



## International Journal of Trade and Policy (ISSN:2637-5095)



# An Analysis of The Traditions of Origin of Ughoton: the Seaport of Old Benin Kingdom

**Dr. Ediagbonya Michael**

Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria Faculty Of Arts, Department Of History And International Studies

### ABSTRACT

This paper wholistically examines the issues relating to the origin of Ughoton in the earliest times. It analyses the political anxiety, crises, conflicts, misrule, anarchy which characterised the reign of Ogiso Owodo. It assesses the circumstances surrounding the birth of Prince Ekaladerhan, and his banishment. It discusses the role of oracle in Benin traditional institutions. Finally the paper also examines how Ughoton was founded in the eleventh century. The researcher obtained data from primary and secondary sources. Archival materials and oral interview constituted the primary sources while the secondary sources were books, newspapers, articles, theses and dissertations. It was found that the manipulation of the oracle's divinations was a factor in the foundation of Ughoton. It was also found that from the numerous wives of Ogiso Owodo, only Imade gave birth to a child Prince Ekaladerhan. Prince Ekaladerham was banished and he eventually founded Ughoton in the eleventh century.

**Keywords:** Origin, Analysis, Divination, Banishment and Founding

### \*Correspondence to Author:

Ediagbonya Michael  
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria Faculty Of Arts, Department Of History And International Studies

### How to cite this article:

Ediagbonya Michael. An Analysis of The Traditions of Origin of Ughoton: the Seaport of Old Benin Kingdom. International Journal of Trade and Policy, 2018,1:7.

 eSciPub  
eSciPub LLC, Houston, TX USA.  
Website: <http://escipub.com/>

## 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 the Ogiso dynasty of the Benin Kingdom (Oronsaye, 1995). 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 (Roth, 1972). Pereira further observed that houses were built of sun-dried bricks with palm leaves (Ibid; p.5). Two French naval officers, Legroing and Balon who saw Ughoton in c.1787, put the number of houses at around forty (Ryder, 1969). However, Burton, who visited Ughoton in 1862, asserts that the village had shrunk to some twenty or thirty houses, mostly in a ruinous condition (Burton, 1865). In terms of population, J.F. Landolphe, who visited Ughoton in 1778, estimated the population at 3,000.

Ughoton community has common boundaries with Ekenwuan 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*.

The Benin-Ughoton road links Ughoton with the 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.

Ughoton is situated within the rainforest hence it witnesses abundant rainfall and sunshine. While seventy-five percent of the population of Ughoton engage in farming others engage in hunting and fishing because of the riverine nature of the environment. The main occupation of the men in the village was farming while the women engaged primarily in trading. The weather in the village is fairly

stable with two clearly defined seasons in the year which are the rainy and the dry season. The rainy season lasts 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. Man-made forests of rubber, oil palms and cocoa had replaced the original rain forest vegetation in some areas.

Ughoton is a household name in Benin villages because the village is the home of the deity called "Olokun" which is worshiped by most Benins (An Interview with Ogbewe Clifford, 2013) and is known as the god of the sea, the giver of riches and children as well as posterity. 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 de vbe oke Alubode)*" (Eweka, 1992: 106-109).

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. As Ughoton grew in economic status, the political organization and social activities of the community equally underwent rapid transformation processes.

At the economic level, 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 processes, the Portuguese established warehouses and factories at Ughoton as a Benin port. Ughoton thus experienced considerable economic prosperity and development. The trade in Ughoton was

greatly enhanced as the traders from Europe brought new items into Benin especially during the period of the slave trade. These items include maize and cassava which contributed immensely to the diet and wealth of individuals and Ughoton community as a whole.

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. During the reign of Oba Esigie (c.1504), many people were baptized before the death of the great explorer Affonso de' Aveiro who was buried with great lamentation by the Oba and christians in Benin City. The christians referred to here included those of Ughoton because Aveiro also resided there and preached the religion at Ughoton for a long time. Infact, in the first visit of Aveiro to Benin between 1485-1486 during the reign of Oba Ozolua, he was warmly received by the Oba and on his way back home, the Oba sent the chief of Ughoton (Ohen-Okun) to accompany him and his company to Lisbon so that he might learn about the Portuguese and their ways of life.

From c.1440 the population of Ughoton increased as a result of the migration of different traders, visitors and missionaries to the community. This was particularly true of Ughoton Creek also known as Gelegele where Ijos migrated to for the purpose of trade with the Europeans.

The political institutions 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 (the Priest of Olokun). Due to the importance accorded to the Ohen-Okun, he was appointed as Benin ambassador to Portugal from 1486. This gesture increased the fame of Ughoton and its name was registered on the world map. Traditionally, it was compulsory, from c.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 the "Edion age grade" which was originally four ("Edion-nene") was increased to eight ("Edion-nerhenrhen"), then to twelve ("Edion-neweva") in response to new exigencies and responsibilities brought about in the political transformation of the community.

However, the transformation process was affected by the events of 1897. In 1897, Ughoton was a theatre of war during the British invasion of Benin. Acting Consul-General Philips, who assumed duty on the October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1896 as the Head of Niger Coast Protectorate while Ralph Moore was on leave, (N.A.I, 1896) embarked on an ill-fated journey to Benin ostensibly on a peaceful mission to see the Oba. The events that followed the ill-fated mission led to the British invasion of Benin and the collapse of the kingdom including the economic hub of the kingdom, Ughoton. Ughoton, however, survived after the invasion of 1897.

## **ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN OF UGHOTON**

### **The Era of Prince Ekaladerhan**

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 Ekaladerhan, the only child of the last Ogiso, Ogiso Owodo, was the founder of Ughoton in about the eleventh century AD. However, a major question arises: who was this Prince Ekaladerhan? Prince Ekaladerhan was said to be the only child of Ogiso Owodo, the last Ogiso of Ogiso dynasty who came to the throne in c.1068AD. His reign witnessed the end of Ogiso dynasty. Ekaladerhan mother's name was Imade. She was from a very poor background; hence, she was always despised by other wives because Ekaladerhan's mother was given to Ogiso as a tribute.

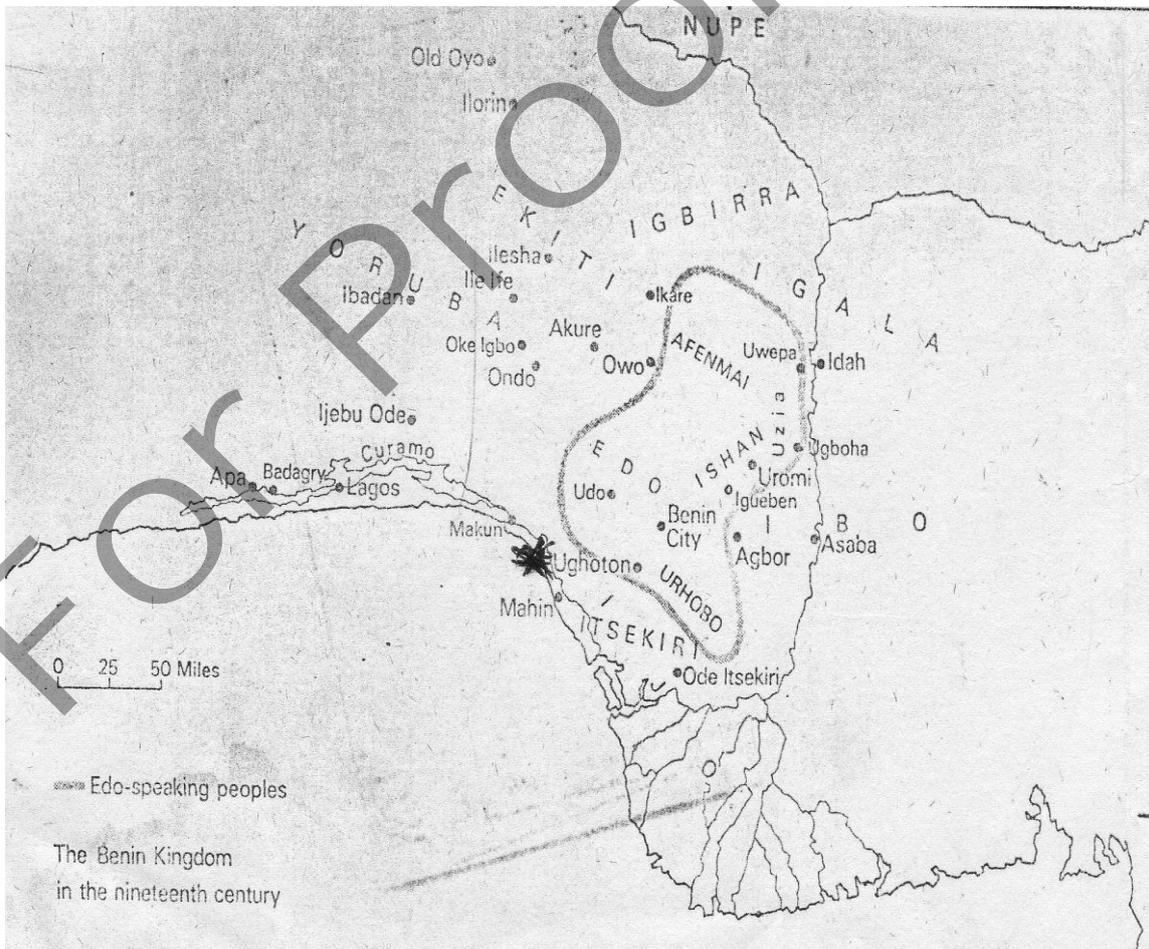
The reign of Ogiso Owodo witnessed unprecedented crises, conflicts, misrule, acrimony and anarchy. Ogiso was said to have

summoned the state council meeting only when there was trouble and had no respect for the king makers and the Uzamas. His reign was a long period of misrule, failure and anxiety. 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, Ogiiso Owodo had physical defects which affected his personality. This accounted for his erratic behaviour. Owodo's major concern was the failure of his numerous wives to bear children so he had to consult the oracle.

**Oracle Divination**

In traditional Benin society, the position of the oracle is very unique. Divination rids many people of the fear of the unknown. People consult diviners on practically all ventures to be

undertaken. It is a source of divine revelation, and also avenue for people to claim innocence in matters like stealing, adultery, fornication and witch craft. 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. It is part of African traditional religion. 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 (Ezeanya, 1976).



**Fig. 1: Map of Benin Kingdom in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century showing the location of Ughoton.**

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

The consultation of oracle by Ogiso Owodo became imperative to the establishment of Ughoton. This is because the manipulations of the oracle's divinations led to the banishment of Prince Ekaladerhan who eventually founded Ughoton. This was because 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 Ekaladerhan. It is possible to say then that the issue of Prince Ekaladerhan's connection with Ughoton could have not arisen. Out of his numerous wives, only one wife bore him a child, whom he named Ekaladerhan. The whole kingdom was concerned because if anything happened to Ekaladerhan, Ogiso Owodo would not have an heir apparent which would 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' barrenness.

The oraclist said that Esagho, the senior wife of the king, was the cause of the barrenness 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 Ekaladerhan 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 barrenness of Ogiso's wives may be plausible because another story said that Esagho was known to be a huge woman, and a witch who practised lesbianism. Ogiso Owodo had strong passion for Esagho who was the wife of his late father, Ogiso Arigho. Ogiso Owodo was said to have strong affection for 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 (Egharevba, 2005).

Another version says that Owodo sent three delegates in addition to Esagho (Oronsaye, 1995). 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 sent and that he would instantly be executed (Izevbigie, 2010).

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**

As a result of this miscarriage of the oracle's 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 (An Interview with A. O. Izevbigie, 2013).

In the circumstance, 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 Ekehuan road into the forest by two Odionmwan (the traditional executioners) to fulfil 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), Ikaladerhan started wailing, pleading that the father should spare his life because he claimed innocence. When the king refused to pardon him, Ikaladerhan 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" (Ibid, p. 18). At Urhurokhokho (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 successor 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).

Ekaladerhan rested at Ugbinah, 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, 1983:2).

### **Establishment of Ughoton**

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 (Egharevba, 2005). However, there are few others who claimed that Ekaladerhan was not the direct founder. From the account of Osemwegie Ebohon, it was said that, Ekaladerhan met some people at Ughoton already settled there before his arrival (Ebohon, 1972). However, the people he met were hospitable to him, hence he settled there and became a part of them. Another version noted that Ekaladerhan founded Ughoton which was in fact, called Igue Ekaladerhan (the land or place of Ekaladerhan) (Akenzua, 1979). 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 (Akenzua, 1979, p:11). In spite of



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



**Fig. 3: A Statue of Spiritual Cock that gave Prince Ekaladerhan information about the presence of enemies in his environment. Beside it is Prince Uhen-Osa Ekaladerhan of Ughoton.**

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 in the Benin River.

## CONCLUSION

Although in the writing of origin or history of pre-literate societies, divergent opinions or views would always come to focus but different political historians of political history seem to be united in tracing the establishment of Ughoton to a source; Prince Ekaladerhan. So it can be established that the issue of the establishment of Ughoton has not attracted much debate or heated arguments from Benin political historians and other scholars who are interested in the origin of Ughoton.

However, the origin of Ughoton cannot be examined without, the background knowledge of Ogiso myth. Ogiso Owodo was the last Ogiso of Ogiso dynasty. His misrule led the people of Benin to agitate for the discontinuation of the monarchical system of government and opted for a Republican system headed by Evian.

It was said that the reign of Ogiso Owodo witnessed setback and anarchy, hence it was not a surprise that his administration marked the end of the much cherished and enviable monarchy in Benin. The period witnessed anxiety and misrule. It became more complex when the numerous wives could not give birth to children except Imade, who was from a very poor family and was given to Ogiso Owodo as a tribute because her father could not pay the debt owned to the king.

The irony of the situation was that it was this poor woman that gave birth to the child called Prince Ekaladerhan, who founded Ughoton.

The inability of the numerous wives to bear children brought the issue of oracle to the origin of Ughoton. He decided to consult the oraclist to ascertain the rationale behind why the wives could not bear children. The oraclist correctly gave the blame to the senior wife of the king, Queen Esagho, who later manipulated the oracle divination, saying to the king that the only child of the king, Prince Ekaladerhan was the cause and should therefore be killed or offered as a sacrifice to enable the wives of Ogiso to have children.

Prince Ekaladerhan was however banished and after much wandering in the forest, he founded Ughoton by the Benin River in about the eleventh century.

## REFERENCES

1. Akenzua, Eden. Some facts about Great Benin, Benin City: Bendel Newspapers Corporation, 1999.
2. Ebohon, Osemwegie. Cultural Heritage of Benin. Alaska: Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska, 1972.
3. Egharevba, J. U. A Short History of Benin, Benin City: Fortune Temperance Publishing, 2005.
4. Eweka, E. B. Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy. Benin City: Uniben Press, 1992.
5. Ezeanya, S. N. "Women in Africa Traditional Religion", Orita: *Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, December, 1976.
6. Izevbigie, O. A. "The Monarchical Connection between Yoruba and Benin", A Seminar Paper delivered at the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of Edo National Association in USA and Canada, held in Miami, Florida, USA, 2010
7. Marshall, H. F. "Intelligence Report" on the Ekenwan District, September, 1938.
8. National Archives, Ibadan. CSO 1/13/16. Philips to F. O. No. 102 of 10 Nov. 1896.
9. Oronsaye, D. N. "The History of Ancient Benin Kingdom and Empire. Benin City: Jeromelaiho, 1995.
10. Roth, H. L. Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors. North Brook: Metro Books, Inc., 1972.
11. Ryder, A.F.C Benin and the Europeans: 1485-1897. London: Longman, 1969.
12. An Interview with Izevbigie, A. O; 79 years, Retired Lecturer, Benin City, 3-4-2013.
13. An Interview with Ogbewe, Clifford, 50years, Business, Oba's Palace, Benin City, 16-4-2013.