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## The Benin Kingdom (13<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries) as a Megacommunity

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### ABSTRACT

*The article provides an anthropological analysis of the socio-political system of the Benin Kingdom from coming to power of the Oba dynasty till the British conquest. The course of this system formation and its basic characteristic features are outlined. It is argued that the Benin Kingdom between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries was a supercomplex society but not a state, as it was not based on supra-kin (territorial) social ties and there was no professional (bureaucratic) administration in it. The kin-based extended family community always remained this society's focus, and the supracommunal institutions were built up by its matrix, what is impossible in a state. So, being not less complex and developed than many so-called 'early states' (e.g., Claessen and Skalnik 1978) or 'archaic states' (Feinman and Marcus 1998), Benin was not a state but rather a specific alternative to the state. This form of socio-political organization can be called 'a megacommunity' and depicted as four concentric circles forming an upset cone: the extended family, the community, the chiefdom, and finally the kingdom.*

### INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our aim in this article is to examine from the standpoint of anthropological theory the socio-political system of the Bini society during the longest and most important period in its history: from coming to power of the Second (Oba) dynasty presumably in the thirteenth century till the British colonial conquest in 1897. In other

words, we concentrate on the socio-political system of the Benin Kingdom – one of the most socially and politically sophisticated polities all over precolonial Africa. Though it deals with the past, this article is not historical in the sense that we are not going to reconstruct concrete events of the past in any significant detail.<sup>1</sup> Rather our intention is, basing on various kinds of evidence, to discern general socio-political and cultural trends behind the rich history of the Bini people and their kingdom; the trends that underpinned history. For doing this, we refer, quite naturally, to the theories and methods elaborated mainly within anthropology, including such its subfields as historical and political anthropology.

In particular, we hope to trace the general socio-political trajectory of Benin Kingdom from the standpoint of the growth and permutations of the Bini society's overall cultural complexity. The notion of complexity (and supercomplexity as its derivative) is used in the present work in the sense in which it has long been accepted in anthropology.<sup>2</sup> Since the nineteenth-century evolutionists (Claessen 2000: 15), complexity is routinely understood in anthropology (including archaeology) in structural terms, and for its rise different socio-economic, political, ideological, ecological and other factors or their sets are regarded as responsible, depending on particular researchers' approaches (see Wenke 1999: 331–385; Denton 2004; Sassaman 2004: 231–236). Thus, the more components, that is towering each other 'levels of socio-political integration', a culture embraces, the more complex the culture is. So, '[d]efinitions of *complexity* begin with a connotation that is as applicable to mechanical or biological systems as it is to societies: complexity is a relative measure of the number of parts in a system and number of interrelationships among those parts' (Sassaman 2004: 231; original emphasis). Eventually, it turns out that '[t]otal complexity... is the product of specializations of local units, local exchange, and administrative complexity' – 'the sum of administrative segments and decision-making' levels (Wright 2006: 3). For the majority of anthropologists concerned with the problem of societal complexity, the socio-cultural history is the history of complexity growth from simple to middle-range complex and to supercomplex societies, accompanied by the respective increase in stability understood as the societies' ability to cope with their possible fission: 'Change in

the direction of increasing complexity goes on because more complex organization permits greater internal stability in the system' (Scott 1989: 6; see also Cohen 1981). Supercomplex societies are states and what we and some colleagues call 'alternatives to the state' (see, *e.g.*, Bondarenko 2000b, 2006; Bondarenko and Korotayev 2000; Bondarenko *et al.* 2011; Kradin *et al.* 2003; Grinin *et al.* 2004). The 'alternatives' are not less complex than states, but their socio-political organization is different and they should be considered as essentially non- rather than pre-state societies. By arguing this, we emphasize that to be not a state does not inevitably mean to be inferior to the state in any respect; the Benin Kingdom is a clear proof of it.

As for the state, our approach to this phenomenon stems from the presumption that it should be perceived not as a specific set of political institutions only but, first and foremost, as a type of society to which this set of institutions is adequate (Bondarenko 2008).<sup>3</sup> This position leads to the necessity of paying special attention to coming to the fore of the non-kin, territorial relations in state society. What should be realized clearly and not forgotten while dealing with this criterion is that it is really evolutionary: 'Kinship-based divisions [in society] gradually lose their importance in favour of institutional, political and economic divisions' (Tymowski 2008: 172; our emphasis. – *D. B.*). In this respect, history is a continuum of socio-political forms in the typological sequence. In this sequence one can observe a general dynamics from greater to less importance of kin *vs.* territorial relations that eventually resulted in the fact that 'kinship and other types of ascriptive relationship have ceased to be central organizing principles of society' (Hallpike 1986: 1). So, the state may be fixed in the situation when territorial ties begin clearly dominate over those of kinship on the supralocal levels of society's complexity.

In the course of this transformation, local communities, even if preserve their initial structure and the right to manage their purely internal affairs, turn into nothing more than administrative (and taxpaying as well as labor providing) units in the wider context of the state polity. It is vitally important for a state: if a state fails to adapt the community to its needs, stagnation and decline of the political system follow.<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking, in a successful state

supreme power does not develop the community matrix further on but rather ‘on the contrary begins to restructure society’ in its own image (Beliaev 2000: 194). Indeed, as Kurtz (1991: 162; see also 2008) rightly points out, ‘... the reduction of the influence of local level organization upon the citizens’ is ‘a major goal’ of states’ legitimation strategies. If the state triumphs, ‘the encompassment of the local sphere by the state’ (Tanabe 1996: 154) becomes the case.

With the transition from kinship to territoriality as the basic organizational principle, another feature fundamental for the state – the emergence of specialized professional administration (bureaucracy) is intrinsically connected (*e.g.*, Diamond 1997: 281; Bondarenko 2006: 64). The state tends to encompass all the spheres of social life and with its rise the situation when local institutions (the family, lineage, and community) influenced directly the form and nature of the supralocal ones, was reversed. In fact, this, as well as bureaucracy’s very emergence and existence, becomes possible just due to the territorial ties coming into prominence: only under such circumstances a stranger unrelated to any member of a community by kin ties can effectively be appointed the community ruler or supervisor in the political center of the regional or/and the whole-polity level. As Spencer (2003: 11185) rightly points out, ‘[a] state administration... is inherently bureaucratic’, or, in the words of Haas (1995: 18), the presence of ‘institutional bureaucracies’ is among ‘basic characteristics... standing at the heart of the state form of organization’.

#### **THE PATH TO MEGACOMMUNITY: A SKETCH OF THE BINI SOCIO-POLITICAL EVOLUTION**

The ancestors of the Bini came to their final place of inhabitation in the depth of tropical forest from the savanna belt in the first millennium BCE (Bondarenko and Roese 1999; Bondarenko 2001: 25–39). At first the Bini had to live intermingled with the aboriginal settlers – the Efa, eventually assimilated by them (Bondarenko and Roese 1998b).

The Bini transited to hoe agriculture in the end of the first millennium BCE – the first half of the first millennium CE (Shaw 1978: 68; Ryder 1985: 371; Connah 1987: 140–141). The formation of independent local communities composed of extended

families marked this radical change and characterized that period of the Bini history in the socio-political respect (Bondarenko and Roesse 1998a). Their rise turned out the earliest stage of the process that finally resulted in the emergence of the Benin Kingdom. Since then, the extended family community has always been the fundamental, substratum institution of the Bini, the socio-political, cultural, economic background of their society. On its matrix, or pattern, all the supracommunity levels of socio-political integration were shaped later, when the society became complex and the communities lost independence (Bondarenko 1995a; 2001; 2006). Hoe agriculture was among the factors that promoted such a course of events. The woody natural environment of the region prevented introduction of the plough and individualization of agricultural production, conserving the extended family community as the basic social unit for hardly an immense prospect (Bondarenko 1995a: 101–117; 2000c; Usuanlele 2005: 260). It still exists generally the same, and this stability allows an extrapolation of the ethnographic evidence on the Bini community of earlier historical periods with quite a considerable degree of plausibility (Bradbury 1964).

The principle of seniority, so characteristic to a greater or lesser degree of all the complexity levels of the Bini society in the time of Kingdom, was rooted in the communal three-grade system of male age-sets (for details, see Thomas 1910, I: 11–12; Talbot 1926, III: 545–549; Bradbury 1957: 15, 32, 34, 49–50; 1969; 1973: 170–175; Igbafe 1979: 13–15; Bondarenko 1995a: 144–149; Usuanlele 2005: 260–261). The obligation of the eldest age-grade members (the *edion* – the ‘elders’; sing. *odion*) was to rule families and communities. As far as the ancestor cult fixed the position of every person in Benin society and the whole Universe, the elder people naturally were considered the closest to the ancestors, thus being able to be the best performers of the role of mediators between them and the living, crucial for the well-being of each and every Bini. The *edion* age-grade members, including heads and representatives without fail of all extended families, formed the community council. That council of elders appointed and invested the head of the senior age-grade as the council and thus the community leader. He bore the title of *odionwere* (pl. *edionwere*). So, the head

of the whole community could easily represent not the family of his predecessor: there was no sole privileged family in the initial Bini community (Egharevba 1949: 11, 13–14; Bradbury 1957: 29, 33–34; 1973: 156, 172, 179–180, 243; Sidahome 1964: 114, 127; Uwechue 1970: 145). The most archaic form of government, the public assembly, probably still was of some significance at that distant time, too (see Bondarenko 1995a: 165).

The major reason for the very existence of the institution of *edionwere* in people's minds reflected in the principles of their appointment, defined the ritual function as the most important among *edionwere*'s duties. Besides, the worship of the deities and the ancestors on behalf of the people by the *odionwere* further strengthened the position of this dignitary. But in the initial Bini community, its head was not merely the ritual leader. He was responsible for the division of the communal land, was the judge, the keeper and guard of traditions, *etc.* (Bradbury 1957: 32–33; 1973: 176–79). *Edionwere* received gifts from those governed by them, but those gifts were of the prestigious and ritual character (Talbot 1926, III: 914): economically, they depended on their own families.

However, in the mid-first millennium CE (Obayemi 1976: 256), the conditions for further political centralization and concentration of power grew ripe. The separation of powers in a part of communities into ritual, left for *edionwere*, and profane was the next step of the Bini socio-political evolution. The appearance of the institution of profane ruler (*onogie*; pl. *enigie*) was related to the process of overcoming the community level as the utmost with the formation of the first supracommunity level of societal organization. This level rose in the form of chiefdom – ‘an autonomous political unit comprising a number of villages or communities under the permanent control of a paramount chief’ (Carneiro 1981: 45).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, a part of local communities remained independent and continued to exist alongside with chiefdoms. Later, within the Benin Kingdom, they enjoyed autonomy and their *edionwere* were comparable by their status to heads of also autonomous chiefdoms (Bradbury 1957: 34; Bondarenko 1995a: 164–173, 184–185; 1995b: 140–145; 2001: 55–65). Thus, since then communities of two types co-existed: without a privileged family in which the only ruler, the *odionwere* could represent any kin group, and with such a family in cases

when the hereditary *onogie* existed in a community alongside with the *odionwere* (Thomas 1910, I: 12; Egharevba 1956: 6; Bradbury 1957: 33, 1973: 177–179).

The communities of the second type formed cores of chiefdoms: only the profane office holder could become the head of chiefdom (Bradbury 1957: 33; Egharevba 1960: 4). The *onogie's* community was as privileged in chiefdom as the family of community head was in community. The cult of the chiefdom head's ancestors was similar to that of the family and community heads' ancestors on the higher level, as well as to the royal ancestors' cult on the lower one in the time of Kingdom (Bradbury 1973: 232). There was also the chiefdom council similar to corresponding family and community institutions, formed by the elders and leaders of all member communities and presided by the head of chiefdom (Egharevba 1949: 11; Sidahome 1964: 100, 158, 164). Thus, the senior age-grade played an important part in governing the chiefdom, too (Bradbury 1957: 16).

The very possibility of increase in the sociopolitical integration level by means of neighboring communities' unification was determined by the development of agriculture, the growth of its productivity on the basis of new technologies that appeared due to the introduction of iron, and, as an outcome, the increase in population number and density from the mid-first millennium CE (Connah 1975: 242; 1987: 141–145; Oliver and Fagan 1975: 65; Obayemi 1976: 257–258; Atmore and Stacey 1979: 39; Darling 1981: 114–118; 1984, II: 302; Shaw 1984: 155–157). This, in its turn, led to a violent competition for resources, the arable land in first place. The environment determined the type of subsistence economy that demanded regular land clearings and extenuation of agricultural territories. 'Even before the first contacts with Europe the West African cultivators cut down vast areas of forest and replaced it by cropland and fallow' (Morgan 1959: 48). Thus, besides conserving the extended family community, this way of production led to conflicts between neighbors for the land. Life changed with the Efa, who no doubt claimed for superiority over newcomers, also was an obvious cause of the large role of warfare in the rise of Bini chiefdoms. The introduction of iron gave an important additional impetus to intensification of the military activities in the area (Bondarenko 1999: 25–26).

Initially, the integration of the Bini communities was peaceful (Igbafe 1974: 2–3; Obayemi 1976: 242; Connah 1987: 136; Eweka 1989: 11), and it is reasonable to suppose that they formed alliances against the Efa. Hereditary leaders appeared in the course of struggle against enemies – those were the warriors who demonstrated exceptional bravery, strength and so forth. At first they were recognized as military chiefs by all the alliance member communities, and then transcended their authority into the inner-alliance sphere settling disputes between villages under their control and convoking and presiding over meetings (Bradbury 1957: 34). Eventually, they made their offices hereditarily attributed to their native communities, thus transforming them (as well as their families) into privileged, on the one hand, and into communities with separation of powers, on the other hand. That was the moment of the emergence of the chiefdom. There were not less than 130 chiefdoms all over Biniland in the beginning of the second millennium (Obayemi 1976: 242). Not so infrequently they opposed each other (Darling 1988: 129).

Urbanization among the Bini was directly connected with the rise of chiefdoms. The process of city formation started practically simultaneously with the chiefdoms' rapid growth. As a matter of fact, early proto-city centers, about ten in number, including future Benin City, were chiefdoms (Jungwirth 1968: 140, 166; Ryder 1969: 3; Onokerhoraye 1975: 296–298; Darling 1988: 127–129; Bondarenko 1995a: 190–192; 1995c: 145–147; 1999; 2001: 65–71). They struggled with each other for the role of the sole place of attraction and of the political and ritual center for the overwhelming majority, if not for all, the Bini. At last, Benin City gained victory and the other proto-cities went down to the level of big villages (Talbot 1926, I: 153, 156–157; Egharevba 1949: 90; 1960: 11–12, 85; Ryder 1969: 3; Onokerhoraye 1975: 97; Darling 1988: 133; Bondarenko 1995a: 93–96; 1995b: 216–217; 1995c: 145–146).

That was also the eventual fortune of Udo, the most violent rival of Benin City (Talbot 1926, I: 160; Macrae Simpson 1936, III: 10; Egharevba 1964: 9), which probably was the first capital of the Kingdom – the seat of Igodo, the legendary founder of the so-called '1<sup>st</sup> dynasty' of the *Ogiso* who ruled between the late first and early second millennia CE.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere we together with Peter

Roose have argued that the first *Ogiso* could have come (and bring monarchy as the form of suprachiefdom political organization to Biniland) from the Yoruba town of Ife, halfway between which and Benin City Udo is situated (Bondarenko and Rouse 2001; 2010). With the *Ogiso*'s coming to power, far from being peaceful, the period of the local Bini chiefdoms flourishing is associated. Meanwhile, that was the time of the first attempt, made by the *Ogiso* rulers, to establish not only a supracommunity but also suprachiefdom authority in the country.<sup>7</sup> The institution of kingship was simply imposed on the Bini multiple independent communities and chiefdoms without any genetic, organic connection with them, their social structures and political institutions.

Benin of the *Ogiso* time can be characterized as a complex chiefdom – a group of chiefdoms under the leadership of the strongest among them – with a ‘touch’ of autonomous communities which did not belong to any chiefdom. But the ambivalence of the initial situation crucially influenced the immanent instability of the suprachiefdom institutions and the course of further historical events. The ‘1<sup>st</sup> dynasty’ is a conditional name for the *Ogiso* rulers. In reality, they did not form a dynasty in the proper sense of the word. The third *Ogiso* became the last in their Yoruba, Ife line. He returned to Ife but by that time the very institution of the supreme suprachiefdom ruler had already been established firmly enough in Benin, disregarding its outside origin and correspondence to the level of sociopolitical organization, not achieved by the Bini yet. The next about twenty *Ogiso* were not relatives to each other. Like all the later 1<sup>st</sup> dynasty rulers, they were the Bini, heads of chiefdoms within then Benin, the strongest at the very moments of emptiness of the throne. None of those rulers managed to found his line of the *Ogiso*, to make his chiefdom the strongest in Benin for a considerable time span, without direct connection with his personal abilities: the society still was not ready to accept a stable supra-chiefdom authority.

For the last eight or so reigns the truly dynastic way of transmission of the *Ogiso* office was restored. We have no evidence that can help us reconstruct that historical situation and to learn exactly why and when it happened or what chiefdom's head was a success in establishing the dynasty. What is obvious, is that this event re-

flected and then promoted a further consolidation of the Benin society to the suprachiefdom level, and that mainly just during that dynasty's being at power the conditions for stable royal office grew ripe once and for all. It happened due to first quantitative and only then qualitative changes in the manifestation of the same factors that led to complication of the socio-political organization before. Thus in the anthropological sense the process of establishment of the really hereditary kingship was evolutionary, not revolutionary (see Igbafe 1974: 7): '... in Benin there was no sudden transformation of the political structure coinciding with the advent of the dynasty' of the *Oba* (Ryder 1967: 31). By the end of the *Ogiso* period (about the turn of the twelfth century), a further prolongation of the situation when chiefdoms (and autonomous communities) bore the suprachiefdom authority while the *Ogiso* governed by the methods typical for chiefdom rulers, became impossible. Eventually, the 1<sup>st</sup> dynasty was not a success in establishing an effective central – suprachiefdom – authority. The society entered the period of crisis of the political system.

The first attempt to overcome the crisis was a step backwards – the abolition of monarchy. The oral historical tradition holds, that the last *Ogiso*, Owodo, 'was banished for misrule by the angry people, who then appointed Evian as administrator of the government of the country because of his past services to the people' (Egharevba 1960: 6). But it was impossible to govern Benin as a chiefdom any longer. However, commoners in their starvation to restore the *odionwere* system still prevented the first of only two interregnum rulers, Evian, from establishing his own dynasty, what he desired to do (Egharevba 1960: 6; 1970: 5–6; Eweka 1989: 15). Already during the rule of the second 'administrator', Ogiamwen, Benin was put on the brink of breaking into fragments (Ebohon 1972: 3) – separate communities and chiefdoms (for details, see Bondarenko and Roesse 2004).

Soon another step was made, and it was a decisive step forward. The Benin City chiefdom leaders (the *Uzama*) initiated an invitation to the throne of the Ife prince Oranmiyan. He came, and though later preferred to return to his native city, founded the new dynasty: his son from a noble Bini woman was crowned *Oba* under the name Eweka in about 1200–1250.<sup>8</sup> For the Bini, that was to mean a continuation of the *Ogiso* line, for it is evident that an Ife prince was

chosen by Benin City leaders not by chance. As a compatriot of the first rulers of the *Ogiso* line, Oranmiyan was to symbolize the restoration of the previous order, the transition of supreme authority from the *Ogiso*. This fact could ensure him the recognition by the people, decrease the feeling of serious changes in their minds and hearts, and all in all pacify the society.

The *Oba* eventually managed to establish effective suprachiefdom authority. In the result, Benin City transformed from the strongest segment (chiefdom) of the country into the center that was not a segment of the whole but stood above all the segments including Benin City as chiefdom. That was power and authority of another, higher than of chiefdom, 'quality'. The *Oba* achieved this result in a severe, sometimes bloody struggle against local rulers and the *Uzama*. It ended with the decisive victory of the fourth *Oba* Ewedo only more than half a century after the 2<sup>nd</sup> dynasty's accession to the throne (see Bondarenko 1995a: 234–236; 2001: 171–173). With the establishment of really effective supracommunity and suprachiefdom authority in the thirteenth century, the historical search of the most appropriate for the Bini forms of social and political organization at all the levels of their being was finally over. Benin found the sociopolitical 'frames' for all the changes of the subsequent centuries till the violent interruption of her independent existence by the British colonialists in 1897.

#### **BENIN KINGDOM BETWEEN THE THIRTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES AS A MEGACOMMUNITY**

So, the Benin Kingdom between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries was a supercomplex (generally not less developed than many early states) yet a non-state society and constituted an alternative to the state. We have called Benin of the 2<sup>nd</sup> dynasty time a 'megacommunity'. Its structure can be presented as four concentric circles forming an upset cone. The 'circles' were as follows: the extended family (the smallest self-sufficing unit, the extended family community,<sup>9</sup> the chiefdom, and finally, the broadest circle that included all the three narrower ones, – the Kingdom as a whole.

It is remarkable that this four-circle socio-political system corresponded to the Bini's idea of the Universe (*agbo*), which also was a hierarchy of four concentric circles: the human being (with four

soles of different orders) – the terrestrial space, including Benin megacommunity – the world of ancestral spirits and senior deities – the Universe as a whole (see Bondarenko 1995a; 1997). In our view, it was neither a mere coincidence that the structure of the Universe in people's minds was similar to that of socio-political realities in which they lived, nor, of course, that any one (social or mental construction) was consciously modeled on the other. Rather this similarity was an outcome of complex interplay between the social and the imagined, in the process of which they were shaping and justifying themselves and each other (see Durand 1960, 1964; Searle 1995; Castoriadis 1997), although in the final analysis, Durkheim (1982) was right arguing that, as far as people live in societies, all what they have to deal with are essentially 'social facts'.

The terrestrial world was considered as central, basic for the whole Universe. Benin, in turn, seemed its (and hence the whole world's) focal point; myths told how the Earth and the life had emerged just there (see, *e.g.*, Ebohon 1972: 5; Eweka 1992: 2–4; Isaacs and Isaacs 1994: 7–9; Ugowe 1997: 1). So, the Bini's picture of the Universe turned out 'Beninocentric'. The community was the center of that society; in the Bini minds, it hence turned out the very heart of the Universe's heart, the core of its core. And in reality, the community, as the basic institution, fastened together all the levels of the Benin society's hierarchical structure. At all the levels the institutions were penetrated by essentially communal ties and relations (Bondarenko 1995a: 90–181).

At the same time, as it was pointed out at the outset, our theoretical premise is that a state cannot be based on community as the matrix institution and on kinship as the dominant type of social ties. The thirteenth-nineteenth centuries Benin, notwithstanding its structural and overall cultural supercomplexity, developed an opposite situation. Not only social but also political relations were 'naturally' perceived and expressed in kinship terms.<sup>10</sup> Kinship was the true, 'objective' socio-cultural background of this society that tied it into a megacommunity. The megacommunity was a hierarchy of social and political institutions from the basic, substratum complexity level up to that of kingdom, built up by the kin-based community matrix. The integrity of the whole supercomplex socie-

ty was provided by basically the same mechanisms as of a local community.

Ideologically, this part was played first of all by the ancestor cult which ascribed legitimacy to political institutions from the society's bottom to the top (see Bondarenko 1995a: 176–181). Even in our time, for the Bini the ancestors ‘... are never left out in the scheme of things in the society’ (Aghahowa 1988: 63). The spirits of royal ancestors ‘spread’ their authority on all the sovereign’s subjects and formed the core of what today would be called an ‘official ideology’. The very existence and prosperity of the populace was believed to be guaranteed by the presence of the dynasty of sacralized *Oba*.<sup>11</sup> The role of all-Benin integrity symbol and not that of ‘profane’ ruler was the most important historical destination of the *Oba* (Palau Marti 1964; Kochakova 1986: 197–224; 1996; Bondarenko 1995a: 203–231). Through his image people realized their belonging to a much broader unit than their native communities or chiefdoms, that is to the megacommunity as a whole. In this respect, the *Oba* was indispensably instrumental in shaping and effective functioning of the megacommunity as an ‘imagined community’ in Benedict Anderson’s (1991) sense, adjusted for the pre-national, pre-modern nature of the Benin society.

The institution of the *Oba* initially appeared as a combination of profane functions and sacral duties in one person, but the dynamics of Benin political system was towards a constant increase in his sacral duties at the expense of profane, which were gradually cleaned up to the hands of different categories of titled chiefs. Eventually, in the early seventeenth century the *Oba* lost the last profane function they still possessed – the right to lead the army. The folk ‘was bound together by the reverence felt for... the Obba of Benin’ (Talbot 1926, III: 563), and the role of the supreme ruler in Benin history was no doubt only growing as his profane power was diminishing. It was so because within the context of the Benin culture in general and political culture in particular, the immense sacral power concentrated in the *Oba*’s hands was a specific kind of real power which allowed an effective limiting of the subjects’ behavioral alternatives.<sup>12</sup> Thus, monarchy does not presuppose a state.

From the *Ogiso* time, the megacommunity inherited and even strengthened such traits characteristic of the complex chiefdom

(see Kradin 1995: 24–25) as, for example, ethnic heterogeneity and non-involvement of the elite into subsistence production. But while ‘simple’ and ‘complex’ chiefdoms represent basically the same, chiefdom, pattern of socio-political organization, the same ‘quality’ of authority and power (‘The general rights and obligations of chiefs at each level of the hierarchy are similar...’ [Earle 1978: 3]), the difference between both of these types on the one hand, and megacommunity on the other hand, is really principal and considerable. In particular, contrary to the *Oba* and typically for chiefdom and complex chiefdom rulers, the *Ogiso* had no formalized and legalized apparatus of coercion at their disposal. This is one of the factors due to which not a transformation into state but a breakdown into simple chiefdoms and independent communities is the typical fortune of complex chiefdoms (Earle 1991: 13). Thus, the megacommunity is a possible way of ‘positive’ transformation of complex chiefdom, an alternative to its disintegration.

Only the megacommunity of the thirteenth-nineteenth centuries formed the real ‘center’ that was ‘above’ all the socio-political components of the country. This center turned out to be able to establish really effective and stable suprachiefdom authorities – the institutions of the *Oba* and titled chiefs of different categories, most important of which formed by the late fifteenth century. Precisely this became the decisive ‘argument’ in the competition of Benin with other proto-cities for the role of the all-Bini center. Not occasionally Benin started dominating over them right after the submission of the *Uzama* by Ewedo. With the advent of Oranmiyan and the establishment of his dynasty, the pattern of Benin socio-political organization changed radically from ‘the extended family – extended family community – chiefdom – complex chiefdom’ to the ‘formula’ of the megacommunity described above.

The *Ogiso's* might extended over the territory of approximately 4,500–5,000 sq km (Egharevba 1960: 4; Roese and Rose 1998: 306 [map]) with the population numbering between 80,000 and 100,000 people (Bondarenko 2001: 123–125). The *Oba* immediately began to expand their ownership: the first *Oba* Ewedo made a military campaign against the Igbo and countenanced migration to the Kukuruku area (Egharevba 1960: 85; Roese 1984: 202; 1992: 383; Eweka 1992: 180). The *Oba* began to pay even more attention to

foreign policy as soon as they (namely, Ewedo in the thirteenth century) solved their main internal problem: subjugated the pre-dynastic nobility – the *Uzama* chiefs (Bondarenko 2001: 171–174; Usuanlele 2005: 264–265). Nevertheless, until the beginning of the period of Benin's most intensive territorial expansion (mid-fifteenth – early seventeenth centuries), its territory did not enlarge much since the *Ogiso* time (Roese and Rose 1998: 306–310 [maps]; Ohadike 1994: 44). However, due to the historic transformation that took place during the reign of the first 'warrior *Oba*' Ewuare the Great (c. 1440–1473), the country became so vast and populous that the army alone numbered from 20,000 to 50,000 warriors (Egharevba 1956: 34; 1966: 13). In the mid-seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, the European visitors estimated the population of the country's capital as 15,000 (Dapper 1671: 487; Adams 1823: 111) but at turn of the eighteenth century, before the city's decline, they gave the figures from 80,000 to 100,000 (see Pacheco Pereira 1937: 64) and ranked Benin City not lower than the largest and most impressive cities of their own continent.

In the time of 'empire', between the second half of the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries with late fifteenth – early seventeenth centuries as heyday, the initially local, communal nature of Benin society came into contradiction with the imperious political and cultural discourse. However, the principles and system of formation and governing the empire (non-deposing of the local rulers in subjugated lands, migrations of *Oba*'s relatives with followers to sparsely populated territories, residing of the Bini administrators of the dependencies not in 'colonies' but in Benin City, reproduction of the same ideological 'pillars' that supported the *Oba*'s authority in Benin, *etc.*) witness that by the moment of the British occupation Benin still was a megacommunity, to which socio-politically varying 'provinces' were joined. So, the megacommunity managed to absorb and 'reinterpret' those elements of the imperious discourse that could seem insurmountable for an essentially local form of socio-political organization.

But the megacommunity differed not only from complex chiefdom but from the state as well. As has been stressed above, the community remained the matrix institution for the Benin society throughout the whole *Oba* period. As far as the community was

based on the extended-family relations of kinship, the whole super-complex society was not organized along predominantly territorial (suprakin) lines (see Bondarenko 2005: 35–43; 2006: 64–88). Respectively, there were no professional administrators, unrelated personally to those under their authority and dependent primarily on propitiuousness of those above them on the bureaucratic ladder. The megacommunity institutions towered above local communities and chiefdoms, established their political dominance over them, but in the essentially communal Benin society with lack of pronounced priority of territorial ties over kin, even those who governed at the supreme level could not become professional administrators. In particular, Benin titled chiefs do not correspond to any feature of bureaucracy proposed by Max Weber (Bondarenko 2002) whose concept of bureaucracy (in general and in pre-industrial states in particular) is most authoritative (*vide strictum* Weber 1947: 333–334, 343; see also Vitkin 1981; Morony 1987: 9–10; Shifferd 1987: 48–49; Creel 2001: 13–17). At the same time, Benin was not simply a non-state society – it was an alternative to the state, as far as its high overall socio-cultural and political complexity level was not inferior to that attributed to the early state or archaic state in respective theories.

**CONCLUSION:  
MEGACOMMUNITY AS A SOCIETAL TYPE**

The specificity of Benin megacommunity's was in the integration on a rather vast territory of a complex, 'many-tier' society predominantly on the basis of the transformed kin principle supplemented by a 'grain' of territorial one. This background was inherited from the community, in which 'vertically'-organized extended families preserved kinship relations not only within themselves but with each other as well, supplementing them by the 'horizontal' ties of neighborhood. Thus, the Benin community was characterized by a tangle of kin and neighbor ties dominated by kinship. The community served as the matrix institution: the way of the Benin Kingdom's formation was through 'adjusting' of the supracommunity socio-political institutions to the markedly 'vertically'-organized community of extended families, in which the basic social ties were those of kinship (elder relatives – younger relatives) and, what is

especially significant for the present discussion, the role of the family head was undisputable.

No doubt, the importance of territorial ties grew considerably in the process and after the megacommunity formation. However, it should be stressed once again that as before such ties were built in the kin relations not only in the ideological sphere but in realities of the socio-political organization either; particularly, kinship was the background of the whole system of government up to its uppermost level (Bradbury 1957: 31).<sup>13</sup> The community also was always the core of the whole Universe in the Bini's outlook. What is more, only structurally and essentially communal society could be identical with the structure of the Universe, as it seemed to the Bini (Bondarenko 1995a: 24–89; 1997). So, the community did not just preserve itself when the supercomplex socio-political construction of the Kingdom appeared (what is typical for states): it remained the matrix, encompassing socio-political institution, the true focus of the society throughout the whole Benin history, notwithstanding the number of complexity levels overbuilding it (Bradbury 1966: 129). It played the key role in specification of the megacommunity's socio-economic, political, and cultural subsystems, as well as in correlation of their transformations. The specificity of megacommunity becomes especially apparent at its comparison with the 'galaxy-like' states studied by Tambiah in Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1977, 1985). Similar to these states, a megacommunity has the political and ritual center – the capital which is the residence of the sacralized ruler, and the near, middle, and remote circles of periphery around it. However, notwithstanding its seeming centripetal character, the true focus of the megacommunity culture is the community, not the political center, as in those Southeast Asian cases.

Besides, the thirteenth-nineteenth centuries Benin Kingdom, as a megacommunity can also be designated, for instance, the late sixteenth-nineteenth centuries Bamum Kingdom in present-day Cameroon which as a whole represented an extension up to the supercomplex level of the lineage principles and organization forms, so the society acquired the shape of 'maximal lineage' (Tardits 1980). Analogously, in traditional kingdoms of another part of that post-colonial state, in the Grasslands, 'the monarchical

system... is ... in no way a totally unique and singular form of organization but displays a virtually identical structure to that of the lineage groups' (Koloss 1992: 42).

Outside Africa, the megacommunities may be recognized, for example, in the Indian societies of the late first millennium BCE – first centuries CE. Naturally, differing in many respects from the Benin pattern (in the type of community, the role of the capital city, *etc.*), they nevertheless fit the main distinctive feature of megacommunity as a non-state social type: an integration of a supercomplex society on the community background and the whole society's encompassment from the local level upwards. In particular, Samozvantsev (2001) describes those societies as permeated by communal orders notwithstanding the difference in socio-political organization forms. 'The principle of communality', he argues, was the most important factor of social organization in India during that period (see also, *e.g.*, Lielukhine 2009). In the south of India this situation lasted much longer, till the time of the Vijayanagara Empire in the mid-fourteenth century, when the region finally experienced '... the greater centralization of political power and the resultant concentration of resources in the royal bureaucracy...' (Palat 1987: 170). A number of other examples of supercomplex societies in which the 'supracommunity political structure was shaped according to the community type' are provided by the first millennium CE Southeast Asian societies, such as Funan and possibly Dvaravati (Rebrikova 1987: 159–163; see, however, Mudar 1999). As non-kinship-based megacommunity, or civil megacommunity, based on the territorial neighbor community, one can consider the ancient Greek *polis*, its Roman version, the *civitas*<sup>14</sup> and other societies of the same model worldwide, for example, the Mountainous Daghestani 'republics' or 'free associations' ('*vol'nye obshchestva*') of the nineteenth century Russian sources (*e.g.*, Aglarov 1988; Korotayev 1995).

Thus, it can be argued that the megacommunity is a specific societal type alternative to the state, which shows that becoming a state is far from the only possibility for a chiefdom-based polity to escape disintegration by making an evolutionary step forward. The Benin Kingdom of the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries is a good example of this phenomenon, underconceptualized and understudied by now.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Such an attempt has already been made by the present author in a number of articles and, particularly, in the book written together with Peter Roesse (Roesse and Bondarenko 2003).

<sup>2</sup> And which is very different from the one accepted in Complexity Studies (see Bondarenko 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For recent discussions on the interrelation between the phenomena of state and society, see, *e.g.*, Bondarenko and Korotayev 2003: 111–113; Bondarenko 2006: 68–69; Vliet 2005: 122–123; Grinin 2007, I: 28–30.

<sup>4</sup> As it happened, for example, in the cases of the nineteenth century West African Samori's state and Kenedugu (Tymowski 1985; 1987: 65–66).

<sup>5</sup> It is remarkable that prior to that time communities also could form unions (Egharevba 1952: 26; 1965: 12). Joint meetings of councils of such unions' member communities were presided over by the senior *odionwere*, chosen according to the age or in conformity with the precedence of certain villages over others (Bradbury 1957: 34). But such unions of communities were not chiefdoms, for they voluntarily comprised basically still independent and politically equal to each other communities. The head of a union was the oldest man of all the union's *edion*, not necessarily a representative of a concrete community (hence not a 'paramount chief') for, due to the fact of independence and equality of member communities of the union, there was no privileged, politically dominating one among them, even though a prominent *odionwere* taking over political responsibility and caring for the people might acquire great power.

<sup>6</sup> The *Ogiso* times cannot be studied with the same amount of certitude as the later *Oba* era of Benin history. However, we hardly think that its study is completely impossible. For our attempts of that Dark Age reconstruction, see Bondarenko 2001: 72–107; Roesse and Bondarenko 2003: 40–54.

<sup>7</sup> To be distinct, in the part of Biniland around Benin City, whose emergence is predated the 1<sup>st</sup> dynasty time (Roesse 1990: 8; Aisien 1995: 58, 65).

<sup>8</sup> The earlier date is the one on which modern native historians, interpreters of the oral tradition, usually insist (see, *e.g.*, Egharevba 1960: 8, 75; Ebohon 1972: 3; Eweka 1989: 15–16, 18). We argue that the later date is, perhaps, more correct (Bondarenko 2003).

<sup>9</sup> In Benin a community typically integrated more than one extended family.

<sup>10</sup> What is typical for the pre-colonial African societies, disregarding their classification by particular authors as states or non-states (see Diop 1958–1959: 16; Armstrong 1960: 38; see also, *e.g.*, Kaberry 1959: 373; Tardits 1980: 753–754; Tymowski 1985: 187–188; Ray 1991: 205; Claessen and Oosten 1996: 50–51, 92).

<sup>11</sup> Ruling now, since 1979, *Oba* Erediauwa I is considered the 38<sup>th</sup> representative of the dynasty on the Benin throne.

<sup>12</sup> The critical role of the *Oba* became especially clear in the colonial time when after an attempt to abolish the institution immediately after the fall of Benin in 1897, the British had to restore it in 1914: it had become clear by that moment

that ‘if they were to secure even the grudging co-operation of the Bini they must restore the monarchy’ (Igbafe 1974: 175; see also Zotova 1979: 105–114; Nevadomsky 1993: 66–67).

<sup>13</sup> From the broader viewpoint of African socio-political systems, it is remarkable that the same authoritative author, Robert Bradbury (1973: 15), noted that, notwithstanding his argument about the fundamental role of kinship in Benin, the kinship there was even weaker than among the neighboring Yoruba (see also note 10). Kinship in Benin of the *Oba* period was also weaker than among their other neighbor and ethno-cultural ‘relative’ – the Urhobo, whose precolonial socio-political organization was not as sophisticated (complex and centralized) as that of the *Oba* time Bini, being similar to the one reconstructed for Benin of the *Ogiso* time (Ekeh 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Marcus and Feinman remark correctly that ‘... many Aegean specialists do not believe the *polis* was a state at all...’ (1998: 8).

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