



An Analysis of the Tradition of Origin of Ughoton: The Old Sea Port of Benin Kingdom

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Abstract This paper examines the tradition of origin of Ughoton, the Old Sea Port of Benin Kingdom. It also discusses the misrule, anxiety and the failure of Ogiso Owodo, who was the last Ogiso of Ogiso dynasty. It assesses the miscarriage of oracle divination and banishment of Prince Ekaladerhan. The final establishment of Ughoton by Prince Ekaladerhan also came to focus. The paper relied on primary sources like oral interview and secondary sources such as books, theses, articles, newspapers, journals, and dissertations. The study found that the reign of Ogiso Owodo witnessed a long period of crises, rancour, anxiety, acrimony, conflicts and anarchy. It was also found that Queen Esagho the first wife of the King was a witch who practiced lesbianism was responsible for the barrenness of Ogiso's wives. The study demonstrated the relevance of divinations to the founding of Ughoton in about the eleventh century. In conclusion, when Prince Ekaladerhan was banished from the city because of miscarriage of oracle divination, after much wandering in the forest, he founded Ughoton by the Benin River in about eleventh century.

Keywords Ekaladerhan, Oracle, Divination, Banishment, Ughoton

Introduction

Ughoton known to the Europeans as Gwatto lies about 42 kilometers South East of Benin. The community has common boundaries with Ekewuan to the East and Gelegele to the West. Other neighbouring communities are Urhokhokho, Ikpako, Uduna, Igo and Ugbine. 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, (An interview with John Ogedegbe, on 30-5-2013) [1]. From the account of Pereira in c.1505, Gwatto was a league across from gate to gate, there were no walls but there was a ditch all round [2] Pereira further observed that houses were built of sun-dried bricks with palm leaves (Ibid). Two French naval officers, Legroing and Balon who saw Ughoton in c. 1787, put the number of houses at around forty [3]. However, Burton, who visited Ughoton in 1862, asserts that the village had shrunk to some twenty or thirty houses, mostly in a ruinous condition [4]. In term of population. J.F. Landolphe who visited Ughoton, in 1778 estimated the population at 3,000 November to March.

Ughoton is within the rainforest with abundant rainfall and sunshine. Seventy-five percent of the population of Ughoton engaged in hunting and fishing because of the riverine nature of the environment. The main occupation of the men in the town was farming while the women engaged primarily in trading. The weather in the town is fairly stable with two clearly defined seasons in the year which are the rainy and the dry seasons. The raining season starts from April to October while the dry season lasts from November to March. The place experiences seasonal harmattan mainly from November to February because of the cold dry wind from the Sahara Desert. It



is however important to note that at Ughoton the vegetation had been affected as a result of the long period of human occupation and exploitative use of the land (An interview with Osayawe Christopher, on 15-4-2013) [5]. Human made forests of rubber, oil palms and cocoa, had replaced the original rainforest vegetation in some areas (An Interview with Eguakun Kenneth, on 6-4-2013) [6].

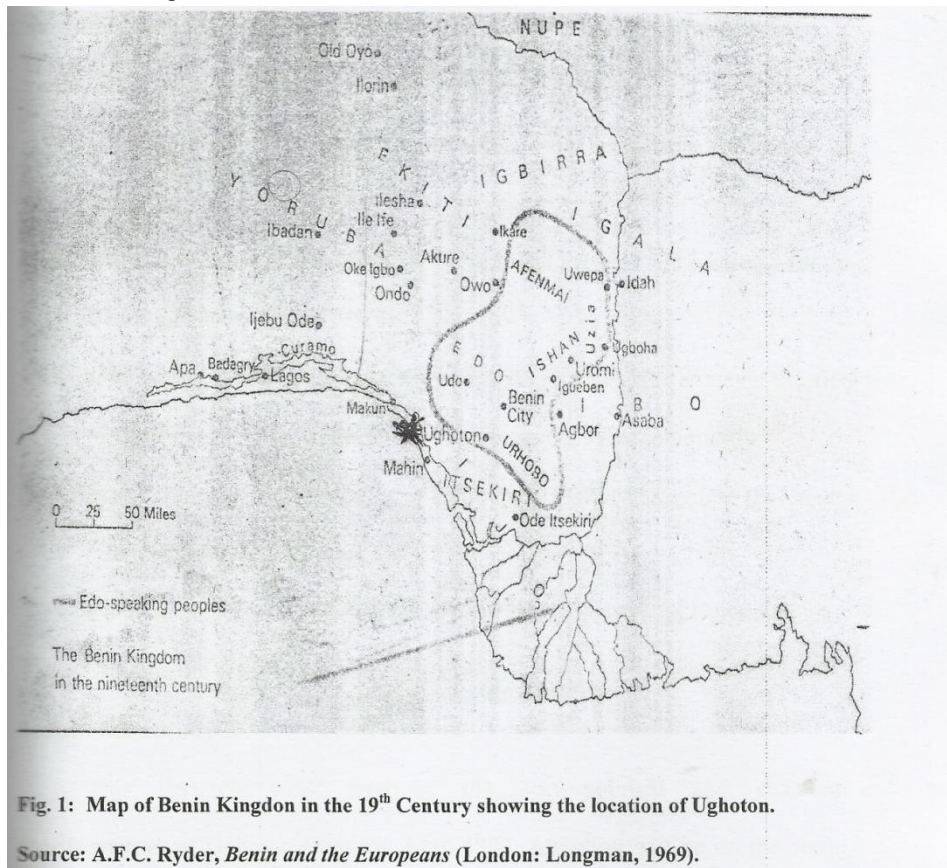


Fig. 1: Map of Benin Kingdom in the 19th Century showing the location of Ughoton.

Source: A.F.C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans* (London: Longman, 1969).

Figure 1: Map of Benin Kingdom in the 19th Century Showing the Location of Ughoton

Ughoton is a household name in Benin villages because the village is the home of the diety called “Olokun” which is worshipped by most Benins (An interview with Clifford Ogbewe, on 16-4-2013) [7] and is known as the god of the sea, the giver of riches and children as well as posterity. (An interview with Aigbovbiosa, O.V., on 15-4-2013) [8]. Apart from this, it has been said that Benin mythology sees Ughoton as the gateway to heaven, hence, burial ritual songs, entreat their loved ones not to falter in “Alubode slope (Gbe devbeoke Alubode)” [9].

From its rudimentary stage, Ughoton witnessed rapid social, political and economic 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 to serve as the Benin Port.

Again Ughoton became the main port of Benin Kingdom during the period of Benin-European trade relations which started in the fifteenth century. As part of the transformation process, the Portuguese established warehouses and factories at Ughoton as a Benin port, Ughoton thus experienced considerable economic prosperity and development. At the social level, the missionaries came through Ughoton as the chief port of Benin Kingdom to introduce Christianity to Benin and the people of Ughoton. From c.1440, the population of Ughoton increased as a result of the migration of different traders, visitors and missionaries to the community.

The political institutions in Ughoton also went through transformations between 1440 and 1897. Ughoton was a centre for settlement of disputes and received messages from the Oba of Benin through the Ohen-Okun (An interview with Priest Ukhuegbe Frank, on 14-1-2014) [10]. Due to the importance accorded to the Ohen-Okun,



he was appointed as Benin ambassador to Portugal in 1486. This gesture increased the fame of Ughoton and its name was registered on the world Map.

However, the transformation process was affected by the events of 1897. This British invasion of Benin led to the collapse of the Kingdom including the economic hub of the kingdom, Ughoton. However survived after the invasion of 1897.

Issues of Traditions of Origin of Ughoton

The issue of the establishment of Ughoton has not attracted much debate or controversy among scholars of Benin history. Traditions of Ughoton are unanimous that Prince Ekaledherhan, the only child of the last Ogiso, Ogido Owodo was the founder of Ughoton in about the eleventh century A.D. However, a major questions arise, who was this Prince Ekaledherhan? Prince Ekaledherhan was said to be the only child of Ogiso Owodo, the last Ogiso of Ogiso dynasty who came to the throne in c. 1068A.D. There are a lots of contentious issues which demand analysis and clarification. Such issues include Ogiso Myth, Oracle divination and Banishment of Prince Ekaledherhan.

The Era of Ogiso Owodo

The reign of Ogiso Owodo witnessed unprecedented failure, anxiety, crises, conflicts, misrule, acrimony and anarchy. Ogiso was said to have summoned the state council meeting only when there was trouble and had no respect for the King makers, the Uzamas. Ogiso Owodo was said to have seriously breached the norms and ethics of the culture when he personally carried out the execution of a pregnant woman who was a helper to Queen Esagho. This was an abomination in Benin. It is further said that Ogiso Owodo had physical defeats which affected the personality. This accounted for his erratic behavior. Owodo's major concern was the failure of his numerous wives to bear children. So he had to consult the oracle.

Prince Ekaledherhan mother's name was Imade. She was from a very poor background, hence she was always despised by other wives because Ekaledherhan's mother was given to Ogiso Owodo as a tribute. Fortunately, she was the only wife that gave Ogiso the only child out of the numerous wives.

In traditional Benin society, the position of oracle is very unique. It was a source of divine revelation, an avenue for people to claim innocence in matters like stealing, adultery, fornication and witch craft. (An interview with Efosa Igunbor, on 8/4/2013) [11]. When there was serious famine, drought and an impending war, the oracle was consulted. Even in rites dealing with the institution of marriage, parents consult a diviner to learn whether the marriage of their daughter to a particular man will lead to trouble or whether their daughter will have children and prosper in the marriage. People believed strongly in oracle whenever there is problem. Divination is practiced by men as well as women in Africa. The diviner seeks to interpret the mysteries of life, convey the message of the gods, give guidance in daily affairs and settle disputes, uncover the past and look into the future [12]. The consultation of oracle by Ogiso Owodo became imperative to the establishment of Ughoton. This is because the substantial miscarriages of the oracle's divinations led to the banishment of Prince Ekaledherhan who eventually founded Ughoton. If the information from the oraclist was given correctly by the delegates to Oba Owodo, Queen Esagho could have been killed or banished and not Ekaledherhan (An interview with Obazee Christopher on 6/4/2013) [13]. It is possible to say then that the issue of Prince Ekaledherhan connection with Ughoton could have not arose. Out of his numerous wives, only one wife bore him a child, whom he named Ekaledherhan. The whole kingdom was concerned because if anything happened to Ekaledherhan, Ogiso Owodo would not have an heir apparent which will be a serious calamity to the king in particular and the kingdom in general; hence the need to consult the oracle for him to know the cause of his wives bareness (An interview with Izevbigie Omokaro on 3/4/2013) [14].

The oraclist said that Esagho, the senior wife of the King, was the cause of the bareness of Owodo's wives and that she should be killed for them to have children. The delegation that went to consult the oracle hid this from the king and instead told the king that, Prince Ekaledherhan was the cause and should therefore be killed or offered as a sacrifice to enable the Ogiso's wives to have children. The oracle's revelation that Queen Esagho was responsible for the bareness of Ogiso's wives may be plausible because another story said that Esagho was known to be a huge woman, and a witch who practiced lesbianism. Ogiso Owodo had strong passion for Esagho



who was the wife of his late father, Ogiso Arigho. Ogiso Owodo was said to have fell under the influence of Esagho because of the love he had for her.

There is some controversy as to the composition of the delegation led by Oliha, including Esagho and what actually happened on the way. One version says that, owing to the wives' persistent worry, Owodo, the Ogiso, was compelled to send his senior wife Esagho alone to consult the oracle [15]. Another version says that Owodo sent three delegates in addition to Esagho [16]. It may be difficult to uphold the fact that in a matter of this magnitude, Ogiso Owodo would solely rely on one person to visit the oracle without a witness. From another version it was said that the delegates to the oracle were influenced by Esagho. It is said that when Esagho heard the message of Obiro (an oraclist), she started scheming on what to do to save her life and she accused the leader of the delegation, chief Oliha of infidelity, insisting that, Oliha saw her nakedness and touched her which he was not supposed to do. She asserted that when she reports this to her husband, Oliha would not be alive to report what the diviner had said and that he will instantly be executed.

It is possible that considering the nature of this offence as proposed by Esagho, they succumbed to her evil suggestions. It is said that when the delegates started pleading, Queen Esagho then proposed a compromise solution to the problem regarding who should be executed. That means that, the other members of the delegation were forced to accept the compromise suggested by Queen Esagho.

Banishment of Prince Ekaladerhan

As a result of this miscarriage of the oracles divinations, Ekaladerhan and his mother, Imade were banished from the city. They led him into the bush and asked him to go to anywhere in the world but never to come to Benin throughout his life and the executioners then stained their matchets with animal blood to convince the Edos that the boy had been killed. Though Ogiso Owodo openly said that the child should be killed for the other wives to have children, he had however given secret instructions to the executioners that he should be spared provided he did not return to Benin (Interview with Izevbigie on 3-4-2013) [14]. In the circumstances, Owodo had thoughtlessly forced his only son, Ekaladerhan, to an unearned death which providence was said to have converted into exile. Ekaladerhan was led away through Ekewuan road into the forest by two Odionmwan (the traditional executioners) to fulfill the prediction of the oraclist and at the same time relieve the pressure by the wives of Ogiso.

As he was led away, his hands were tied behind his back. His relatives from the mother's side, friends and well-wishers followed, many of whom wanted to die with him. They all joined Ikaladerhan to plead with the executioners for mercy (Izevbigie, 2010).

At a place called Igo (meaning I shouted for help), Ekaladerhan started wailing, pleading that the father should spare his life because he claimed innocence. When the King refused to pardon him, Ekaladerhan was said to have called on the Ancestors of the kingdom to come to his aid, "let there be no rain and no sunshine, let there be uneasiness and trouble in Ogiso palace. At Urhrokhokho (meaning chicken neck), he was pardoned by the executioners. The executioners were prepared to set him free if he could take an oath never to come to the City in his life time. Edun Akenzua puts this way:

At the time of Ekaladerhan banishment, Owodo had no successors because his only son and heir-apparent Ekaladerhan had earlier left for an unknown destination after having been secretly granted freedom by those sent to execute him as a sacrifice to the gods to enable him have male children (Akenzua, 1979:11) [9].

Establishment of Ughoton

Ekaladerhan rested at Ugbine, a neighbouring community. There, he saw a woman as he was wandering who told him to go further that there is hope and there, he got the magical sticks which he later used to establish Ughoton. The magical sticks or wands came into the discussion because of an attempt to give spiritual or magical explanation to the origin of Ughoton. H.F. Marshall puts it that:



As Kaladerhan wandered through the bush, he was hungry, he contemplated suicide. It was then that he came to a juju house in the bush and hearing a voice inside, went in. the spirit handed him seven wands and told him that whenever, he wished for anything he should strike the ground with one of the wand (Marshall, 1938: 2) [7].

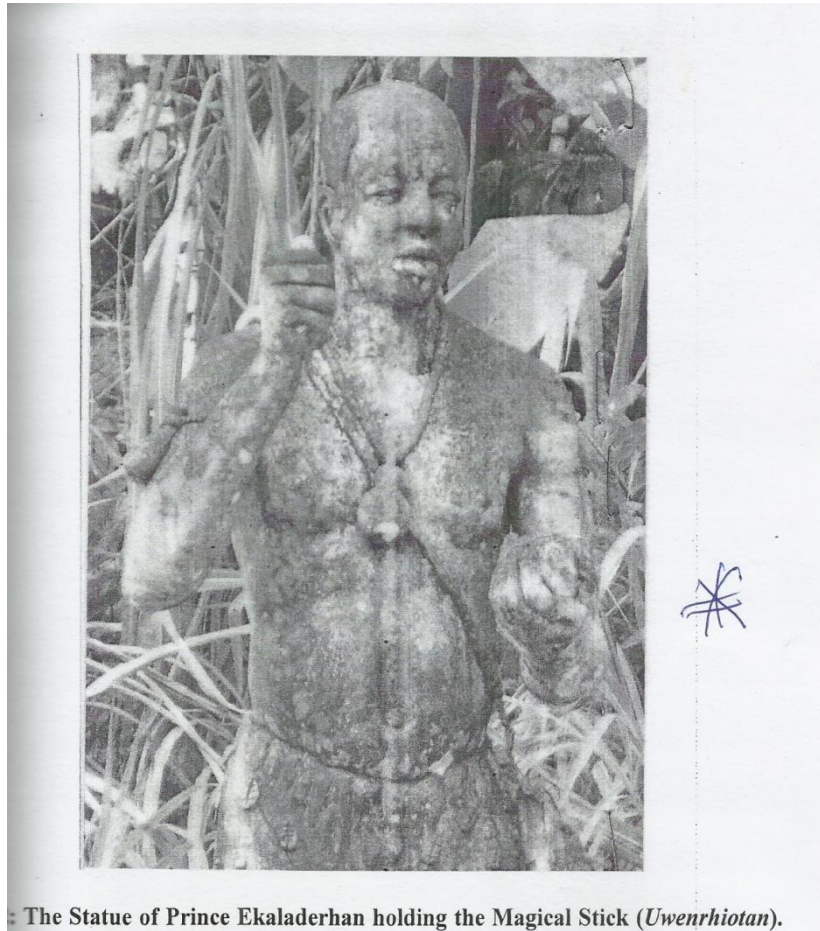


Figure 2: The Statue of Prince Ekaladerhan holding the Magical Stick (Uwenrhiotan).

Figure 2: The statue of Prince Ekaladerhan holding the Magical Stick (Uwenrhiotan)

Ughoton was founded by Prince Ekaladerhan, the only child of Ogiso Owodo, the last Ogiso of Ogiso dynasty, in about the eleventh century AD. After his banishment from the city and after much wandering in the forest, Prince Ekaladerhan founded Ughoton by the Benin River. In fact when he was banished with his mother from the City, he was joined by his friends and they moved further near the sea where they built a new town called Ughoton. From the account of H.F. Marshall, Ekaladerhan was said to have been given seven wands in a juju house in the bush and that when he reached the present site of Ughoton, he struck the ground with the first wand, wished for houses and people which immediately appeared (Ibid).

Ekaladerhan eventually became the founder of the village of Ughoton on the bank of a river after a long course of wandering in the forest [15]. However, there are few others who claimed that Ekaladerhan was not the direct founder. From the account of Osemegie Ebohon, it was said that, Ekaladerhan met some people at Ughoton already settled there before his arrival. However, the people he met were hospitable to him, hence he settled there and became a part of them [18]. Another version noted that Ekaladerhan founded Ughoton which was in fact, called Igue Ekaladerhan (the land or place of Ekala`derhan) [9]. Again, Edun Akenzua expresses the fact that, the hunters from Benin who stumbled on him in the forest and the soldiers the father sent to arrest him founded Ughoton and named it after Ekaladerhan (Ibid). In spite of their slight differences with other scholars, what is central to their discussion was still Ekaladerhan. In writing the history of pre-literate societies, different opinions would always come into focus or consideration, so that of Ughoton cannot be an exemption. In spite of



the divergent views of both academic and non-academic historians on the origin of Ughoton, they agreed that Ughoton was founded by Prince Ekaladerhan by the Benin River.

Conclusion

Ughoton also known to the Europeans as Gwatto lies about 42 kilometers Southeast of Benin. There existed four major streets in the traditional Ughoton society and has common boundaries with Ekewuan to the East and Gelegele to the West. The Benin-Ughoton road links Ughoton with other neighbouring villages. The road has been of socio-political and economic relevance to the communities that border Ughoton. The road facilitated trade with the Europeans from the fifteenth Century. (An interview with Erhunmwunamase Izevbigie on 6/4/2013) [19].

Ughoton witnessed serious transformation in the social, economic and political sectors from 1440-1897. However, the transformation process was affected by the events of 1897. This British invasion of Benin led to the collapse of the kingdom including the economic hub of the kingdom Ughoton. Fortunately, Ughoton however survived after this invasion of 1897.

The tenure of Ogiso-Owodo, who was the last Ogiso of Ogiso dynasty of Benin Kingdom witnessed a long period of misrule, anxiety, conflict and anarchy. In spite of the numerous wives he married, he had only a child called Ekaladerhan. This barrenness of his wives gave him serious concern as the whole kingdom was disturbed, hence the need for divination. His senior wife Esagho did not help matters as she was a witch who practiced lesbianism. The oraclist confirmed that Esagho was the cause of the bareness of Owodo's wives and instructed that she should be killed or offered as a sacrifice to enable the Ogiso's wives to have children. The delegation led by Chief Oliha substantially miscarried the oracle's divination which led to the banishment of Prince Ekaladerhan. The consultation of the oracle by Ogiso Owodo became very paramount to the establishment of Ughoton. This is because the miscarriages of the oracle's divination led to the banishment of Prince Ekaladerhan who eventually founded Ughoton.

Fortunately, at a village called Urhurokhokho (meaning chicken neck) Prince Ekaladerhan was pardoned by the executioner who asked him to take an oath with them never to come to the City in his life time because if he did, they would be killed for refusing to carry out the instructions of the King (An interview with Iyangbe Frank, on 6/4/2013) [21]. After this banishment and after much wandering in the forest, Prince Ekaladerhan founded Ughoton by the Benin River in about the eleven century A.D [15].

Infact, the 31st and last Ogiso, Ogiso Owodo had thoughtlessly forced his only son Ekaladerhan into an un-earned death which providence converted into exile.

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