

The Ughievwen People of Western Delta of Nigeria Pre-Colonial Political System: A Monarchy or Republicanism?

OGHI, Felix Ejukonemu, *PhD*

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies
Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogwa
Edo State, Nigeria

Abstract

The popular opinion about Ughievwen precolonial political organisation is that which described it to have had a brief experience of monarchical rule in precolonial times when one Ewwhereha from Oginibo tried to impose himself on the entire division as king. Popular resistance to this administrative innovation prevented it from maturing into an institution. Following pressure from colonial authorities, the Ughievwen created the office of Otota in the early decades of the 20th century. The view continues that when Midwestern Region was created in 1963, the designation of the Otota was changed to Okobaro in 1964. Late Chief Ugen, the then Odede of Ebo society, the view maintains, became the first Okobaro. He was succeeded as Okobaro by Chief Okpako Dase of Otutuama from Owahwa sub-section of Ughievwen with the title Owahwa I. How correct is this assertion? It is the position of this paper that this view cannot be sustained in the light of emerging evidences. Ughievwen land had a monarchical political structure before the advent of colonialism and that the position of “Ototaship” and “Okobaro” as implying king was an aberration prior to the coming of the British.

Keywords: Monarchy, Pre-colonial Political System, Republicanism, Ughievwen

Introduction

Ughievwen people occupy Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State. The administrative headquarters of the people is at Otujeremi. The area is bounded on the South and South-East by Okpare Creek, on the West by Gbekebo Creek, on the North and North-West by Saba Creek in Udu Local Government Area of Delta State and on the North-East by Agbarho Clan and to the East by Ughelli Clan (Johnson, 1932: 3-5). The area lies wholly in the tropics and could be located roughly at 5,12N and 5,80E. It occupies about 279 square kilometres (Pippah, 1999) and also hosts Otorogu gas company, one of the largest in West Africa. A version of the traditions of Origin of the people point to Benin

(Egharevba, 1968), but in terms of culture, they appear closer to the Ijos (Darah, 2011).

A lot of arguments and ideas have been propounded on the origin of the state generally in Africa. These arguments are said to have started in the period of classical antiquity. It was stated that the state was derived from the act of warfare, that is, “war is the prime mover in the origin of the state” (Kirk, 1954, 246 – 247). Aristotle even perceived it as “natural” and that it existed for the sake of the “good life” and thus like Plato, believed that the naturalness of the state had existed long enough in history and therefore, did not require an explanation (Allen, 1970: 142).

In Europe, ideas like “social contract” and monopoly of scarce – resource postulations were also made. Scholars like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau had argued that the origin of the state should be viewed as a consequence of the unwritten agreement between individuals who decided to unite and form a large political organisation (Aaron, 1955: 272-273). The Marxists, apostles of scarce – resource view on the other hand, contended that the state was an organ designed to reconcile class conflict that arose from conflicting economic interest so that they might not consume themselves and society in a futile struggle (Lenin, 1968: 267). Up till now, the problem of the origin of states still engage the attention of scholars (Armstrong, 1960). In the main, conquest and warfare, hamitic/diffusionist hypothesis, class struggle and monopoly of scarce resources have been used by Scholars to explain state formation. However, none of these views have been able to provide an “all-embracing” explanation for the emergence of the states of West Africa or in Nigeria.

For Ughievwen land, the story of how the state emerged has it that after the settlement of the people at Otujeremi, migrations took place to neighbouring areas and this led to the founding of villages that at the beginning had their heads as Okparo'r' Orere (eldest man) until a king was made to take charge of the entire Ughievwen land (Akpomugie, 2008). As with other parts of Uthoboland, the 'Ovie' stool was held with utmost sacredness. *Ivie* (plural form of *Ovie*) were regarded as the bridge between the people and God.

Just as there has never been a people without God interfering in their affairs, so it was with the Ughievwen people. Even though the circumstances that led to the emergence of the “Ovie” of Ughievwen land in the past seem controversial, its existence was attested to, by colonial officials in their intelligence report compiled in 1932. It may be conceded that at the time the British arrived the area, the cohesiveness which ordinarily was expected to have existed between the “Ovie” and his people may have nose-dived, this did not however, mean that the people were without a king and to imply that monarchical system was a brief experience.

For a people who, even the British officials in their report, acknowledged the way the clan was administered, in both civil and criminal matters, to be regarded as republican appears to be a wrong judgment. It was certainly not correct. At the time the intelligence report on the area was written (1932) it was obvious that Ughievwen was either being presided over by Prince Ogbaran as “Ovie-elect” or preparations were on to inaugurate

him. Yet, the said report of 1932 was silent on these. This paper therefore contends that before the coming of the British Officials Ughievwen had a monarchical system patterned most probably, after that of the ancient Benin Kingdom. Titles like “Otota” and Okobaro” existed but certainly they were innovations that came between 1927 and 1950. Bradbury, captured the situation thus:

At some unknown date most of the Urhobo-Isoko country came under the rule of the Oba of Benin. Many of the Ivie or Kings of Urhobo and Isoko tribes had sought confirmation of their titles from the Oba and some still express an intention to do so; the Orodje of Oorerokpe (Okpe-Urhobo) received ceremonial sword from the Oba as late as the Autumn of 1953 (Bradbury, 1957: 129-130).

Drawing from the view above, it was expected by the Ughievwen people that occupants of the “Ovie” position must pass the test of identifying the bronze-cast head (effigy) of his predecessor. Persons who did not belong to the male line of the royal family were not qualified to take the Ovie title (Odje, 1995: 4). This was the position in the 1940s that seem to have painted the picture of statelessness or republicanism.

Method

This study was based largely on primary (archival) material gotten from intelligence report and oral interviews. Where these sources did not answer the questions raised, resort was made to secondary sources, mostly books. The analysis of the materials received from these sources formed the bulk of this study. These revealed a lot of misinformation on the part of the writers of the intelligence report and the wholesale adoption later was not necessary. The effect of the misinformation has manifested in claims and counterclaims by contenders to the “Ovie” stool in Ughievwen land. Attention has therefore been drawn in the conclusion that this misinformation has the tendency of encouraging more disunity among the people if not corrected.

Early History of the Ughievwen People

Like the migration traditions of the Cross-River people (Erim, 1981: 108), the traditions of origin and settlement of Ughievwen people are complicated because of the intertwined nature of the stories of waves of migrations from various directions in the course of their search for new homes. While some claimed to have migrated long distance, others moved only within a geographical region as evidenced in the movement of Owahwa from Otughievwen to found Owahwa (Nukueye, 2003: 13). Some were people fleeing from events in larger societies such as Benin, while others came for reasons of the quest for safety and insecurity (Adjoro, 2008). However, as a result of the complex nature of the stories, state formation in Ughievwen land could be streamlined to four: the Hamitic hypothesis, exodus from Benin, Niger/Congo confluence hypothesis and the Ijo tradition.

The version of the traditions of the people which falls within the Hamitic hypothesis, has it that a long time ago, Ughievwen and his followers came from the East, Egypt along with the Binis, Ijos, Itsekiri, Hausa, Ga and Yoruba. This tradition maintains that the Ughievwen people were part of the Urhobo people, who once lived together amicably and in upheavals several years before the Arabs, Greeks and Romans evicted them in a mass exodus from Egypt. Sad enough, there is no place in the account that specifically mentioned the Ughievwen people.

This loop hole sounds like Ikime's "vague insurance policy (Ikime, 1982: 12) thesis and Sander's view that, such hypothesis is accepted in order to bolster ego (Sander, 1969: 531-532). Agreed that Egypto – Meroic civilization filtered into the Sudan from where it spread to other parts of Africa (Fage and Oliver, 1962: 51-52), no evidence showed that Ughievwen, the eponymous founder of the Ughievwen sub-culture area came from there. The most that could be conceded to the Eastern origin tradition is the remote possibility that some migrants from Meroe through Nok could have reached Urhoboland and perhaps, Ughievwen area, but we do not have any evidence to sustain this partly due to the inadequate state of archaeological data and given the obscure date of departure from Egypt.

There is also the Niger/Congo confluence hypothesis. This hypothesis was introduced by writers after the rich Nok finds and other discoveries connected with the area. Ughievwen people have also made up their story to identify with the tradition. Associating Ughievwen origins to the Niger/Congo confluence seemed to have been based on linguistic affiliation. There is the view that groups of people might speak the same language at one period, but with passage of time and their drifting apart, they might lose contact with each other, develop different dialects of the same language and finally, acquire different language.

No doubt, Ughievwen, as part of the Urhobos, belong to the Kwa subfamily of the Niger-Congo family of languages, but we are not told why the confluence area must be regarded the special cradle land of the Kwa family of languages. The Kwa speakers could and may have dispersed from anywhere else. It may be argued that even if the suggestion for deriving Ughievwen from the confluence area as made by oral traditions, such tradition certainly is hundreds of years old – a period which certainly is too long for the human memory to remain accurate (Oghi, 2014:26).

Third, is the tradition which emphasised exodus from Benin. According to this tradition, long ago the Ughievwen people after leaving Egypt later settled in Benin from where they arrived their present settlement (Omoni, 2009). Egharevba, even recorded that the Urhobo left Benin during the reign of Egbekah (Egharevba, 1968). Continuing, the tradition maintained that the departing Urhobo from Benin were led by one "Koku". They arrived the Ethiope River, crossed and later settled in the areas beyond the Ethiope River. Who could the said "Koku" be? No mention was made about Ughievwen. In fact, the meaning of the name "Ughievwen" seems not to be easily interpreted by those who emphasise the version (Omoni, 2009). Lack of detailed information on Koku's identity at

present encourages speculative rather than definitive comments. It is possible to regard him as one of those associated with voluntary migrations in search of new homes, or due to population pressure, but there is no available evidence to support this.

The most popular of the traditions is the one associated with the Ijos. It was the version recorded by colonial officials who, in producing their intelligence report, relied much on stories narrated to them by the people. According to this version of the traditions, the Ughievwen people migrated from Ogobiri in present day Bayelsa State (Okotete, 2010). However, as has been argued earlier, the exodus from Benin seemed to be a generalisation for the Urhobos and not particularly for the Ughievwen people. Though the link to the Ijos find historical basis in the long social ties between the two ethnic groups, it is most probable to suggest an arrival period to the present settlement of the people, to the beginning of the 18th century relying fairly on the king-list of the people. But the point must be made that the journey of the founder, Ughievwen, to the present day Otughievwen, has been variously related to have been characterised by a “stop and move” fashion. (Oghi, 2014:31).

The Evolution of Ughievwen Kingship

Prior to the evolution of the “Ovie” stool in Ughievwen land, four subclans headed by the four children of Ughievwen, the eponymous founder of the clan, were established in order of seniority. These were: Orowhe, Owahwa, UkpEDI and Uvburie. Administration of these subclans rested squarely on the shoulders of the Subclan heads with Otughievwen as the headquarters of the clan. The ruling council that co-ordinated administration was the *Idede*.

This council was made up of four Ughievwen cults, namely: Ade, Igbu-Oto, Igbu-Eshovwin and Ebo. Just as each subclan had its spokesman (*Otota*) there was also a single “*Otota*” for the entire clan, but as it were, no one single person was chosen to be “Ovie” (King) until one Mosumo (from Oginibo) claimed to have been divinely called to become an 'Ovie'. According to the revelation (Koyonda and Ogbaran, 2012: 12-19), as narrated by Mosumo, then, on his return from his farm one hot afternoon, sent one of his wives to fetch water for him to have his bath but she refused.

The insolence of his wife notwithstanding, Mosumo, asked one of his daughters to carry out the assignment. The daughter took an earthen pot and rope and went to the well in the compound to fetch the water. Apparently, believing that the pot had been filled with water, she tried to pull it, but she could not because the pot was too heavy for her to pull up. She tried severally but in vain. When subsequently it was pulled up with the assistance of other persons, it was found to be full, not of water but strange ornamental beads (coral beads) that had not been seen before.

The discovery of the coral beads elicited fear to the elders of the UkpEDI family (to which Oginibo belonged). Divinations were done and it was revealed that Mosumo had been chosen by God to be an Ovie for the Ughievwen people, who until then, had none.

This led to the convening of the meeting at Otughievwen where it was agreed that if Mosumo's claim was confirmed by the Oba of Benin, then Ughievwen people would accept the idea of kingship. Why must confirmation be from the Oba of Benin? It may not have been unconnected with the respect the Ughievwen people had for the Benin Monarch. After all, they were said to have once lived with the Binis. Above all, the Urhobos still regarded the Oba of Benin, as *Orovwa akpor* (owner of the world) (Nowamagbe, 2006).

Second, considering the circumstances surrounding the migration of the Urhobos from Benin Kingdom which were far from being friendly, the people felt it would be impossible to get the Oba's approval and third, the wherewithal to undertake such an arduous and dangerous journey considering the distance was enough to kill such dream.

As it turned out, Mosumo embarked on the journey and was made an Ovie with royal regalia created with the beads fetched from the well which he took along to Benin (Koyonda and Ogbaran, 2012: 7-10). On arrival, he built his palace at the spot where Ughievwen market is located at Otughievwen (Okotete, 2010). This marked the beginning of monarchical rule in Ughievwen land. This went on for years. At the death of Mosumo, he was said to have been succeeded by his son, Ogbaran.

However, it must be noted that owing to the way Mosumo died just as was done to the Ovie of Agbon (Odje, 1995), the Ughievwen people buried Mosumo with the crown and his royal regalia. This scenario itself, laid the foundation for claims and counterclaims as to who could and be accepted as "Ovie". This could be the reason why at the demise of Ogbaran, it was purported that a curse was placed by the Igbun society concerning Ovienship in the second half of the 1920s. Therefore, it could be said that prior to 1900 when colonial rule took its root in Ughievwen, there existed a monarchical government patterned most probably, after that of the ancient Benin Kingdom.

What Constitutes Monarchy and Republicanism?

A form of government in which all political power is absolutely or nominally lodged with an individual or individuals could be called monarchy (Nnamdi, 2010: 114). As a political entity, the monarch is the head of state, generally until their death or abdication, and is wholly set apart from all other members of the state. In precolonial African societies, this form of government was common in areas where powers were centralised e.g. Benin.

However, that powers were centralised did not imply the non-existence of other organs. In Benin, while the Monarch exercised control over the kingdom, there were also enigies (singular Onogie) and Odionweres who represented the authority of the Oba at their various levels. Elders played roles in the administration but were part of the overall monarchical structure (Igbafe, 1980).

Like the Binis, from whom the Ughievwen people could have drawn a lot of political/ideological guardianship as discussed above, that there was an "Ovie" did not imply that elders (Ekpakos) had their own distinct form of administration, rather the

gerontocratic or republican aspect of their precolonial administration, was subsumed in the monarchical power of the Ovie (the king): Though it could be argued that arising from reaction to the growing power of government, anarchism could develop among the people (Baradat, 1994: 133), for the Ughievwen people, it was born out of what they perceived as tyrannical rule of Mosumo. Could this be said to deny the existence of a monarchy? Certainly not. It is instructive to note that the said monarchical system did not begin during Mosumo's reign, but far back to his father, Evwerha. In fact, a 1914 edition of Bouvier's Law Dictionary states that monarchy is contradistinguished from republic, and gives this definition:

“a monarchy is the government which is ruled by one person, who is wholly set apart from all other members of the state's (called his subjects), while we call republic that government in which not only there exists an organism by which the opinion of the people, or of a portion of the people (as in aristocracies) passes over into public will, ... but in which also the supreme power, or the executive power, returns, either periodically or at stated times...” (Nnamdi, 2010: 114).

Attempts at Resuscitating Ughievwen “Ovie” Stool

It must be quickly pointed out that Ughievwen history has suffered a lot of misinformation. This may be due largely to the dearth of historians of Ughievwen extraction and late arrival of western education. Consequently, one of the early documentations about the people was done by Lieutenant Commander S.E. Johnson (Johnson, 1932). This was followed by *The Urhobo People* edited by Onigu Oriteand recently, Darah's book, *Battle of Song-Udje Tradition of the Urhobo* (Darah, 2005). Among the misconceptions about the Ughievwen people were the circumstances that led to the death of Mosumo, the use of the term “Okobaro”, and the place of Evwerha in Ughievwen history.

The account of S.E. Johnson stated that the said Mosumo was reported to habitually seize women he fancied and as such he was unpopular (Johnson, 1932: 18-24). An in-depth investigation of this incident was never done. Salient issues like: whether it was Evwerha or Mosumo that actually went to Benin or Evwerha who was crowned the first Ovie? Whether the crime alleged against the Ovie was true or not? Or whether the first Ovie really imposed himself on the people was not properly investigated. Recent statements from the Mosumo family at Oginibo contradicts this: rather, it was King Mosumo, the great grandson of Evwerha who did (Koyonda and Ogbaran, 2012: 19).

Both Johnson and Darah's work also show that Evwerha was not from Oginibo. They both agreed that Evwerha was the father of Gbebo and that Gbebo was the father of Mosumo, and that Gbebo founded Oginibo. Again, this is a sharp contradiction because recent pronouncements from the Mosumo'sroyal family counters this view. It has been asserted that while Ughievwen was the father of Ukpédi, Ukpédi was the father of

Evwerha, while the latter was the father of Usiarho who begat Gbebo the father of Mosumo, *Taifo* and *Uto*. How could Evwerha then be from Oginibo? Could he have magically reincarnated to come from a village founded by his grandson? Up till modern times, there is a quarter named after Evwerha in Otujeremi. Evwerha and his son Usiarho were from Otujeremi and not Oginibo, as portrayed by S.E. Johnson and G.G. Darah.

The second worrisome distortion of the people's history is the failure to have investigated the allegations against the then Ovie. The Intelligence report had stated that the Ovie, after being duly crowned by the Oba of Benin returned to Jeremi (Otughievwen) where he assumed the role of Ovie (Johnson, 1932). The point being emphasised here is that if the people were republican as claimed by Darah and S.E. Johnson, and the Ovie imposed himself on the people, why did he return to Jeremi and built his palace with the help of the people and continued as "Ovie" unchallenged until the conspiracy against him? The inevitable conclusion that could be drawn here is that the situation that presented him as "Ovie" was beyond doubt and he was in all probability welcomed by the people of Jeremi (Otughievwen).

Third, if Mosumo's reign was ephemeral essentially because he had been accused of one crime or the other, how far did the British Administrators probe into the affair that led to the killing of a ruler? The Intelligence report is silent on this. It only stated that "in the course of time, Evwerha (Mosumo) died" (Johnson, 1932). The salient question that would flow from this picture painted of the Ughievwen people would be: was Ughievwen a kingdom or not? If the pre-colonial structure of the people depicted a kingdom, then it could not have been a republican at the same time.

Fundamentally, it must be stated that in the writing of the history of a people, primary sources of data are vital except where they are non-existent. The fact that the intelligence report failed to consult the Mosumo family to hear their side of the stories showed that the report could not have revealed the true picture of things. This shortcoming may lend credence to the assertion of Karl Marx, who, addressing a similar situation of the Greeks, centuries ago, said: "In the frightening dramas of the royal houses of Mycenae and Thebes the greatest Greek poets rightly represented ignorance as tragic fate" (Easton and Guddat, 1967: 130). The account of the pre-colonial system in Ughievwen land appears not to have been properly represented.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to debunk the claim that pre-colonial Ughievwen society was republican. The view as expressed by the intelligence report compiled by S.E. Johnson and later influenced other writers is rather unfortunate. Benin imperial authority over the Ughievwen area existed up to the time of Oba Akenzua II (Koyonda and Ogbaran, 2012: 19). Prince Ogbaran who succeeded Mosumo, was said to have visited Benin for the necessary rituals and ceremonies for the revival of the kingship. He was said to have died around 1950. The acclaimed restiveness of Ughievwen land in the 1920s and 1930s was

not strange. In Benin, this kind of incident had happened to Oba Eweka II, when an Urhobo colonial policeman was said to have eloped with the Oba's wife named Iyare in 1923/24. The Oba was accused of having used her for human sacrifice, until the woman was found with her lover in Effurun, Warri Province (Usuanlele, 2007: 490).

The pre-colonial political structure in Ughievwen was a monarchical system until the Schism in the area necessitated the invention of the title, "Otota" and later "Okobaro". The titles were political creations that over the years, have been dressed with garments of legitimacy because chieftaincy titles in Ughievwen had and still had four cults (Ede, Ebo, Igbun Oto and Igbun-Eshovwin). These titles never before 1964 portray the holders to be heads of the Ughievwen people. This misinformation on the political structure of the Ughievwen people could further deepen disunity among the people if not corrected.

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