

The Great Walls of the Ancient Benin Kingdom

Benin City, the current capital of Edo State in Nigeria, is still surrounded by huge mounds of asymmetrical and unstable earth, the remnants of colossal walls that are increasingly taking their place as another ancient marvel alongside the likes of the Great Wall of China, the ruins of Great Zimbabwe and India's Taj Mahal. Crisscrossing an estimated 16,000 kilometers and encircling 6,500 square kilometers of community lands, the Walls of Benin¹ restricted access to the former Benin Kingdom and strictly demarcated its boundaries. Although the kingdom was already insulated by armed guards and solid gates that were locked at night, the elaborate earthwork reinforced security against the adversarial Oyo Kingdom to the south, the Sokoto Caliphate to the north and the threat of marauding slave raiders from Europe.

Cited as one of the lengthiest ancient fortifications in the world, archaeological studies estimate that construction of the Benin ramparts started around 800 AD and continued till the mid-1400s. Credited with initiating the multifaceted project, Oba² Oguola (circa 1280-1295) directed the digging of the first and second moats, after which 20 more were subsequently added around Benin and its vicinities. In the 15th century, Oba Ewuare (1440-1473 CE) would expedite the process, extending and consolidating the moats by adding "great thoroughfares" and erecting "9 fortified gateways" (Alayande 72).

Until it was pillaged by the British in 1897, Benin was one of the most commercially and industrially developed kingdoms in the coastal hinterland of West Africa, and is principally celebrated for its advanced mastery of bronze and ivory sculpting. Its clash with the British was preceded by events that took place during the latter part of the 19th century when the reigning Oba Ovonramwen essentially rebuffed attempts by Britain to establish close ties with his kingdom. While increased diplomatic efforts by the British allegedly led to the signing of the 1892 Gallwey Treaty, which favored British imperial interests and proposed greater authority over its subjects, there is some controversy as to whether Ovonramwen actually signed the treaty. All

¹ Referred to as "Iya" by the indigenous people.

² King

diplomacy would eventually be discarded after an altercation between Benin palace guards and eight visiting British delegates led to the murder of the delegates. The British launched a retaliatory offensive in 1897, using superior military power to defeat the Benin army and lay waste to the kingdom. Subsequently, Benin was annexed by the British while its walls were extensively destroyed. Its priceless art collections and carvings were also plundered on a massive scale.

At the height of its sovereignty, the Benin Kingdom stretched from the western shores of the Niger River and continued through the southwest in Ondo State and parts of Lagos in modern Nigeria. A picture of an even more extensive empire is provided by Lanre Alayande:

At its maximum extent the empire is claimed by the Edos to have extended from the Igbo kingdom of Onitsha in the east of Nigeria, through parts [of] the southwestern region of Nigeria, modern day Benin Republic, Togo, and into the present-day nation of Ghana. The Ga Peoples of Ghana trace their ancestry to the ancient Kingdom of Benin. (72)

The Benin earthwork, which reaches heights of up to 18 meters, illustrates an intricate design comprising a sequence of inner and outer interconnecting circles, and an impressive architectural combination of ramparts and moats. The outer walls were of earthen embankments complemented by ditches that served a dual role—besides being an integral part of the walls they also functioned as a quarry that stored material used to expand the walls. Essentially, the exterior barricade was built with earth excavated from ditches dug to create inner moats.

Other details of the building process are documented by Fred Pearce who, in *New Scientist*, identifies “a mosaic of more than 500 interconnected settlement boundaries” that allegedly “took an estimated 150 million hours of digging to construct” (40). Alayande draws similar conclusions in his reference to the excavation efforts of archeologist Graham Connah on the site in the early 1960s:

Connah estimated that its construction if spread out over 5 dry seasons would have required a workforce of 1,000 laborers working ten hours a day seven days a week....

Excavations also uncovered a rural network of earthen walls 4 to 8 thousand miles long that would have taken an estimated 150 million man hours to build and must have taken hundreds of years to build. These were apparently thrown down to mark out territories for towns and cities. (72)

Unfortunately, the Walls of Benin may suffer the same fate that has befallen several artefacts and archaeological relics in Nigeria and Africa. Scattered vestiges of the structure delineate the extent to which it is in disrepair. While sections are overgrown by foliage, others are continuously pulled down and used for various construction purposes by the indigenous people. Nonetheless, significant portions of the earthwork are still standing and can be salvaged.

Though the dikes and walls of Benin have been technically protected by legislation since 1961, they are in urgent need of preservation and maintenance work, and also require more stringent measures to shield them against further vandalism. Without effective law enforcement and financial commitment from government and stakeholders, the task of safeguarding the walls appears to be unattainable with each passing day. There is a disheartening possibility, therefore, that this phenomenal structure—the symbol of an eminent kingdom, an embodiment of colonial opposition and a potential boost to a waning tourism sector—may succumb to neglect and the intellectual failure to appreciate treasured antiquities. And all this in the midst of so much talk about reviving culture and celebrating our heritage.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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