

## **POLITICS AND POWER IN THE COURTS OF TWO QUEENS: CLEOPATRA OF EGYPT AND IDIA OF THE OLD BENIN KINGDOM**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The aim of this paper is to examine the character, personality, intrigues involved in the power and politics of two different female principalities who existed and reigned in two distinct epochs. Queen Cleopatra of Egypt exhibited skills which surpassed those of her predecessors and secured her position as Pharaoh in Egypt. Queen Idia of the old Benin Kingdom was a powerful political figure who, during her incumbency, sustained her son, Oba Esigie on the throne. The paper contends that both female leaders believed in their capacity to rule, therefore, they exuded strong political strategies for the greater good of their interest. This paper discovers that both queens who were indeed brave utilized what they possessed to achieve what they desired. Consequently, Queen Cleopatra won the support and love of Julius Caesar first and then Mark Anthony. The title of Iyioba, (King's mother) was bestowed on Queen Idia by her son the Oba (king) of Benin. Studies that may interrogate political strategies of some leaders in both ancient Rome and Benin Empire are recommended.*

**Keyword:** Queen, Cleopatra, Idia, ancient Egypt, Benin

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Leaders of polities tended to dedicate their lives, make and implement strategies and policies for the betterment of their state. The means of achieving these vary from one leader to another. The end result is a powerful, secure and self sufficient state. History presents us with a plethora of such political leaders, men and women who dedicated their lives for their nation such as Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt and Queen Idia of the Old Benin kingdom.

Leaders possess traits that distinguish them from the others. Such traits include the fact that they are more intelligent than the average of their group, more studious, more dependable, more active and sociable and from a higher social and economic class. Leaders also had unusual persistence and initiative, ensured that things were done, were co-operative, and possessed self-confidence, insight, popularity, adaptability, and verbal facility (Alfred de Grazia retrieved from [http://www.grazian-archive.com/politics/PolBehavior/C\\_03.html](http://www.grazian-archive.com/politics/PolBehavior/C_03.html)). McConaughy did a study of eighteen members of the South Carolina Assembly. He discovered that the leaders were more decidedly less neurotic than the other general male population; they were more self-sufficient more extroverted and slightly more dominant. Leaders are more self-confident than the average person and have fewer feelings of inferiority; and . . . they are less irritable and tense than the average person (ibid). In order to exercise their authority as effective as they desired they utilized instruments of authority which includes education and propaganda, force and violence, economic measures and economic manipulation, depending upon whether or not acts are considered legitimate (ibid). Leaders in antiquity even in the old Benin Empire demonstrated some, if not all of these qualities that placed them above others. In both societies, leaders were men but on rare occasions, women emerged as kings or queens of a predominantly male-leader society, where

they ruled effectively, discharging their roles with acumen, utilizing their incumbent power alongside politics to achieve their goals of protecting and prospering their lands. Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt and Queen Idia of the Old Benin Kingdom recognized and utilized the opportunities as they came bare to the queens. They, in their capacity as kings exuded great power, demonstrated strong political intrigues and made enduring political statements in the terrain of politics. As female kings, Queens Cleopatra and Idia ruled in a predominantly male society. They possessed skills that set them apart from their competitors. They were leaders who won battles without necessarily being on the battlefield. They showcased characteristics of skill, uniqueness and blatant authority that aided their rise to the power and acclaim they achieved. This paper attempts to interrogate power and politics displayed by these female kings to sustain their suzerainty, authority and hegemony over their polities. In so doing, it adopts a historical and comparative inquiry to effectively scrutinize the politics played out by both queens and the power that went with it.

### **Politics and Power in the Court of Queen Cleopatra**

Many scholars have engaged and analyzed Queen Cleopatra in various discourses attempting to interpret the nature and character of this famous queen. Some describe her as mysterious; others view her as comparable to nature. Many view her as a powerful political figure that amassed great wealth for Egypt. A progeny of the decadent Ptolemaic dynasty, Cleopatra became a threat to Rome and its stability as she “captivated the two greatest Romans of her day and because of the third destroyed herself.” (Cassius Dio, 1916). Plutarch states that Cleopatra captivated Julius Caesar by her device of concealing herself in a bed-sack to be brought to Caesar. She further captivated this military commander when he succumbed to her charm of further intercourse with him (Plutarch, 1919). Cassius Dio (1916) describes Cleopatra's charisma: "For she was a woman of surpassing beauty, and at that time, when she was in the prime of her youth, she was most striking; she also possessed a most charming voice and knowledge of how to make herself agreeable to every one. Being brilliant to look upon and to listen to, with the power to subjugate every one, even a love-sated man already past his prime, she thought that it would be in keeping with her role to meet Caesar, and she reposed in her beauty all her claims to the throne." This was Cleopatra's personality. She understood the uniqueness of her feline nature, and unleashed it on great and powerful men who had the authority to take her to her destiny even as Pharaoh over Egypt.

Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator was born in 59BC to Ptolemy XII Auletes who was a direct descendant of Ptolemy 1 Soter, son of Arsinoe and Lagus of Macedon. Ptolemy 1 Soter was the originator of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt. The mother of Cleopatra is believed to be Cleopatra V Tryphaeus of Egypt, the sister or cousin and wife of Ptolemy XII (Werner Huß, 1990). Cleopatra grew up in a kingdom where assassinations and counter assassinations were the order of the day and all for political power. The hunger for power and influence motivated these actions, and so when Cleopatra's father died and left the regency in the hands of, by his will and according to traditions, the 18 year old Cleopatra and her sibling the 10 year old Ptolemy XIII (Cassius Dio, 1916), the desire to rule alone broke down relations between Cleopatra and Ptolemy. Thereafter, Cleopatra went against the Ptolemaic tradition which stated that female Pharaohs were to be subordinate to the male. Cleopatra ensured that her face alone appeared on coins. She also dropped the name of Ptolemy from official documents. As a result, in 50BC she came into conflict with the Gabiniani Roman troops of Aulus Gabinius who protected Ptolemy XIII and restored him to the throne in 55BC. This led to the fall of Cleopatra in 48 BC from power for a short period of time. She was pushed out

of power by a group of ministers led by a eunuch named Pothinus and loyal to the thirteen year old Ptolemy XIII, her younger brother and co-ruler. Cleopatra, when she realized she had lost power tried to protest in Pelusium but eventually fled with her sister Arsinoe (Green, 1990).

An opportunity presented itself for Cleopatra when Pompey, Caesar's rival was chased by Caesar's forces to Alexandria. Ptolemy XII thinking he was currying favours for Caesar, decided to murder Pompey. Having set up his throne on the harbour, he watched the assassination of Pompey. Pompey was murdered on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September, 48BC, in the presence of his wife and children, by a former officer in Ptolemaic service and loyal to Ptolemy XIII. Ptolemy's actions were motivated by his desire to make Egypt an ally of Rome but especially, to be the dominant Pharaoh in Egypt. However, this did not go down well with Caesar who arrived two days later. Ptolemy's actions could not ingratiate Caesar rather, it left Caesar in rage. Regardless of the fact that Pompey and Caesar were political enemies, Pompey was an elite Roman consul and was Caesar's son-in-law. Pompey was once married to Julia who died at childbirth. Julia was Caesar's daughter. Caesar who was indeed angered, took over Alexandria imposing himself as arbiter in the problems of Egypt.

It was at this time in 47 BC, that Cleopatra chose to appear before Julius Caesar. According to Plutarch (1919), she smuggled herself into the palace wrapped in a rug. Caesar obviously accepted her and proceeded to grant her demands. She became emotionally involved with Julius Caesar and nine months later, she had a child, Caesarion, for Caesar. Consequently Caesar dumped his plan of annexing Egypt and instead supported and stood firmly by Cleopatra as the later claimed ascendancy to the throne. War then ensued between the armies of Ptolemy XIII and Caesar. By the end of the war which endured for six months, Ptolemy XIII's army was defeated by Caesar's army and the former was drowned in the Nile (Cassius Dio, 1916). His death saw Cleopatra on the throne, with another brother Ptolemy XIV as her husband king (ibid). Since they had become lovers, Cleopatra, who was 22 attempted to utilize her femininity to get Caesar do her bidding in some aspects. A clear cut example was when she asked Caesar to name Caesarion his heir. However, Caesar refused and instead named his nephew Octavian his heir. Again, when Cleopatra, Ptolemy XIV and Caesarion visited Rome in 46 BC, Cleopatra resided in one of Caesar's country homes (Cassius Dio 1916). Caesar loved her so much that he erected a golden statue of her in the temple of Venus Genetrix (Appian, 1913 & Dio, 1916) where she was represented as Isis. Venus Genetrix was the mythical ancestress of Caesar's family. The Romans on the other hand disliked the Egyptian queen and did not approve of their relationship because it was against Roman laws and customs, for Julius Caesar was already married to Calpurnia Pisonis. It is noted that Cicero stated that he hated Cleopatra, the foreign queen (Cicero *Letters to Atticus*, retrieved from <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus/cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=PerseusLatinTexts&query=Cic.%20Att.%2014.8.1&getid=1>).

Two years later, in 44BC, Caesar was assassinated, thereafter Cleopatra and her entourage and relatives returned to Egypt (ibid). In Egypt, she installed her son as co-regent and successor even with these epithets, *Theos Philopator Philometor* (= *Father- and motherloving God*), (Josephus, 42 BC) after the death of Ptolemy XIV who was alleged to have been poisoned by his older sister.

After the death of Julius Caesar, war broke out between the assassins of Caesar led by Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius Longinus and the Caesarian army led by Mark Anthony and Octavian. Cleopatra was sympathetic to the Caesarian cause because she

formed an alliance with Publius Cornelius Dolabella who was the leader of the Caesarian party and who consequently recognized Caesarion as her co-regent (Appian & Cassius Dio). But Dolabella soon, in 43 BC, committed suicide when he realized he had been surrounded and would be overpowered by the enemy.

Now, Cassius the leader of the assassins of Julius Caesar decided to occupy Egypt in order to seize her treasures for which Egypt was known for. Moreover, Egypt lacked a formidable army and at this period was hit by famine and an epidemic. Cassius also wanted to attack Egypt for the regent's refusal to form an alliance with him, send him supplies and reinforcements against the army of the second triumvir. However Cleopatra was willing to send reinforcements to Mark Anthony and Octavian. She sailed to the west along the Libyan coast to bring aid to the Caesarians. However, she could not complete the obligation because her ships were destroyed by a violent storm. It was so bad that the wreckage spread even to the coast of Greece even as witnessed by Lucius Staius Marcus who intended to blockade Cleopatra's route to the Caesarians.

Mark Anthony became one of the second triumvirs after the death of Julius Caesar. He sent Quintus Dellius to Egypt to summon Cleopatra to meet him at Tarsus where she would be required to declare for Anthony against his enemies even the Parthians. Cleopatra who arrived in great pomp and pageantry charmed Anthony such that Mark Anthony spent the winter of 41BC in Alexandria (Plutarch, 1920). She had become very close ally with Mark Anthony that she had him order the death of her enemies. The first was her sister Arsinoe in order to safeguard herself and her son Caesarion. Arsinoe who was living at the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was executed in 41 BC on the steps of the Temple without any regard for the temple's sanctuary. This violation of the temple was said to have scandalized the Roman state at the time. The second enemy she executed in 25<sup>th</sup> December 40 BC, was Serapion the leader of Cyprus. At this time, Cleopatra's relationship with Mark Anthony had graduated from ally to full blown lovers. Cleopatra had twins; Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene II, for Mark Anthony.

En-route to make war with the Parthians, Anthony decided to visit Alexandria, and having renewed his relationship with Cleopatra which seemed to have been on hold because he was away at Rome, Alexandria became the home of Anthony. Mark Anthony who was already married to Octavia Minor (sister of Octavia), married Cleopatra according to Egyptian rites and they had an additional child by the name Ptolemy Philadelphus.

In 34 BC, Anthony conquered Armenia and thereafter, Cleopatra and Caesarion were crowned co-rulers of Egypt and Cyprus. Her other son, Alexander Helios was also crowned ruler of Armenia, Media and Parthia, Cleopatra Selene II was crowned ruler of Phoenicia, Syria and Cilicia. Caesarion was also accorded many titles such as, son of god and king of kings. He was also portrayed as Horus (Burstein, 2007). Cleopatra was given the title of "Queen of Kings" by Antonius (Ronald, 1962). Cleopatra was thought to be a reincarnation of the goddess Isis by the Egyptians because she called herself Nea Isis (Plutarch, 1920). With all these titles and accolades coming her way, the Roman senate became suspicious of the intentions of this African queen. They thought that the queen was probably planning to wage a revengeful war that would "...array all the East against Rome, establish herself as empress of the world at Rome, deliver justice from the capitolium and inaugurate a new universal kingdom" (Ronald, 1962). Consequently, sour relationship between Anthony and Octavian was witnessed for so many years. In 33 BC, the senate, convinced by Octavian declared war against Egypt. Anthony took sides with the Queen of Egypt and so was ready to

face the forces of Octavian. In 31 BC, the two forces met off the coast of Actium and Anthony's ships lost to the superior vessels of the Romans. After the battle of Actium, Octavian invaded Egypt in 30 BC, but Anthony's armies, rather than attack him deserted to Octavian on August 1, 30 BC. After this desertion, Anthony was distraught; he also cried out that he had also been betrayed by Cleopatra. Plutarch tells us that because Cleopatra was afraid of the anger of Mark Anthony, she locked herself in her palace with two of her maidens and sent messages to Anthony stating that she was dead. Anthony thereafter stabbed himself in the stomach, and lay on his couch to die. He begged everyone to kill him because the blood flow had stopped and he was still alive, but no one would heed his plea. While he pleaded, a messenger came from Cleopatra that he should be brought to her. He consented because he was happy to hear that she was still alive. When he got to her palace, she let him in hauled by a rope through her window by Cleopatra and her maidens. Then they laid him on a couch and Cleopatra covered him with her clothes. She cried, raved, beat her chest and mutilated herself as she grieved for Anthony. Anthony told her to calm down, requested for a glass of wine and died after drinking it (Plutarch, 1920). After Anthony's death, Plutarch informs us that Octavian captured Cleopatra in her mausoleum and ordered Epahrodityus to guard her in order to prevent her from committing suicide, for he wanted to present her in his triumph. Cleopatra, however, deceived the guard and committed suicide (Plutarch 1920 & Cassius Dio 1916). She was discovered dead, her two handmaiden were also dying. Iras was dying at her feet, while Charmion, having adjusted Cleopatra's crown also fell dying (Plutarch 1920). In spite of her death, it is noted that an effigy of Cleopatra with an asp on her arm was included in the triumph of Octavian (ibid).

Ancient sources agree on the source of her death. Strabo (1932) who was alive at the time and might have been at Alexandria, states that there are two stories; the one was that she applied a toxic ointment on herself, the other; was that she was bitten by an asp on her breast. Plutarch states that she killed herself, using a poisonous snake; an asp concealed in a basket of figs. She held out her arm to it and it bit her. Other ancient Roman poets such as Horace (2003), Florus (1929) and C. Velleius Paterculus (1924) all mentioned that that she was bitten by two asps. Everit (2007), however, questions these events and states that there was a possibility that Cleopatra was killed by Octavian. At the death of Cleopatra, the Egyptians crowned Caesarion Cleopatra's son by Caesar, Pharaoh. He remained thus until his death when Alexandria succumbed to Octavian.

### **Politics and Power in the Court of Queen Idia**

Idia was the mother of Oba Esigie (r.1504–1550c.e.) of the old Benin Empire. She lived between the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century in Benin, southwest, Nigeria. She was an energetic, formidable, strategic and military warrior at the time. She fought before and during the reign of Oba Esigie her son. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Oba Ozolua, the preceding king died and left the throne for two powerful sons who were Esigie and Arhwaran to dispute succession. Esigie was based in Benin City while Arhwaran was located in Udo an important city which was about twenty miles away from Benin city. For the purpose of ensuring that her son, Esigie secured the throne and became the 16<sup>th</sup> Oba of the Benin Empire, Idia raised an army for Esigie. Consequently, this power tussle between the sons caused chaos in the kingdom of Benin and undermined the place of the Benin city as the political and cultural centre of the kingdom (Bortolot, 2000). Esigie eventually defeated his brother and became the next Oba. He succeeded through the help of Idia.

At about the same period, while exploiting the state of chaos in Benin city, the Igalala people who were expanding their frontiers desired to take control of the northern territories of the Benin Empire. However, Queen Idia raised an army and went to war and through the magical and medicinal help rendered by her, Oba Esigie defeated the Igalalas on the battlefield thereby sustaining her son Oba Esigie's victories over conquered territories and expansion of the Empire to the north. In Benin oral tradition, she stands as the only woman who had ever gone to war. She was a powerful priestess for she utilized her knowledge of prayer and medicines to sustain her son on the throne and to ensure that a peaceful and successful reign of Oba Esigie was witnessed in the empire.

On ascendancy, Oba Esigie did not break with tradition by putting away his mother, rather, in order to honour her created the title of *iyoba* for her, translated as "(biological) mother of the Oba." This honour placed her aside from all other women. As queen mother, she assumed a status similar to that of women of such status at various courts around the world.

She had her own palace at Uselu built for her by her son Oba Esigie. She had villages, chiefs and servants who were at her service. Queen Idia also had various privileges bestowed on her by her son the Oba. The privileges include; the right to a throne; the right to wear special ornamental and coral beads, the right to adorn distinctive dress made of a special cloth and to adorn herself with red colour and the right to bear a sword of office. These rights and privileges were previously ascribed to only men who were chiefs in the society. Queen Idia was thus elevated to this unique position and treated as a queen in a male-dominated society where women were only seen and not heard.

Queen Idia, the *Iyioba* held court in her palace. All the paraphernalia that went with her title were accorded her. Like senior chiefs she heard cases, ordered her chiefs to investigate the facts in the cases and arbitrated in those cases. Because of her disposition and status at her court, she was confident to invent a unique hairstyle. The hairstyle which was associated with the title of *Iyioba*, became a model for all successive *Iyobas* after Idia was called *ukpe-okhue*. The hairstyle was curved, conical, covered with a network of coral beads and resembled a parrot's beak.

Queen Idia played a significant role as *Iyioba* even for later *Iyobas*. As the mother of the king, Queen *Iyiobas* bore the first son and only child from her for the Oba or the heir to the throne. The *Iyioba* wielded considerable power and committed her life to raising and protecting the future Oba. Queen mothers were therefore viewed as instrumental to the protection, well being and survival of the Oba and the kingdom. The role and personality of the *Iyioba* was so important that during ceremonies organized to rid the kingdom of evil forces, Obas wore pendants made of ivory representing the *Iyioba* around their waists.

After her death, a likeness of Queen Idia's head was cast in bronze and placed on ancestral altars to commemorate her reign. She must have been a powerful and influential figure, even as queen in her own right. For the carved ivory replica of Queen Idia, two vertical bars of inlaid iron between her eyes allude to medicine-filled incisions that were one source of her metaphysical power (ibid).

## CONCLUSION

### Queen Cleopatra

Queen Cleopatra's drive for power already had its foundation in the power tussles that played out among the Ptolemies and siblings. Every Ptolemy or Cleopatra who so much desired this power politically expunged his or her opponent so that he or she could hold on to power. Cleopatra VII engaged in this power politics especially, when she refused to observe the rules that female pharaohs were subservient to the males. This desire for power prompted her to take actions that aided her on the throne. The best opportunity was when she captivated Julius Caesar first and then Mark Anthony, two great Romans of their era. She could captivate these men due to her personality. This personality became a useful tool. Her personality was not a great and formidable army; it was not a council of great generals with useful counsel on how to defeat an enemy; it was also not a country effectively bordered with the latest and important technology; it was her personality, the feline personality which can further explain that a woman's strength do no lie in her bones but in her felineness. Cleopatra exploited this greatly to her advantage and the advantage of Egypt.

The advantages are not farfetched. Cleopatra was installed as the dominant Pharaoh after the death of Ptolemy XIII Neos Philopator which she partly masterminded, after she presented herself to Julius Caesar wrapped in a rug. She had a son for Caesar named Caesarion, therefore winning Caesar's love and commitment. Moreover, Egypt did not fall to Rome during Caesar's consulship. After Julius Caesar death, this same feline attributes bore her towards Mark Anthony who became the greatest Roman at this time. Mark Anthony totally gave himself to her and protected her. She had children for him. She won more territories for Egypt without a battle. These territories were gifts from Mark Anthony. Under Cleopatra, Egypt enjoyed peace and prosperity. Egypt remained an independent state when all the other of the Hellenistic dynasties had fallen to Rome several years before Egypt became a province of Rome in 30 BC.

### Queen Idia

With Queen Idia, her motivating factor was probably the mother's instinct or drive and the fact that she enjoyed power, even spiritual power which she exploited to a considerable degree for the progress of her son Oba Esigie and the Benin Empire. A mother's instinct is that behaviour that is "automatic, irresistible and triggered by something in the environment. . ." (Ragsdale, 2013) It was also an instinct for survival too. This was an era when a heir or a supposed heir to the throne wanted the throne at all cost. Queen Idia was prepared to install her son on the throne, therefore she sourced other spiritual means to achieve her aim. She succeeded and to a large extent became the king, for Oba Esigie performed his kingly duties with the counsel of his mother. Queen Idia understood where her strength laid and she exploited it fully. She became invincible; she even went to battle with the troops where her success against the enemy of the empire at the time was recorded.

She had become so powerful that although she was a woman and the king's mother, she had her own court where she heard cases and settled disputes. This motherly instinct drove her to such an extent that the desire for more power multiplied even as she continued to protect her son and eventually elevated herself to a high status, the status of Iyi Oba. As a result of her power and influence, the title of Iyi Oba continued to be awarded to the woman, who anatomically, bore the Oba.

Finally, Queens Cleopatra and Idia's emergence as strong and effective leaders in their eras demonstrates that it is important to understand and utilize strategies that aids in promoting a leader and his state. Both queens adopted strategies that placed them on a high pedestal even until death. For Queen Cleopatra, it was her feline attributes and for Queen Idia, her motherly instincts and her dependence on spiritual or juju powers that placed them on their thrones. Studies that may interrogate political strategies of some leaders in both ancient Rome and Benin Empire are recommended.

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