

## A Study in the Political Transformation of Ughoton, (Old Seaport of Benin Kingdom), 1440-1897

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper examines the political transformation of Ughoton between the period of 1440-1897. The political system before 1440 in the community also came to focus. The political institutions which witnessed transformation include the appointment of Ohen-Okun of Ughoton as the first Benin ambassador to Portugal and it was compulsory for the heir-apparent to the Benin throne to be initiated into edion-age grade. Again the age grades which include 'Iroghae' the 'Ighel' and the edion witnessed transformation between 1440-1897. The researcher obtains data from primary and secondary sources. Oral interviews serve as primary sources. Books, journals, articles, newspapers, projects, theses, dissertations and intelligence reports serve as secondary sources. It was found that the Ohen-Okun of Ughoton became the first Benin Ambassador to the outside world. It was also demonstrated that the heir-apparent to the Benin throne must be initiated into 'edion age grade in Ughoton before he can be crown as Oba of Benin. It was also found that the age grade system in Ughoton went through serious transformation. In conclusion, the visit of Ohen-Okun of Ughoton to Portugal attracted many foreigners like Christian Missionaries, Chroniclers, Scholars, visitors and traders to Ughoton.*

### **Keywords:**

*Benin; Portugal; transformation; ambassador; age-grades*

## **I. Introduction**

Ughoton also known to the Europeans as Gwatto, lies about 42 kilometres Southeast of Benin. It was said to have been founded in about the eleventh century by Prince Ekaladerhan, the only child of Ogiso Owodo, the last Ogiso of Ogo dynasty of the Benin Kingdom (Oronsaye, 1995). In the traditional Ughoton society, there existed four major streets or "Iduwu" namely Iduwu Ode-Edo; Iduwu Elase', Iduwu Ukpo called (Gelegele Road) and Iduwu Okeagor.

From its rudimentary stage, Ughoton witnessed rapid political transformation from the fifteenth century. This was because of its vantage position as a market which was the hub of economic activities before and after the coming of the Europeans. This was facilitated by its strategic location on the Benin River which enabled it serve as the Bini Port. As Ughoton grew in economic status, the political organisation equally underwent rapid transformation processes. Ughoton political institutions went through transformation between the period under focus. Ughoton was a centre for settlement of disputes and received messages from the Oba of Benin through the Ohen-Okun (The Priest of Olokun). Due to the importance accorded to the Ohen-Okun, he was appointed as Benin ambassador to Portugal from 1485. This gesture increased the fame of Ughoton and its name was registered on the world map. Traditionally, it was compulsory, from 1440, for the heir-apparent to the Benin throne to be initiated into edion-age grade (elders) at Ughoton before he could be crowned as the Oba of Benin. The membership of "edion age grade" which was originally four ("edion-nene"-was

increased to eight (edion-nerenren”) then to twelve (edion-neweva”) in response to new exigencies and responsibilities brought about in the political transformation of the community.

### **The Political Organisation of Ughoton before 1440**

The political system of Ughoton before 1440 revolves around Ekaladerhan (founder), Ohen-Okun (Priest of Olokun), Odionwere (oldest man), Age-grade system and the village council. In the ancient times, Ohen-Okun, was the Chief Priest of Olokun temple and the political head of Ughoton.

When Prince Ekaladerhan was under pressure to leave Ughoton, he entrusted the care and control of Olokun to his closest relative, Aigbovbiosa Eversince, the position of the high priest has been hereditary. In the absence of any Enogie, the Ohen-Okun of a very important diety to the people of Benin Kingdom and the reigning Obas, took over the administration of the place.

Odionwere title in Ughoton was the exclusive right of the oldest man in the village. In the absence of an Enogie (representative of the Oba) and Ohen in the village, Odionwere was the village Head. In the case of Ughoton, where Ohen-Okun existed, the Odionwere became the second in command. Hence Igbafe asserts that in villages in Benin where there was no hereditary ‘Enogie’, the Odionwere was the administrative head of the village with all the other Edion forming the village council (Igbafe, 1979:15).

Also before 1440, the administrative organisation of Ughoton rested on the division of its adult male population unto age grades which were generally divided into three-the ‘Iroghae’, the ‘Ighele’ and the ‘Edion’.

- (A) Iroghae Age Grade: This age grade consisted of boys and young men between the ages of twelve and thirty. Their main functions includes: cleaning of paths, lanes and streets, carrying the annual tribute of yams and other materials to the Oba, providing communal labour required for the construction of public buildings like village deities. They equally carried water and firewood during village ceremonies.
- (B) Ighele-Age Grade: This consisted of all the adult males of the village of about thirty and fifty years. They were the strong men of the village and provided the people with adequate security and were the soldiers of the community.
- (C) Edion Age-Grade (Elders): In the earliest time, the Edion age grade consisted of edion nenne and other elders. Edion nenne (four elders) was the highest authority. Their decisions were subject to the approval of Ohen-Okun who was the Chief Priest of Olokun temple and the political head of the village.
- (D) Village Council: The village council was made up of the most senior members of the village (Heads of the various extended families in the village). The village council also comprises of edion nenne. When a village council was convened at Ughoton, such a meeting was held at “Eguadion (village square). The sitting arrangement was based on seniority and that all members of other age grades were invited to the village council. All invited were free to express their opinions on matters under focus, leaving the Ohen-Okun and Odionwere to have the final say on the matter. P. A. Igbafe observes that in any Benin village, just like Ughoton, the other age grades like Iroghae and Ighele played supporting roles (Ibid). The village council exercised both executive and judicial functions and was the highest policy making body of the village.

Some of the functions of the village council include the following: settlement of disputes which were beyond the capacity of the family elders. It apportioned out the village farm lands, allotting a definite area to each family. The village council approved and fixed the time of the village annual festival and of the annual communal clearing of the village farm roads, paths and giving to each age-group its definite share of the work. It confirms the headship of a family and ceremonially inducts the head to his functions. The village council co-ordinated regulated and controlled the whole political life of the village.

## **II. Review of Literatures**

### **2.1 The Political Transformation of Ughoton from 1440**

Having examined the political system of Ughoton before 1440, it is now necessary to discuss the political changes in Ughoton which amounted to transformation.

### **2.2 Explanation of the Concept of Transformation**

Before discussing the issue of political transformation in Ughoton from 1440, it may be necessary at this point to examine the concept of "Transformation". Such an examination will give us a clear understanding of the political transformation of Ughoton from 1440-1897.

Transformation refers to changes which occur in a particular community, state or country (Cox; 1978:111). R. W. Cox in his theory of transformation focuses on change which emanates from the bottom-up. It is commonly claimed that we should expect pressure for social change to take the form of political backlash like protest from those who are economically marginalized (Ibid, 113).

Aligning with the above view, Maclean argues that inequality has become a threat to human security, people whose needs are not met are less likely to be productive economically and they are more likely to become militantly aggressive in protesting their condition (Maclean, 2004). The above analysis shows that apart from seeing change as a transformation process, instrument of change is also seen as part of transformation. The chronic re-occurrence of military rule in Nigeria illustrates the problems of establishing a democracy based on civil authority where ethnic and class interests compete in an emerging capitalist industrial state. However, through series of efforts, Nigeria transmitted from military rule which brought underdevelopment to civilian rule which also amounted to transformation.

Africa is a continent undergoing profound change with numerous events and processes bringing hopes for progress. Transformation took place in 1990s in Ethiopia when it shook off autocratic rule for the first time in the country's history and with Eritrea, emerging optimistically from three decades of war, insecurity and the collapse of its previously well-established industrial and commercial base (Anita and Love, 1994:5).

Discussing transformation in Africa, D. A. Low spoke of a fluctuating contact between European traders, missionaries and consuls, with a series of African states who while engaged in often bitter and war-like rivalry with each other were building up their trade and were making a creative response to the new conditions which were being created by the impact of European contact (Low, 1964).

From all the above analysis it is clear that transformation connotes change, transition, development and reform. The transformation agenda of the defunct administration in Nigeria led by President Ebelo Goodluck Jonathan is a case in point. Before his administration, the

previous Governments in Nigeria abandoned the railway system President Jonathan rehabilitated that sector and the rail system is working again in Nigeria. That is transformation. Based on that understanding, the political transformation of Ughoton can now be fully examined.

From 1440, the political system revolved around Ohen-Okun, Odionwere, Age-grade system and the village-council. During the period under focus, the founder of the community Prince had gone to unknown destination. However before his departure, he entrusted the care and control of Olokun to Aigbovbiosa, who was the Ohun-Okun of Olokun temple. From 1440-1897, the Ohen-Okun was both the Chief Priest of Olokun and political head of the village. After the British invasion of Benin in 1897 which affected Ughoton badly, Odionwere (oldest) now took over as the political head of the community. The Ohen-Okun of Ughoton now became the Chief Priest of Olokun only.

From 1440, the Ohen-Okun took up additional responsibility as being the Head of Ughoton group of villages. He settled dispute between the villages and received messages from the Oba of Benin on behalf of those villages which included Ughoton, Agbatan, Abiala and Evbode.

J. E. Jull observes that the administrative organisation of the Benin villages rested on the division of its adult male population into age-grades which consisted of Iroghae, the Ighele and the Edion (Jull, 1937:8).

### **2.3 Iroghae Age Grade**

In the earliest time, the functions of Iroghae included the clearing of paths and carrying food stuffs to the Oba once a year, but from the fifteenth century, during the reign of Oba Ewuare, the political system witnessed transformation in all Benin villages including Ughoton as the state was organised in such a form that tributes came regularly into Benin City from all his subjects. Twice a year, tributes in the form of food stuffs and livestock were sent to the Oba by the Iroghae age group (Ryder, 1980:116-118).

It became necessary for tributes to be sent twice to the Oba every year to increase the revenue of the Kingdom because Oba Ewuare was a warrior King who engaged in series of wars and he conquered about 201 towns and villages. More, wars were fought during this period than any other period in Benin history (Egharevba, 2005:24-26). The people of Ughoton responded to the change because refusal meant disobedience and the consequences of which could be disastrous. Ryder posits that the town and palace Chiefs responsible for the tribute units took half of what was delivered and presented the rest to the Oba (Ibid, 118).

Ighele-Age Grade, apart from providing security to the people of the community as in the earliest time, the Ighele-Age grade had additional responsibility in 1897. In addition to serving as soldiers of the community, the group took up a new role when they participated fully in defending Ughoton against the British penetration. As society became more sophisticated, new roles were also created. They were in the forefront in supervising Benin Soldiers while they hid themselves in the bush awaiting the arrival of the British forces (Interview with Osague Bright, 6-4-2013).

This is against the background that most of the forest in Ughoton contained a lot of taboo which strangers may not understand. The influx of different people to Ughoton in order to benefit from the maritime trade with the Europeans raised the issue of internal and

external security. Apart from protecting their people from the fifteenth century, they were equally equipped to protect the Europeans residing at Ughoton which included traders, Christian missionaries and so on.

During this period, the Ijaws residing at Gele-Gele, the first Benin village on the Gwatto Creek had been a source of challenge for Ughoton over the ownership of Gele-Gele (Interview with Mike Ogieva, 6-6-2013). This has resulted to crisis for so many years between Ughoton and the Ijaws. In this battle, Ighele-age group gave the Ijaws a good fight to justify their claim of ownership of Gele-Gele.

From the Sixteenth century, local guns loaded with gun powder were used in Ughoton which helped to boost the performance of the Ighele-age group as the soldiers of the community. Again the activities of the Ighele-age group assumed a new sophistication where firearms like flint-locks which the Portuguese were hesitant to export to Benin (Roth, 1972:57). The Dutch brought it to Benin towards the end of the seventeenth century through Ughoton and this were also at the disposal of Ughoton Soldiers.

Also the members of Ighele-age were aware of the taboo associated with the different deities they worshipped, they also knew areas in the forest which strangers could not enter which attracted severe punishment. This knowledge was put at the disposal of the Benin Soldiers when they hid themselves in the bush in readiness for war against the British Soldiers. It was not a surprise that the members of Ighele-age joined by other Benin Soldiers led by Ebeikhinmwinn gave a good account of themselves in the field of battle.

#### **2.4 Edion Age-Grade**

Edion age grade witnessed serious transformation as the members increased to Sixty-five or more working together for the development of Ughoton. Members of Edion age grade increased to Sixty-five because of the following reasons. First, from the fifteenth century the population of Ughoton increased tremendously as the close-door neighbours from Ugbine, Ikpako, Ekenwuan and Igo came to trade with the Europeans as the Port of Benin Kingdom.

Equally, distant traders like the Ijebus, Itshekiri, Urhobos and Ijaws came for commercial purposes. In the course of the trade, some settled permanently at Ughoton. Ughoton indigenes who were away from home also came to benefit from this maritime trade. Hence, it was said that by 1778, the population of Ughoton was 3,000. This increase in population also resulted to increase in the number of family heads who became members of the Edion Age grade group.

Again, if someone kills a tiger in Ughoton, he was initiated as Edion (Interview with Pa. Erhunmwunamase Izevbigie, 15-4-2013). However, from the fifteenth century, local guns or dane guns loaded with gun powder were later used to shoot animals. Guns were better used for hunting when there was improvement in firearms. With this improvement in hunting weapons, more hunters were capable of killing tigers and got initiated into Edion-age grade. Hence, membership of edion-age grade increased. In the earliest time, the edion age grade composed of edion nenne (four elders) made up of Odionwere and three elders. From 1440AD to the present, the edion age grade consisted of 'edion nenne' 'edion nerenren (eight elders) and edion niwena (twelve elders) (An Interview with Henry Osazuwa, 30-5-2013). Edion nenne was the highest authority (Ibid).

Although 'edion nenne' was the highest authority, their decisions were subject to the acceptance of the Ohen-Okun who was both the Chief Priest of Olokun temple and the administrative head of the village till around 1897. After the British invasion of Benin, the Odionwere became the administrative head of Ughoton.

### III. Discussion

#### 3.1 The initiation of the Heir-Apparent to the Benin Throne or Ediaken of Uselu into Edion-Age Grade at Ughoton

The relevance of Ughoton 'Edion' age group to the monarchy in Benin after fifteen century became more prominent. In spite of the Age-grade system which operates in all Benin village as part of their political system, Ughoton age grade group is very unique as it attracted the attention of the Benin monarchy from the fifteenth century (Oba Ewuare) it was compulsory traditionally that the Edaiken of Uselu or heir-apparent to the Benin throne to first be initiated into the Edion-age grade in Ughoton before he can be crowned as the new Oba of Benin. At the demise of an Oba, the Senior Son 'Ediaken' comes to 'Eguedion' at Ughoton to be initiated into Edion age grade. This rite was performed by the Odionwere after which the Oba no longer come to Ughoton before the end of his reign.

A major question arises: why the choice of Ughoton Age Grade Group? The choice of Ughoton Age Grade Group could be attributed to the introduction of 'Olukun-Ewuare' by Oba Ewuare to Ughoton in the fifteenth century whose specific function was to protect all the reigning Obas in Benin Kingdom. The first Chief Priest of Olokun-Ewuare was 'Dayi-Niken' the Son Oba-Ewuare (Interview with Henry Osazuwa, 30-5-2013). Subsequently, all the Chief Priests came from that lineage. It could also be seen from the location of Ughoton in the Benin River. The village was the Chief Port of Benin during the period of Benin-European trade relations. Before the building of factories in the mid-seventeenth century on the main Benin River like Arboh, all European trade was conducted at the Port of Ughoton. Oba Ozolua of Benin who showed readiness to permit trade with the Europeans, allowed the Portuguese to establish factories at the Port of Ughoton, thus establishing a long period of regular maritime contact between Europeans and Benin. The amount of wealth which came from that village to the Kingdom could have dictated the special favour extended to Ughoton-Edion-age group by the Benin monarchy (Interview with Hon. Efosa Igunbor, 30-6-2013).

Again, the circumstance of its foundation could also explain the initiation of the monarchy into their 'Edion age grade. The village was founded by Prince Elkaladerhan, the Son of the last Ogiso Owodo of Ogiso dynasty of the Benin Kingdom (Oronsaye, 1995:44). From the account of Pereira in 1505, Ughoton was a League across from gate to gate; there was a ditch all round (Egharevba, 2005:2). In terms of population, J. F. Landolphe who visited Ughoton in 1778 estimated the population at 3,000 (Landolphe, 1969:20). Immediately after the foundation of the village, Prince Ekalederhan ordered a temple to be built by the people for Olokun to be worshipped by all. To the Benin's generally, Olokun was the god of wealth, prosperity and giver of children.

All the Chief Priests of Olokun temple were descendants of Prince Elkaladerhan. This could also explain the special reference to their Edion age grade by the Benin monarchy. Little wonder that Oba Ozolua in 1486 instructed the Chief Priest of Olokun temple to accompany Affonso Aveiro to Portugal as Benin Ambassador.

For an Oba to agree to visit Ughoton to be initiated into their Edion-age grade is a clear indication that the village was very important in the assessment of Benin monarchy against the background of the greatness of Benin Kings. According to Ben-Amo Daniel, the Oba of Benin is certainly the political, religious and social centre of Benin culture (Amos, 1972:69-72) Igbafe asserts that the socio-political organisation of Benin during the pre-colonial years of its history was dominated by the special position occupied by the Oba who was the pivot around which everything revolved, the supreme religious as well as the civil authority in the Land (Igbafe, 1979:1).

For ages, certainly since the time of Oba Eweka 1, the institution of the Oba of Benin has been held with great awe and reverence. In contemporary times, non-Edo people throughout the length and breadth of Nigeria look at Benin Obaship with great admiration and respect. The respect and dignity which others accord Benin institution has been due to the way Edo people have it (Edebiri, 2004:85).

### **3.2 Appointment of ‘Ohen-Okun’ of Ughoton as Benin Ambassador to Portugal**

Ughoton equally witnessed transformation from 1486 when the Ohen-Okun who was the political head of the Ughoton community was appointed by Oba Ozolua (C. 1481) as the first Benin ambassador to Portugal Ughoton from its rudimentary stage before the fifteen century was registered in the world map when Ohen-Okun of Ughoton visited Portugal in 1486 as Benin Ambassador (Ryder, 1969:30-35). This attracted many foreigners like Christian Missionaries, chroniclers, scholars, visitors’ and traders to the community to have a firsthand information about this place where the ambassador came from, described as the Port of Benin Kingdom. Ughoton became a centre of attraction.

There is no contention that in 1486, Oba Ozolua of Benin Kingdom ordered the Ohen-Okun of Ughoton to accompany Affonso d’ Aviero and his team to Portugal. The Portuguese were on religious and trade mission to Benin Kingdom. This action of Oba Ozolua showed clearly that he had adequate knowledge of international politics and benefits derived from it. The Chief Priest of Olokun temple and the leader of the village, Ohen-Okun thus became the first ambassador of Benin to the outside world. The Chief of Ughoton was received with great festivities and was shown many of the good things of the Portugal and he was returned to his land in a ship of the king of Portugal. The purpose of the visit of Ohen-Okun of Ughoton to Portugal was to learn more about Portugal and its way of life and more importantly to promote trade and diplomatic relations between Benin and Portugal.

Many supported the view that he was a man of honour and that he had natural intelligence. First to comment on him was H. L. Roth when he said, “this Ambassador was a man of prudence and natural knowledge (Roth, 1972: 57) Ruyde Pina, also said of him, “their Ambassador was a man of good speech and natural wisdom (Ruyde Pina, 1950:30). This implies that Oba Ozolua was already satisfied with his conduct before nominating him as ambassador.

The choice of the Chief of Ughoton as ambassador to Portugal was not only peculiar with Oba Ozolua, it was repeated by Oba Esigie, J. U. Egharevba states that when John Affonso d’Aveiro came to Benin City for the Second time during the reign of Oba Esigie, he advised the Oba to become a Christian and that Oba Esigie therefore sent Ohen-Okun, the Olokun priest at Ughoton with him as an ambassador of Portugal asking him to send Priests who would teach him and his people the faith (Ibid.29). From the record of H. L. Marshall, it

is said that, the Ohen-Olokun, the priest of Olokun juju in Ughoton himself visited Portugal in the time of Oba Esigie (Marshall, 1938:10).

From the foregoing, it may be said that Ughoton was reputed for having good Chief Priests or Ohen-Okun. Hence their choice as ambassadors for centuries. There is no doubt that the ambassador of 1486 showcased and promoted the image of Benin to the outside world. He promoted and enhanced the culture of Benin in Portugal. There is also no doubt that the culture, so promoted excellently contributed to the beautiful comments about him when he left Portugal. So it can be established that the ambassador of Benin to Portugal promoted and spread the rich cultural heritage not only to Portugal but to the other parts of the world.

Again, the honour and dignity displayed by Ohen-Okun in Portugal was not a surprise, this was typical of a Benin Chief. The comment of Cyril punch is an eloquent testimony to this assertion. According to him:

“In my time the Benins seemed to be courteous and hospitable to strangers. The chiefs were dignified and reserved in manners and even when angry, did not as a rule indulge in loud tones of violent gestures. There were very curious when we first visited them” (Cyril Punch, Cited in Roth, 1972:5). The sound character he displayed in Portugal contributed to the expensive gifts he got from the King of Portugal when he was leaving. A present delivered in the name of King Manuel in 1505 consisted of a caparisoned horse, necklace of Indian bead, a piece of printed Chinz from Cambay, a marklota, white satin, six linen shirts and a shirt of blue Indian Silk (Ibid, 5). At the moment of parting “The King of Portugal presented him and his wife with rich dresses and sent at the same time to the King of Benin, a rich present of things which he thought the latter would greatly esteem (Ibid).

The presentation of expensive gifts to the Oba of Benin through the Benin ambassador can be interpreted in two ways. First, it was to impress the Oba of Benin of Portugal’s regard for him and his Kingdom, thereby promoting and enhancing trade relations between the two countries. Secondly, it was an indication that the Ambassador impressed the King of Portugal, King Manuel, with sound character. Hence Roth stressed that the Benin Ambassador was returned to his land in a ship of the King of Portugal (Ibid).

In his absence from Ughoton, the vacuum created was covered by ’edion nene (four elders) headed by the ’odionwere (the oldest man in the community). They administered the village in collaboration with other elders. The first Benin ambassador came back from Portugal before the end of Oba Ozolua’s reign hence it was said that the King of Portugal, Manuel sent expensive gifts through him to Oba Ozolua.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The political institutions in Ughoton went through changes between 1440 and 1897. These changes occurred because Ohen-Okun, the Chief Priest and the political head of Ughoton, was elevated from simply being the head of Ughoton to the head of a group of villages with the edionwere of the other villages like Agbatan, Abiala, Evbode now under his control.

The membership of edion age group increased tremendously compared with the earliest times when they were very few. This was brought about as a result of the sudden rise

in the family heads who were automatic members of edion-age group. Also the Ighele age group apart from providing security to their people became better equipped as a result of external, threat occasioned by the migration of different people to settle in Ughoton from the fifteenth century. However, after the 1897 the Odion were, the oldest man in Ughoton took over as the head. This could be attributed to the death of Ohen-Okun of Ughoton in the British invasion of the community.

From the fifteenth century, especially after the reign of Oba Ewuare, it now became compulsory traditionally for the heir apparent to the Benin throne to be initiated into the edion age group at Ughoton. The appointment of Ohen-Okun of Ughoton as the first Ambassador to Portugal spread the name of Ughoton to the outside world. The cultural heritage of Benin spread to Portugal as a result of the activities of Ohen-Okun of Ughoton.

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