Appendix

Fact vs Fiction
The real story of the Benin Kingdom

Was there really a powerful Edo kingdom in the rainforest?

Yes there was. Over a thousand years ago, in what is now southern Nigeria, the Edo people began to clear ground in the tropical rainforest where they lived.

Over time many small Edo villages joined together and gradually formed a large community, united under one leader.

This process was already well under way by the 12th century, the time when our story is set.

By then, a thriving community had become established, known as Igodomigodo.

It was named after a ruler called Igodo, who is said to have been the first king of the Edo people.

Why is this story called Children of the Benin Kingdom?

Today the ancient Igodomigodo civilisation is often referred to as the Benin Kingdom, and the forest city is called Benin City.

But the word ‘Benin’ would not have been recognised by the people of the 12th century, so we have used terms such as ‘Edo kingdom’ and ‘forest city’.

To reflect modern usage, we have still used ‘Benin’ in our book title.

Note: the modern day country, the Republic of Benin, is located further to the east, and should not be confused with the medieval kingdom.

Was the Edo civilisation isolated in the rainforest?

Igodomigodo was not an isolated civilisation cut off in the rainforest. And nor was it particularly unusual in West Africa at this time.

In fact it was one of a series of kingdoms and empires that arose in the region from the 400s to the 1700s.

Many of these communities became sophisticated centres of art, where work of exceptional quality came to be produced in clay, wood, metal and ivory.

And these great centres of power were well known to one another – through trade, through the exchange of ideas and traditions, and sometimes through war.

Why are there pictures

of cowrie shells on the cover of this book?

The cowrie shell was a widely accepted currency, used for buying and selling everything from crops to craftworks. Other currencies were accepted too, including glass beads. Like the cowries these had value because they were hard-wearing and relatively rare.

By the time our story is set, trading between the West African kingdoms, and right across to east Africa and beyond, had been an important part of life for centuries.

In our story, Mama Ginika and Chief Iwe are both skilled at trading with neighbouring peoples and dealing with merchants from further afield too. Idris (mentioned in chapter 7) is an Arab merchant.

This trade was made easier by the region's extensive network of rivers which enabled people to transport goods, and to travel quickly from one area to another, just as Ada

and Mbe do in our story.

What were the symbols of power used by the Ogisos?

Although the Edo people had united under one Ogiso (or sky-king) the elders of the original villages still retained authority amongst their communities.

Part of the Ogiso's job was to ensure that these men would continue to support him and accept him as their leader.

As with any monarchy, the Ogiso had special symbols of power to impress people and to help him retain authority. You will find mention of some in our story:

• In artworks, the depiction of leopards was often associated with royal power.

• The 'ada' and 'eben' were emblems of royal authority that could only be owned with express permission from the sky-king. The

ada is a curved blade, a ceremonial version of the Edo umozo sword. The eben is a leaf-shaped sword.

You can find graphic representations of ada and eben at various places in this book, including below.

• The colour red was associated with power in the Edo civilisation and the Ogiso probably wore red beads as symbol of authority. In later years the Obas (who succeeded the Ogisos as kings) wore red beads made of coral.

• The Ogiso sat on a special stool, an ‘agba’ to denote his authority and power.

Who were the king-makers?

The Ogiso was supported by his council of Edionisen: five senior men who were hereditary chiefs within the kingdom. These advisers were the ‘king-makers’. Their job was to support the sky-king in ruling Igodomigodo. They even had

the power to overrule a king if it was felt that he was not making good decisions for the kingdom.

In our story, Chief Efe is a member of the Edionisen.

To help protect his rule, the king would also appoint warrior chiefs – some to keep order within the kingdom and some to fight wars with neighbouring peoples. Through such wars rulers could try to extend their kingdoms, and therefore their power and wealth. Warrior chiefs were very important. In our story, Chief Obiro is one such powerful man.

Were the guilds really important?

The ivory-carvers, iron-workers, wood-carvers and the other craftspeople were organised by the king into specialist groups, or ‘guilds’.

The guild members lived and worked close to one another, with each guild occupying its own area of the city.

In our story, Amenze is the guild master of the blacksmiths, making him an important figure in the city.

The guild system was set up by the rulers as one way to keep control over the production of important items, such as tools and weapons.

Tools were essential for efficient farming and hunting, which was required to feed the large numbers of people in Igodomigodo. Good weapons were needed for protecting and enlarging the kingdom. And fine artworks were important for ceremonial and religious purposes.

Without books, how did knowledge spread?

Knowledge and traditions were not only shared among the members of each guild but also, sometimes, with craftspeople from other communities and kingdoms.

For example, Ogun, the god of iron, was not just worshiped in Edo culture, but in other cities.

One of the most important of these places was Ife, an influential city to the north of Igodomigodo. You can find Ife on the map at the beginning of this book – like Igodomigodo it is also a forest city.

Ife was influential in the development of artistic work and culture in Igodomigodo. In our story, specialists from Ife are seen sharing skills with Edo craftspeople (read carefully and you might spot this in the scene at the end of chapter six).

The Edo also shared knowledge through oral tradition and through visual representation in art, (for example, see the Benin Bronzes page 210).

What happened to the Ogisos?

The power, wealth and influence of Igodomigodo continued to grow into the 1400s. By this time the kingdom was one of the most important in West Africa. Throughout the 1400s and the 1500s the city was producing exceptional art which is evidence of its thriving culture.

The dynasty of the Ogisos came to an end in some time in the 1200s. Then a new dynasty, the Obas, took control and continued many of the same traditions.

This dynasty is still in existence today, with ceremonial and local power and patronage in Benin City, in the Edo State in Nigeria, which is where the Edo people still live.

It was during the 1400s that Igodomigodo began to be known (to outsiders) as ‘Benin’ and its capital began to be known as Benin City.

What are the ‘Benin bronzes’?

Some of the most famous of the works of art produced during the kingdom’s heyday are now known as the Benin Bronzes, many of which are displayed in museums in Europe and the US.

The bronzes were used to adorn the Oba’s palace and they were decorated with scenes from Benin history – they would have shone brightly in the sun and impressed visitors to the palace, reminding them of the power of the king.

The bronzes (which are actually made of brass and copper) were created over period of a few hundred years and were commissioned by the kings to record royal events. They portray a visual history of the kingdom. In addition to other events, the bronzes depict the arrival of Portuguese traders, who sailed from Europe to trade with

the Edo people in the late 1400s.

The bronzes were stolen by British armed forces in 1897. During an attack much of the city was destroyed and the kingdom was subsequently forced to become a British colony. Benin city is now the capital of Edo State, Nigeria.

What about the city walls?

Benin's famous city walls were built up both before during the period – in our story they are described as earth banks and ditches but some were to become larger and more impressive over the following centuries.

By the 1600s they were significant structures extending to around 15 kilometres in the city area and up to 16,000 kilometres in the rural areas.

During the same period the city itself became larger and more sophisticated, with

features such as roads paved with potsherds and oil lamps being used for street lighting.

Which gods are mentioned in our story?

In traditional Edo religion, Osanobua is the creator of the world and the father of all the gods. Osanobua does not concern himself with human affairs, but sometimes his children, who are also gods, do.

These children of Osanobua are therefore worshipped at shrines – in the belief that they can affect what happens to humans. Osanobua's most important children are Olokun, Ogiuwu, Osun and Ogun. Olokun is the god of the rivers, water and wealth. Ogiuwu is the god of death. Osun is the god of medicine and healing.

Ogun is mentioned several times in our story. He is the deity of metalworkers and those who use metal, such as hunters.

In our story, Amenze stops at a shrine to Ogun, to pay his respects.

The Ogisos were also believed to be descended from Osanobua and were thought to be semi-divine. This is why they were called the ‘sky-kings’.

The acceptance of their divine right to rule helped to maintain their authority. The Ogisos took care to preserve this belief.

Why are ancestors important in the story?

In common with other peoples in the region, the Edo believed in the importance and power of their ancestors, who reside in the spirit world. Shrines to ancestors would be located in homes, and appeals for help would be addressed to the ancestors, as well as to the gods. Ancestors would watch over families, could help with problems and sometimes could create trouble for the living

if they were angry.

In our story, Ada is worried about not knowing her ancestors.

What is the role of divination and traditional medicine?

The Edo system of divination, in common with others across the region, is believed by followers to offer help with life's problems, including illnesses and difficult decisions.

Sometimes diviners try to find answers by interpreting the way that objects fall when they are cast on the ground, combining that with their knowledge of proverbs, folklore and history.

In our story, Ujo uses four strands, each containing seeds. Ujo throws, or casts, these onto the ground.

In traditional practise, a diviner might look at which side up the seeds land (there are

many combinations) and use this to interpret the cause of a person's problems, and to offer advice on what they should do.

Some diviners specialise in medical matters only and these are more akin to Papa Eze – medical herbalists who aim to use their specialist knowledge to treat physical illnesses.

Papa Eze is a herbalist healer only.

Many herbalists and healers would have combined their knowledge of folklore, charms and incantations, along with their understanding of the properties of plants, to offer treatments to patients.

Diviners, herbalists and religious specialists, such as priests and oracles, can all offer to cure ailments and their skills often overlap.