

From Face to Face—Africa

# Oba Esigie, the king of Benin who was the first West African leader to establish diplomatic relations with a European country

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Oba Esigie, the powerful ruler of the Benin Kingdom. Pic credit: Association of Great Benin Descendants

When Oba Esigie ascended the throne in 1504, Great Benin, also known as Edo, was an important state that flourished in southern Nigeria.

For about 46 years that he was in power, Esigie was well known for his literacy, hospitality and his abilities as a communicator to the extent that he would establish peaceful relations with Portuguese ambassadors, as well as, other Christian missionaries.

This made him the first leader in the **West-African Sub-Region to establish diplomatic relations with a European country** while his son became the first accredited African envoy to Portugal court.

Despite this relationship, efforts made by Europeans to have access to the hinterland to benefit from its rich natural resources did not materialize as Esigie never allowed them to.

Born to Oba Ozolua's and Iyoba Idia in 1504, Esigie was named Prince Osawe, but after succeeding his father to the throne, he took the title of Oba Esigie.

He was at loggerheads with his brother, Idubor, who argued that his birthright was taken away from him. According to history, Idubor's mother gave birth to him a few hours before Esigie was born. However, because Idubor did not immediately cry at birth, Esigie, who did was reported first to the king and his proclamation rights were performed.

This tradition angered Idubor, who would go to war with his brother on several occasions before he was finally defeated.

Esigie would go on to reign over the ancient Benin Kingdom while maintaining a strong connection to Portugal throughout his reign.

Becoming the first leader in the West-African Sub-Region to establish diplomatic relations with a European country, Esigie encouraged extensive trade with the Europeans though ensuring that his kingdom was independent of their control.

**Accounts state** that Esigie sold slaves to the Portuguese, the French, and later the English. This became a major business in the kingdom as its armies captured people from other West African kingdoms towards that purpose.

“At this time the Portuguese described Esigie's capital as a city with a nine-mile wall around it. As several historians have pointed out, this description reveals that Benin was a wealthy trading center, but its great wall suggests that it had many enemies and was plagued by unrest and instability,” writes *Encyclopedia.com*.

At a point in time, Portuguese agents tried to talk Esigie into acquiring firearms from Portugal for future campaigns.

But this came with a clause. The Portuguese king **wrote** Esigie, explaining to him that: *“When we see that you have embraced the teachings of Christianity like a good and faithful Christian, there will be nothing within our realms which we shall not be glad to favour you, whether it be arms or cannon and all other weapons of war for use against your enemies; of such things we have a great store, as your ambassador Dom Jorge will inform you.”*

But Esigie paid deaf ears to this, and in 1516, even without Portuguese arms, he defeated the **Igala** to the north, who had tried to invade his kingdom.

Esigie forced the defeated Igala to pay reparations. Nevertheless, the Portuguese king was able to send missionaries to Benin who successfully converted the Oba's son to the Christian faith. A few churches were also established in the kingdom even though Christianity became a minority religion, according to *When We Ruled*.

The powerful Esigie, meanwhile, has his mother to thank for his successful reign over

Benin. His mother, Idia, was a strong influence on him as he “undertook nothing of importance without having sought her counsel.”



Queen Idia. Pic credit: Rain Queens

Esigie introduced a special post in the administration for his mother called the *lyoba*, the Queen Mother, and commissioned a “highly improved metal art” that has since received wide acclaim. The famous Queen Mother Idia busts are some of the most well-known art pieces.

Idia’s image is also expressively captured in the famous Ivory mask, which served as the logo of the 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), held in 1977 in Lagos, Nigeria.

“The exquisite craftsmanship of the mask bears testimony to the quality of life and superlative level of civilization of the Benin people prior to their colonization,” an article by *Trip Down Memory Lane* said.

Years later, the British would invade the Benin kingdom and take away various works of art commissioned by Esigie, including Ivory and bronze works before burning down the ancient city.

Today, most of these works of art are held in prominent museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum.

The *Oba of the Benin Kingdom* has, nevertheless, stood the test of time even though

Nigeria's history is made up of several unique elements. While Nigeria is a constitutional democracy that elects its leaders, the hundreds of ethnic communities scattered across the country still acknowledge their own traditional rulers and among the most recognized traditional leaders in Nigeria is the Oba of Benin.