, which was vital in the consolidation of their kingdoms. Queen Amina built a formidable state by expanding the territories of Zazzau through her military conquests, establishing it as one of the great early states of Hausaland. She transformed Zaria into a powerful and prominent centre of trade and commerce. In recognition of her power, influence, and military prowess, the neighbouring Hausa states of Kano, Katsina and far as Bauchi, Nupe and other parts of Northern Nigeria paid tribute to her. *Iyoba* Idia defended her kingdom from attack, using both military and, reputedly, magical tactics to defeat the invaders.

It is true that achievements of women from the royal families cannot be used as a yardstick to measure the contributions of women to the development of their societies. The role of ordinary women should not be ignored. Nevertheless, *Iyoba* Idia and Queen Amina stand out as examples of prominent women who left lasting impacts on the administration and governance of their states despite the prevalence of patriarchy in African societies.

The existence of these two historical matriarchs, among others, supports the voice of modern women in the process of nation-building and decolonization, and the development of their societies. The striking similarity between the two is their bravery and successful tactics during warfare. They were highly trained and had good military skills, though *Iyoba* Idia also deployed her supernatural and medicinal powers on the battlefield of the Benin-Idah war. Perhaps most importantly, the *Oba*'s mother is no longer killed as a tradition today in Benin; instead, she is highly respected, with her own office and roles at the *Oba*'s palace. That people of Zazzau and Benin Kingdom are still held in high esteem today is partially due to the impact of these two warrior women.

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