

An Analysis of the State of Ughoton after the British Invasion of 1897

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Abstract

The paper analyses the state of Ughoton after the British invasion of 1897. It examines the survival of the political institutions after the invasion. It discusses Ughoton as a tourist centre, the strengthening of Christianity and other traditional diets. It also focused on the discovering of oil and the relevance of Niger Delta Development Commission to the advancement of the community. The researcher used primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include oral interview and archival materials while the secondary sources were books, newspapers, articles, theses and dissertations. The study found that the houses destroyed during the war were rebuilt and a new chief priest of Olokun temple appointed when Oba Eweka II came to the throne in Benin in 1914. Again the discovering of 'oil in Ughoton was an added advantage to its quick recovering. It was found that Ughoton became a tourist centre and the issue of religion was given a serious boost.

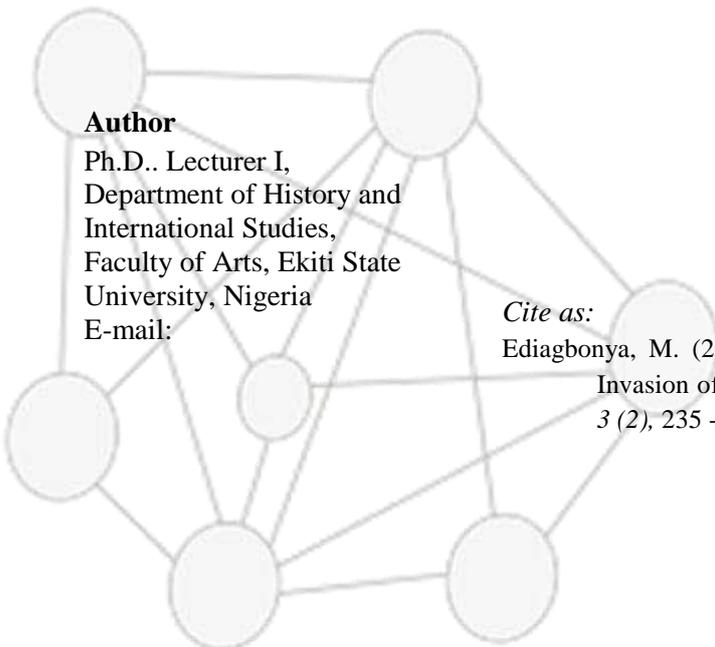
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INTRODUCTION

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 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 that enabled it to serve as the Benin Port for almost four centuries.

Acting Consul-General Philips who assumed duty on the October 15th, 1896 as the Head of Niger Coast Protectorate while Ralph Moore was on leave (National Archives, Ibadan, 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.

In fact, in 1897, Ughoton was a theatre of war in the British invasion of British. The devastating effects of that war on Ughoton cannot be over-emphasized. The Benin soldiers led by Ebeikhinmwin stationed at Ughoton displayed their bravery, strength and courage. At the end, the Benin soldiers including Ughoton able-bodied men were defeated by more determined British forces led by Captain M. P. O. Callaghan who paraded superior weapons. It has been argued that superiority in the quality and quantity of arms compelled the Benin soldiers to withdraw thereby giving the British troops the opportunity to complete the demolition of the houses at Ughoton (Igbafe, 1979).

In that same battle, the Ohen-Okun, the chief priest of Olokun temple as well as the political head of the village was killed and the celebrated Olokun temple burnt. The significance attached to Olokun temple dwindled; there was psychological reaction of the people of Ughoton about the efficacy of their Olokun that was rated so high by the people and the reigning Obas of Benin. This invasion was the immediate factor that brought about the collapse of Ughoton, once described as the chief port of Benin Kingdom. Ughoton emerged from the rubbles of that invasion, as the political, social and economic institutions survived after the invasion of 1897 by the British.

1. Political Institutions of Ughoton after 1897

Among the institutions which the British invasion of the Ughoton affected adversely were the political institutions. More than anything else, the Ohen-Okun of Ughoton who was both the Chief Priest of Olokun temple and the political head of Ughoton was killed in that encounter. Thus, a vacuum was created with the killing of the Ohen-Okun in 1897. However, Ughoton survived the problem when Oba Eweka II came to power on July 22, 1914. He instructed that a new temple be erected. This led to the appointment of a new Ohen-Okun. It is necessary to add that the Ohen-Okun was now confined to spiritual matters after 1897 while the Odionwere, the oldest man in the village became the political head of the community. The



functions of the “Edion age group”, “Irhogae” and “Ighеле” age groups continued to be executed after the 1897 invasion in order to ensure proper administration of the community.

The relevance attached to Odionwere of Ughoton by the neighbouring villages can be seen in the planting of Ikhimwin after 1897. Ikhimwin (traditional tree) is worshipped as a god in Ughoton and the surrounding villages. Ikhimwin is seen by most villages in Benin kingdom as a problem solver. There is no village in Benin kingdom whether small or big that does not have its own ‘Ikhimwin’. The people worship their Ancestors at ‘Ikhimwin’ shrine during a particular period of the year. To most villagers, Ikhimwin inculcates fear in the minds of the people thereby making them to avoid vices and uphold virtues. Odionwere of Ughoton performs the function of planting Ikhimwin at an agreed spot for all the camps and villages near and around Ughoton (An Interview with Priest Ukhuregbe, 2014). Between 1440-1897, the Ohen-Okun of Ughoton took up additional responsibility as being the head of Ughoton group of villages that included Ughoton, Agbatan, Abiala and Evbode. Ughoton became the headquarters. After 1897, Ughoton was still the most senior in the villages and camps around Ughoton, as the Odionwere of Ughoton continues to act as the only person that performs the function of planting Ikhimwin for these villages.

The traditional relationship between Ughoton and Benin monarchy was still strengthened with the mandatory initiation of the heir-apparent to the Benin throne into Edion age-grade. Even the Obas that came to the Benin throne after the British invasion of 1897 like Oba Eweka II (1914), Oba Akenzua II (1933) and Oba Erediauwa (1979) were initiated into the Edion age grade at Ughoton before their installation. This is an indication that the Benin Obas still recognize the significance of Ughoton in Benin history in spite of the setback witnessed in British invasion of 1897.

2. Social Institutions

The deities worshiped by the people of Ughoton survived. The spread of Christianity continued especially in the twentieth century. Ughoton became a tourist centre. Primary and secondary schools were established for the first time in Ughoton. While the primary school was established in 1981, the secondary school was founded in 1975.

2.1. Traditional Religion

All the deities or gods which usually attracted people to Ughoton during annual celebration survived after 1897. Such gods include Olokun, Igbile and Orhonwon, Ikhimwin, Osa, Ovia, Okun Ewuare and Iso. Olokun communal worship suffered a great blow after the British invasion of 1897. The British invading forces destroyed Olokun temple and altars. The Ohen-Okun of the temple was killed. People doubted whether the worship of Olokun in Ughoton would be sustained. Fortunately, on July 22, 1914 the new monarch, Oba Eweka II revived the worship of the deity at Ughoton by instructing that a new temple be constructed for worship of Olokun. Oba Eweka II continued with the practice of sending annual tribute of goats instead of cows that Oba Ewuare started in the fifteenth century.



2.2. Christianity

In the late eighteenth century, there was a great movement among English Protestants called the Evangelical revival (Isichie, 1969). The concern for foreign missions led to the establishment of a number of missionary organizations in which two important ones in West Africa were the Church Missionary Society founded and run by Evangelical Anglicans established in 1799 and the Wesleyan Missionary Society (Ibid., p. 65). It was said that Catholic Missionary revival began perhaps half a century later and the Catholic congregations which had the greatest impact on West Africa were the Society of African Missions and the Congregations of the Holy Spirit (Ibid., p. 66).

The spread of Pentecostal Mission in the twentieth century also affected Benin City and Ughoton. By 1900, the Church Mission Society (C.M.S) was already very active in Benin City. St Matthew Church was built and dedicated on November 2nd, 1902 by the C.M.S. It was said that Chief Obaseki, who was the Iyase of Benin between (1914-1920) became a Christian and attended the services in St. Mathew's church in 1917. In the same vein, Oba Eweka II from 1931 began to attend St. Matthew's C.M.S church regularly (Ogbonmwan, 2005). The evangelical spirit which spread in the twentieth century also affected Ughoton. By 2000, Pentecostal churches were established in Ughoton which include Assemblies Church of God and the Ark of God. While it is difficult to specifically mention the name of Catholic churches or structures erected between 1440 and 1897 at Ughoton, however in this modern period, churches are now visible in the community. The Christians now have permanent places of worship compared to the period of Catholic missions where huts or shades were built.

Although the Catholic missionaries made progress in Benin City in the twentieth century, the same could not be said of Ughoton. Holy Cross Cathedral Mission Road was established in 1926 while St. Joseph's Catholic Church, First East Circular Road came into existence in 1970 (Ibid., pp. 62-65). In this contemporary period, the Deaneries and Parishes in the Archdiocese of Benin City are about twenty-six in number (Ibid., p. 64). Even there is a military chaplain at Ekenwan St Jude Catholic Church a community about three kilometers from Ughoton. There is no Catholic presence at Ughoton. It will be recalled that as a result of precarious conditions which the Catholic missionaries faced in Benin kingdom with Ughoton inclusive between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Catholic missionaries left Ughoton with practically nothing left behind to show for their effort of evangelism. It could be because many of the Christians at Ughoton lack faith and they were inadequately catechized, some of them went back to the worship of their deities.

The beads and red cloth (*Ododo*) which the Europeans introduced to Ughoton became strongly associated with traditional institutions (An Interview with Priest Ukhuregbe, 2014). The coral beads in particular became part of the reigning Oba's dressing. It is now widely used in traditional marriages and burial ceremonies in Ughoton.

2.3. Re-building of Houses

A serious challenge after 1897 was the building of new houses to replace the ones destroyed in the British invasion of the community in 1897. During the British invasion of Benin in which Ughoton was a theatre of war, several houses were destroyed. The people were devastated as they were made homeless and completely confused. Their first major



assignment after 1897 was to make provision for shelter. The importance of shelter or accommodation to human existence cannot be over emphasized. After a hectic daily activities, man needs home to rest. So the people of Ughoton after 1897 directed their attention to building houses to replace the ones destroyed by the British. In an interview with Priest Frank Ukhuegbe, he affirmed that the building of houses at this time was the collective effort of the men in the village (ibid., 2014). The members of a family gave helping hands to each other in attempt to erect houses. This was because the building of a house is money intensive and time consuming. If left to an individual, it may take months or years. Hence men came together to help each other. In this way, the houses destroyed were rebuilt. It must be noted that those men and women who could not cope migrated to other areas to settle, thereby reducing the population of the community. The building of houses took some years after 1897.

2.4. Ughoton as a Tourist Centre

Another area of interest after 1897 was that Ughoton became a tourist centre, which attracted both local and foreign students and researchers. Tourists and researchers visit Ughoton because of its historic importance to Benin; it was the gateway to the Ancient Benin, i.e. the Europeans came through the town to Benin. Many researchers and scholars came from different parts of the world to examine ancient materials or artefacts. This again helped to revitalize the lost glory of Ughoton. Some of these ancient materials include, the statue of spiritual cock and magical stick (Uwenrhotan) used by the founder of the place in the eleventh century and the ancient palace built by the founder which still exists today. Another important artefact is the historic Ughoton-Benin road, where Ugbine is located. It would be recalled that Consul James Philips, seven Protectorate officials, two representatives of a British firm and many African carriers were killed at Ugbine. Olokun temple is another area of interest. Others are the shrines of Olokun, Ewuare, Iso, Ikhimwin, Igbile and Oronmon. Still of interest are the spiritual hill (Okenalubode) and the spiritual river (Ezenimikpor). It could be said that while Ughoton appeared in the world map in the fifteenth century when Ohen-Okun of Ughoton was appointed the first Benin Ambassador to Portugal, again after 1897, Ughoton became a household name in the world, as a tourist centre. However, the relics of trade like boats or canoes and others have been covered by the Benin river moss.

2.5. Establishment of Schools

Another positive development in the twentieth century in Ughoton was the establishment of primary and secondary schools for example, Erediauwa Primary School, Ughoton, was established in 1981 while Ughoton secondary school was founded in 1975. There is no contention about the fact that the Primary School is the basic foundation for the attainment of sound education. The presence of Erediauwa primary school at Ughoton provided the basic skills to those indigenes who went through the school. The moral lesson taught them also enriched their moral standard. The school is still there today serving as a hub for acquiring education and moral lessons.

It has been said that the primary school was built by the people without government assistance (An Interview with Okunhon, 2013). However authentic this may sound it is necessary to add that without government approval that school cannot stand. The government



provided the teachers to teach in the school. The government appointed the headmaster to coordinate the activities in the school particularly the affairs of the teachers and the pupils. So the credit goes to both the government and the people for the establishment of the primary school.

However, what attracts attention here is the time of the establishment of Erediauwa Primary School at Ughoton. The school was established in 1981. That is really odd considering the significance of Gwatto. One would have expected Gwatto to have a primary school much earlier than that. Other towns and villages of lesser significance had their primary schools in the early and middle of the twentieth century. In an interview with Godwin Igbinovia, he affirmed that Ewuare Primary School, Ogan was established in 1949 (An Interview with Igbinovia, 2013). Orhogbua Primary School, Ekenwuan was founded in 1929. Oza Primary was founded in 1917 (An Interview with Aghedo, 2014). In the same vein, most of the primary schools at Sapele were established before the one at Ughoton. Adogbeji Salubi opined that on February 26, 1904, government opened a secondary school at Sapele (Adogbeji, 1960). Another government school was opened in 1907. In 1908, Bishop Johnson of the Church Missionary Society, through the assistance of Mr. I.T. Palmer had established the first church and mission, the St. Luke at Sapele (Ibid., p. 131).

Gwatto, which is known worldwide, had its primary school in 1981, through self-help. That shows the extent to which the Government neglected and abandoned the community. Little wonder, Gwatto remains a village until today.

A much more serious controversy surrounds the establishment of Ughoton Secondary School in 1975. It is said that the greatest injustice done to the community was the citing of a secondary school bearing Ughoton Secondary School at Ekenwuan. The illustrious and industrious sons and daughters fought for the establishment of a secondary school in the village. Ughoton provided a large acre of land for the school in the village. It was a big surprise to Ughoton people, when the government shifted the site to Ekenwuan as a result of the pressure from Ekenwuan people.

Hon. Francis Ode, councillor representing the area then also used his position of authority to influence the choice of Ekenwuan as the site of the secondary school (An Interview with Chief Aigbovbiosa, 2013). The existence of Benin Divisional Council (BDC) School in Ekenwuan by 1975 was an added advantage to Ekenwuan as the government thought it wise to use the existing facilities at the BDC School for a start. However, the importance of Ughoton came out clearly when a secondary school for a clan or district bears the name Ughoton Secondary School established in 1975 and survives till today. It is sad to note that the children of such an important place have to trek about 4 kilometers everyday to attend the secondary school located at Ekenwuan. It will be a welcome development if the government could establish a higher institution there to immortalise the ancient village.

3. Economic Institutions

It is really in the economic sector that the survival instinct of the community has become more noticeable.



3.1. Agriculture

Agricultural activities which include farming, fishing and hunting received a boost. More efforts were put into farming to ensure abundant food supply. With the supply of food, the people were able to embark on other profiting ventures.

With the introduction of maize and cassava and other tree crops as oranges, coconuts, tangerine and mangoes after the fifteenth century, the crops produced in Ughoton after 1897 included, yam, cassava, maize, banana, cocoyams, tomatoes, melon, plantain, okra, pepper, in addition to tree crops. These were produced locally. The ecology of the community favoured the production of the above-named crops. Most of these crops constituted important items of trade as the level of production was beyond subsistence. The surplus was sold which encouraged commercial activities. The production of food helped to avert starvation and brought about accumulation of wealth by individual farmers. Fishing and hunting went side by side with farming.

Ughoton also concentrated on the extraction of timber, because of its economic relevance during this period. It was said that Ughoton after 1897 had a large forest reserve where excellent woods were extracted. Another area that was given serious attention was rubber. The farmers went into establishing large rubber plantations. This was a source of wealth to the individual farmers.

Soon after the expedition, efforts were immediately intensified to exploit the rubber forests in Benin. Writing to the Consul-General Ralph Moor on 30 April 1897 Alfred Turner the first political Resident in Benin revealed that he had been encouraging the rubber trade to the utmost, even giving practical lessons in court having as yet not had the chance of going into the bush (N. A. I, cal. Prof. 6/1). Ughoton was not left in planting rubbers and establishing rubber plantations. Rubber-tappers came from the South-eastern part of Nigeria to tap rubber which became their means of livelihood. Most Benin youths including those of Ughoton were also engaged in rubber tapping.

In order to benefit from the rubber boom after the 1897 invasion of Benin, plantations were established at Ughoton to enable the people recover gradually considering the havoc the community witnessed during that invasion as the economy was paralysed. This was one of the first steps to boost their economy. The efforts exerted in establishing the rubber industry yielded early dividends, for in the Annual Report on Southern Nigeria (1899-1900), Moor reported that "the increase in rubber is very satisfactory and I anticipate considerable increase in the future, as much trouble has been taken to open up rubber produce." (Annual Reports, 1900-1938).

Ughoton was not left out in the production of palm oil and palm kernels. The gradual growth of a money economy and increased overseas' demand enhanced the economic importance of palm products and so the Nigerian farmers evolved a system of palm culture which gave them the maximum output with the minimum labour cost.

In the late 1920s there was encouragement of the development of palm plantation which did not become very significant till the early thirties. In 1931, chiefs and farmers were actively encouraged to plant and improve their palm groves (Igbafe, 1979). There was a favourable response from the people generally and applications for the grant of land for the purpose became numerous within a short time (Ibid). In April 1932. D.H. Urquhart, the superintendent of agriculture in Benin, wrote that, a good number of people in Benin appeared



to be keen on palm-planting and there is no cause for alarm that the land for annual crops is being encroached upon unduly (N.A.I, 1929). Out of the thirty-one applicants in Benin Province with requests for guidance in planting of palms, twenty-five came from the Ekenwuan district alone which Ughoton belonged to during this period (Igbafe, 1979, 360). Ughoton farmers were not left out in the production of palm oil and kernels. It was a source of wealth to the individual farmers and the community. Little wonder that Ughoton survived after the bitter experience of the 1897 British invasion.

After 1897, crude oil was discovered in Ughoton which accelerated development in the community and turned the fortunes of Ughoton to an enviable standard. This attracted government agency, like Niger Delta Development Commission and Dubril Oil Company.

3.2. Establishment of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)

The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was established in 2000 by President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration with the primary aim of developing the oil-rich Niger-Delta region of South-South geopolitical zone of the Nigeria. Part of the reason for the establishment was to fulfil the electioneering promise of Obasanjo in 1999 to establish a commission in 2000 with a mandate of improving social and environmental conditions in the Niger Delta region, which he acknowledges as horrific.

The NDDC was established as a result of popular agitations or protests of the people of the Niger Delta, where oil is produced in Nigeria. Crude oil being a major source of foreign exchange reserve for the country dictates that the areas should be well developed by government in order to reduce the sufferings of the people. Some of these agitators especially the Ijaws and the Ogonis established organizations or bodies to attack the Government and multinational oil companies such as shell. They were particularly sad when they were confronted with problems arising from extensive environmental degradation and pollution because of oil activities without serious government attention. In an attempt to adequately address the problems facing the oil producing communities in the Niger Delta region, particularly to meet their needs and aspirations, the NDDC was established by the government of Nigeria in June 2000. Apart from other functions, the primary aim was to provide infrastructure in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Southern Nigeria.

The Niger Delta Development Commission was established under Act 2000, Act No.6 of the Laws of the Federation. An Act to provide for repeal of the Oil Mineral Producing, Areas Commission of decree 1998 and among other things established a new commission with a reorganized management and administrative structure for more effectiveness and for the use of the funds received from the allocation of the Federation Account for tackling ecological problems which arise from the exploration of oil mineral in the Niger Delta areas and connected purpose (N.D.D.C, Act 2000).

Section 7 sub-section (1) states that "Conceive plan and implement in accordance with set rules and regulation, projects and programmes for the sustainable development of the Niger-Delta area in the field of transportation including roads, jetties and waterways, health, education, employment, industrialization agriculture and fisheries, housing and urban development, water supply, electricity and telecommunication" (Ibid., Section, Subsection (1)).



Activities of Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) at Ughoton

In keeping with its primary aim and functions as contained in part II section 7 sub section (1) of the NDDC Acts, 2000, the commission embarked on some developmental projects at Ughoton.

Provision of Modern Hospital

The Commission constructed a modern hospital at Ughoton. The hospital is located presently at Idumu Ode-Edo also called Gele-Gele Road. Unfortunately the hospital is yet to be commissioned (An Interview with Aigbovbiosa, 2013). The need to commission this hospital becomes very imperative considering the high level of malaria scourge and other tropical diseases in the community. When commissioned, the hospital will complement the Family Support Clinic already operating in the community.

Provision of Electricity

This is an area where the NDDC played a very important role in Ughoton, as electricity is very vital to the socio-political and economic development of any community. The NDDC through the rural electrification scheme is supplying electricity to the community. The NDDC provided power plant or a giant generating plant for the purpose of supplying electricity to the people (An Interview with Eguakun, 2013). However, what is most disappointing is that Ughoton by the twentieth century has no electricity.

Provision of Water

The existing borehole in the community providing portable water for the people was sunk by the NDDC. If one needs a good metabolism and toxic free body, one needs a lot of water as water aids digestion and muscle recovery. The usefulness of water to human existence cannot be over-emphasized. So the provision of bore hole at Ughoton by the NDDC to provide clean and hygienic water for the people is highly commendable.

Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Benin-Ughoton Road

The Benin City expedition cleared the way for the economic exploitation of Benin forests and the expansion of trade in that portion of the Niger Coast Protectorate. Immediately after the occupation of the City, troops were sent to open up the Ughoton-Benin and the Benin Saponba roads. Ending his account of the expedition against Benin; Geary remarks that 'the results of the operations opened up 3,000 or more square miles rich in rubber forests and other African produce (Geary, 1967: 119).

Throughout the whole of March 1897, the policy of conciliation was pursued in Benin. On the economic side, several parties were sent out to open trade and market routes. The first party was sent out on March 4th, 1897 to open the route between Ikoru and Benin City. It accomplished its task in March 5th 1897 after covering a distance of sixteen miles (N. A. I, 1897). The second column went out on March 24th, 1897 to open the route between Benin City and Ughoton (Ibid). The road was later abandoned by Government. This is another area in which the impact of the NDDC is felt in Ughoton. The major road leading to Ughoton from Benin was reconstructed and well rehabilitated by NDDC in 2007 (An Interview with



Osagwue, 2013). The road which covers about 42 kilometres started as bush path and linked many villages along the route together. This bush part or foot part which existed between Benin and Ughoton aided trade between Europeans particularly Portuguese, French, British and Dutch and Benins from the fifteenth centuries. Kit Elliot describes the road thus:

It was a market day at one of the villages on the road and the travellers found themselves accompanied by men and women filling onto the pathway, along tiny tracks from all over the forest and they carried on their head, trays of yam, huge earthy potatoes, bunches of plantains, all sorts of vegetables, tiny green, and peppers, cocoyams (Elliot, 1973:11).

In another vein, the road promoted the ancient Ughoton market during the pre-colonial and colonial period. The rehabilitation and reconstruction of Benin-Ughoton Road by the NDDC opened up the villages along the road including Ughoton for rapid economic and social transformation.

3.3. Dubril Oil Company

Dubril Oil Company also came to Ughoton in the 1980's to explore oil as an oil producing community and to make serious efforts to develop the area by providing certain social amenities in order to compensate the community for the effects of oil exploration on the people. The people suffer from ecological and environmental problems that arise from the exploration of oil mineral. The Dubril Oil Company actually started operating in Ughoton and Ughoton Creek after the exit of Philips Oil Company, a foreign oil company which operated as a flow station in the environs. Philip oil company was a foreign-based company that came to Ughoton and its water creek, Gele-Gele, in the late 1970's for the purpose of exploring oil from the oil wells at Ughoton through its flow station at Gele-Gele for export. The provision of basic amenities to their host, Gele-Gele, brought bad blood because Ughoton felt that the amenities should be extended to them, since they claimed that they were the rightful owner of Gele-Gele which was called Ughoton water side. The Dubril Oil Company was an indigenous company established by late Arest Adams who hails from Auchu in Edo State.

The role of oil companies operating in oil producing communities is captured in Part II, Section 7 sub-section (1) G which states that: "The NDDC has as a function to assess and report on any project being funded or carried out in the Niger Delta area by oil and gas producing companies including non-governmental organizations and ensure that funds released for such projects are properly utilized" (NDDC, Act 2000).

Dubril Oil Company established a Family Support Clinic at Ughoton which was commissioned on May 17th, 1999 by Anthony Ibe Oyeregbulem who was the Military Administrator of Edo State. The company provides drugs to the clinic for the benefit of the people. The Dubri Oil Company should be commended because health is wealth, as the clinic affords the community the opportunity to have access to affordable facilities and cheap drugs. Nearness to such facilities prevent untimely death resulting from diseases. If such facilities were not available, malaria scourge could have increased thereby resulting in high mortality rate particularly among women and children. This is particularly so because the Europeans once saw Ughoton like other Benin villages as Whiteman's grave because of the high



mortality rate among the European traders who came there. The Portuguese like other Europeans found the area unhealthy, succumbing in large numbers to such diseases as malaria and yellow fever. Ryder asserts that the history of the Portuguese trading post at Ughoton is very obscure, a place which soon became notorious for the high mortality rate among those serving there (Ryder, 1969:33).

All these rivers are very unhealthy because of the fever, which does grievous harm to us white men especially in the winter of this century (Ibid.,p. 32).

This explains the state of malaria in Ughoton in the past, which is not different from the present. Hence, the presence of Family Support Clinic in the community is a welcome development to tackle among others the malaria scourges.

Dubril Oil Company employed some indigenes of Ughoton. Most of the workers in this company came from Ughoton and the surrounding villages. This applied especially to casual workers. This employment opportunity given to some of the indigenes of Ughoton was to ensure harmony between the company and the host community.

The gesture of these agencies, the NDDC and Dubri Oil Company in Ughoton could be attributed to the fact that Ughoton is an oil producing community with four oil wells. The social amenities provided are to compensate the community for the effects of oil exploration on the people. The people suffer from pollution which destroys their land, crops and affect the people's health negatively. The air is not fresh. Pa. Erhunmwunomase Izevbigie described the nature of their land thus:

We have no fertile land anymore because of oil spillage which affects their agricultural productivity adversely. A community where 70 per cent of the people are peasant farmers. (An Interview with Pa Erhunmwunomase, 2013)

The agencies realized that if these amenities are not given to the community to compensate them for what they are getting there, it may result to protest, agitations and sometimes anarchy. The Nigerian government is still finding it very difficult to deal with the Ogoni people even when they sometimes take laws into their hands since the hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa by General Sani Abacha. The Shell Oil Company whose vast oil exploration operations in Ogoniland had been shut since the 1990's following Ogoni's struggle against the Nigerian State is planning to sell its assets in Ogoni land (Vanguard, 2013).

The assertion that Ughoton survived and emerged from the rubbles of the 1897 invasion was partly because of the presence of oil in Ughoton after 1897, which attracted the attention of Government agencies such as Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and petroleum exploration companies such as Dubri Oil Company. However, there are some challenges still confronting the community after the British invasion of 1897. These challenges need to be addressed to enable Ughoton realise its intended development plan and actions.

4. The Negative Activities of Ijaws in Gele-Gele Community

First is the negative activities of Ijaws in Gele-Gele Community.

Gele-Gele is the first Benin village on the Gwatto Creek inhabited by the Ijaws. It is about one and a half miles from Gwatto itself. It is a very small village consisting of few huts.



It started as a fishing settlement. “Gelle-gelle” is a Benin word which means truly, truly. *Gele-gele* started as a small hamlet when the first settlers (Ijaws) approached Ughoton elders to give them land to fish. Elders of Ughoton gave them a parcel of land very close to the river. Sometimes, because Ughoton people often forgot that some people were living there, so when reference was made to them, Ughoton people would often say ‘Gele-gele, (truly, truly) we gave a parcel of land to some people in the waterside’ That is how the area began to be referred to as Gelle-Gelle.

At the earliest time, these Ijaws were not permanently resident at Gele-Gele. They came to sell their fish to Ughoton people and the neighbouring villages and purchased food items like, melon, yams, cocoyam, plantain etc. At this time, they accepted the Ohen-Okun as their political head and paid tribute through him to the Oba of Benin.

However, the situation changed from the fifteen century when Benin-European trade relations started. In order to benefit from the profit of this trade, the Ijaws migrated to the area in large number, hence Gele-Gele expanded. They sold fish to the European traders and bought imported goods from them. Due to the high patronages they enjoyed from the Europeans, more Ijaws came to settle permanently in the area. This was when the issue of ownership of the area started.

Pa Erhunmwunomase Izevbigie, in an interview disclosed that Gele-Gele community is regarded as Ughoton waterside or Ughoton Creek, but that for some years now, the Ijaws are contesting that the community is an independent or autonomous community (An Interview with Pa Erhunmwunomase, 2013). This has generated serious controversy and crisis. For many years until recently, the Ijaws accepted the fact that Gele-Gele community belongs to Ughoton under the authority of the Oba of Benin and they have been living peacefully with the people of Ughoton.

When Chief Edo-Osagie established a Sawmill or factory known as Osagie Saw-mill at Gelle-Gelle in the 1970s he employed many people particularly Gelle-Gelle and Ughoton indigenes. When the Osagie Sawmill was established at Gelle-Gelle, there was harmonious relationship between the Ijaws and Ughoton (An Interview with Osayawe, 2013). The issue of ownership of Gelle-Gelle was not in contention since it was accepted by all that the community was part and parcel of Ughoton village. Trouble however started when Philips Oil Company established a flow station at Gelle-Gelle in the late 1970s. It was a drilling company to direct the oil from Ughoton to the flowing station at Gelle-Gelle for collation and onward transportation to the desired destination (An Interview with Ogieva, 2013). This was done because Gelle-Gelle was nearer the sea compared to Ughoton in the inland. The Philips Oil Company opened up the settlement and established staff quarters in the small community and gave out incentives to some of the inhabitants to compensate them for the effects of pollution and other vices associated with oil exploration. The presence of an oil company in a community produces many incentives which include the provision of scholarships to deserving indigenes, construction of roads, provision of social amenities like water, electricity, building of schools and skill acquisition centres among others.

It could be said that the incentives provided by the Philips Oil Company changed the cordial relationship between the inhabitants of Ughoton and Gele-Gele to that of rancour, acrimony and animosity. The elders and leaders of Gele-Gele might have whipped up sentiments to create unnecessary tension, hence the crisis started. Also, it is generally believed



that the Ijaws are war-like. A glaring example was reported in the 'Vanguard Newspaper' of Monday, July 22, 2013 that the Egbema Radical Group (ERG), an Ijaw militia, razed more than six Itsekiri communities in Warri North Local Government Area, Delta State (Vanguard, 2013). The extent of the damage compelled the Minister of the Niger Delta Ministry, Elder Godsdoy Orubebe, to donate relief materials worth millions of naira to the Local Government Council Chairman, Mr. David Edun in Koko the headquarters of the council for onward distribution to the affected victims.

In spite of the fact that Ughoton people got a verdict from the Oba of Benin, the custodian of traditional issues including land, the Ijaws are still resolute in their claim that they are the rightful owner of Gele-Gele. Oba Akenzua II addressed the conflict between Ughoton and Gele-gele over the rightful ownership of the community or whether Gele-Gele was part of Ughoton. The Oba gave his judgment in favour of Ughoton that Gele-Gele belongs to Ughoton and stressed that the Ijaws were tenants. In fact, in this crisis, the Ijaws seem to have upper hand over the owners of the land; Ughoton people. The Ijaws devised different means to attack Ughoton people. The most common of these acts was the way they constitute themselves into dangerous gangs to harass Ughoton people at night; sometimes resulting in the death of innocent people; some were maimed and others ran away for safety to distant villages or communities. This accounted for the reason why many houses in Ughoton today are deserted because of the constant attacks, harassments and intimidation by the Ijaws.

One is actually surprised at this shocking revelation because the village of Gelle-Gelle is very small with few inhabitants yet having upper hand in fighting over Ughoton. The answer is clear when considered against the background that the Ijaws are more united when fighting for what they see as their rights. To them, they are fighting a just course over the ownership of Gelle-Gelle, hence, they attracted support from other Ijaws across the Niger Delta compared to Ughoton people fighting alone. Also, Ijaw militia from other communities can also give support from the background. A good example of such militia is Egbema Radical Group (ERG). One of the reasons why the Ijaws have upper hand is because most indigenes of Ughoton have abandoned the area; preferring to live and build houses in Benin City. If the people had developed the community, the threat of the Ijaws would have been minimised. To authenticate the destructive spirit of the Ijaws, the chairman of the Community Development Committees of Niger-Delta Oil and Gas producing Areas (CDC), Dr. (Chief) Omokaro Izevbigie, during a courtesy visit to the Executive Governor of Edo State, Dr. (Chief) Lucky Nosakhare Igbinedion on June 25th, 2003 disclosed that:

The relative peace enjoyed in Edo State is being threatened by the recent raiding of Ughoton, Iboro, Ewudu and Ikpako communities in Ovia North-East Local Government Area, leaving five members of these oil producing communities dead and properties worth millions of Naira carted away by violent Ijaw youths from the neighbouring state (Izevbigie, 2003).

This negative activities of the Ijaws is a serious problem to Ughoton complete survival after the 1897 British invasion.



5. Migration of the Indigenes to Benin City

Another challenge this time was the migration of the indigenes to Benin City. This is the desire of most successful men and women to live in Benin City, thereby abandoning their village. The absence of the indigenes from the community is a major contributing factor to its under development. The indigenes prefer to build houses and invest in Benin City to the detriment of their community. If these indigenes were residing in the community, more houses would be built in the community which would attract visitors. Some of them who are politicians could influence government projects like a higher institution to the area. Their presence in the community would increase the population. It would be recalled that J.F. Landolph, a French trader who visited Ughoton in 1778 estimated the population at 3,000 (Landolphe, 1969) compared to the situation today when Ughoton has few inhabitants residing at home. The indigenes of Ughoton should learn from Esan their northern neighbour where their sons and daughters erect houses first in their communities before building in Benin City. Most of their investments are concentrated in their home or villages. The result is that there is hardly a typical village in Esan instead we have towns like Uromi, Ubiaja, Ekpoma, Igueben, Ebele, Irrua and so on.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, in spite of the British invasion of Benin which affected Ughoton adversely, the community survived after 1897. Most of the political institutions such as the age-grade system which comprised Iroghae, Ighelle and Edion not only survived, but work together for the development of Ughoton.

The long tradition of the heir-apparent to the Benin throne being initiated into “Edion age-grade” before the coronation can take place has continued and this is a big ego booster for Ughoton. The Odionwere of Ughoton now took over from Ohen-Okun as the political head of the community that made him the head of the village council while the Ohen-Okun became the spiritual leader.

At the social level, all the deities worshipped before 1897 in Ughoton survived. Although, Olokun communal worship suffered initial setback because of the destruction of its temple and altars in 1897, when Oba Eweka II came to power in 1914, he ordered a new Olokun temple to be erected, hence, a new Ohen-Okun was appointed.

The economic sector contributed immensely to the survival of Ughoton after 1897. The discovery of oil attracted government agencies like Niger-Delta Development Commission and Dubril Oil Company which has contributed immensely to the development of the community. However, the community witnessed some setback as a result of the negative activities of Ijaws at Gele-Gele and the habit of majority of the indigenes abandoning the area to reside in Benin City.

It is important to add that the promise made by the Federal Government under the former President, Ebele Goodluck Jonathan in 2011 to establish a sea port in Benin River would have been another milestone as that would have transformed the socio-economic terrain of Ughoton, if the promise had been kept. However, it is instructive to say here that the incumbent Governor of Edo, Mr. Godwin Obaseki is committed to establishing a sea port in



Benin River, especially considering the resources he has committed to this laudable programme at Gele-Gele community also known as Ughoton waterside or Ughoton Creek.

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Oral Interviews

- Interview with Aigbovbiosa, Osarenage; 75, Chief Priest, at Ughoton on 15-4-2013
- Interview with Aghedo, Gideon, 50, a teacher, at Iru on 4-3-2014.
- Interview with Eguakun, Kenneth, 58, farmer, at Ughoton on 6-4-2013.
- Interview with Pa Erhunmwumase, Izevbogie. 98, Odionwere of Ughoton (oldest man), farmer, at Ughoton, on 6-4-2013.
- Interview with Igbinovia, Godwin. 58, Headmaster, at Ogan, on 6-7-2013.
- Interview with Ogieva, Michael. 47, Business, at Ekewuan on 6-6-2013.
- Interview with Osayawe, Christopher. 58, business, at Ughoton on 6-4-2013.
- Interview with Ukhuegbe, Frank. 55, Chief Priest, at Ughoton, on 14-1-2014.
- Interview with Okunhon, 77, farmer, at Ughoton on 6-4-2013.

