

## Ughoton: An Analysis of Its Declining State, 1506-1897

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to analyse the issue at stake in the decline of Ughoton. It examines the bad climatic condition of Ughoton and the factor of Christianity. It also discusses trade as not producing the expected result and the effect of the British invasion of 1897. Finally it evaluates the rise of Sapele and Itsekiri middlemen as factors that also contributed to the decline of Ughoton. The researcher used primary and secondary sources to obtain data. The primary sources include oral interview and archival materials while the secondary sources were books, newspapers, journal, articles, theses, dissertations. The study found that the issues of bad climatic and the factor of Christianity contributed to the decline. Again the trade at Ughoton did not produce the desired results. It was found that the British invasion of 1897 destroyed all the houses at Ughoton and the political head of Ughoton was killed. The rise of Sapele and Itsekiri middlemen were issues that affected Ughoton negatively.

**Keywords:** Trade, Diversification, Invasion, Decline, Effect

### INTRODUCTION

The ancient Port or Seaport of Benin Kingdom, Ughoton took centre-stage during the period of Benin European relations and it contributed immensely to the socio-political and economic development of the kingdom. During the hey-days, it was the port where loading and off loading of goods took place. It serves as a Benin port for about 4 centuries starting from the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Portuguese visited Benin during the reign of Oba Ozolua.

The relevance of this community can be seen in 1485 when the Portuguese, Afonso d' Aveiro visited Oba Ozolua of Benin and he instructed Ohen-Okun the chief priest of Olokun temple and the political head of Ughoton till 1897 to accompany him to Portugal to learn more about Portugal and its ways of life. The aftermath of this visit was that Ughoton appeared in the world map. The strategic location of Ughoton in Benin river placed it at a very big advantage for traders missionaries and visitors to migrate to the area to participate in the maritime trade with the Europeans. In the process, Ughoton witnessed considerable prosperity and became a cosmopolitan town.

However from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Ughoton started witnessing dwindling fortunes and by 1897, it had turned into a small village abandoned by the European traders, missionaries and colonial government. Many factors were responsible for the sudden decline of Ughoton and it ranges from bad climatic condition of the place and the trade did not yield the much needed dividends as expected by the Europeans. Others were the shifting of centres of trade to areas nearer the sea, the rise of Sapele and the British invasion of Ughoton in 1897.

**Factors responsible for the decline of Ughoton.** A major question arises what were those issues at stake which led to the decline of Ughoton.

### The unfavourable climatic condition of the community

During the period of Benin-European trade relationship, the European saw Ughoton like other Benin villages as whitemen's grave because of the high death rate among the European traders and visitors who came there. The Europeans found the region or the Bight of Benin generally as unhealthy as a result of the prevalence of malaria and yellow fever. The region's reputation was seen in the popular saying, "Beware and take heed of the Bight of Benin, where few come out though many gone". A. F. C. Ryder notes with dismay that, the Portuguese trading post at Ughoton is very obscure<sup>1</sup>. Ughoton was seen as a notorious place for the high death rate among those traders or missionaries serving there, Pacheco Pereira once said that:

*All these rivers are very unhealthy because of the fever which does grievous harm to us white men especially in the winter of this country and that Duarte Lopes died in Ughoton a few months after his arrival in 1504<sup>2</sup>.*

The country was afterwards found to be very unhealthy and not so fruitful as had been expected, their commerce ceased<sup>3</sup>. It is important to observe here that, the country referred to was the Benin kingdom and Ughoton inclusive as the main or seaport of Benin.

Again, the French trader, J. F. Landolphe confirmed that he was in Ughoton in Feb, 1778, where he rented a house to serve as a temporary warehouse and factory and observes with serious regret that the bad climatic condition drove him completely from the place for he lost about 90 through disease<sup>4</sup>. The normal disease of fever at Ughoton was attributed to be the cause. The British suffered the same fate as most members of Capt. Thomas Wyndham's crew fell victims of the same fever in 1553<sup>5</sup>. Fever registered serious disaster among the crew in the ships lying in the river mouths with many dying on daily basis. Even Wyndham and Penteado later died. Hence L. I. Izuakor stresses that;

*"From the standpoint of humanism the huge profits less than compensated for the high mortality rate of the crews... out of 140 men who set out for Benin, only 40 returned to Plymouth, Wyndham, Pinteado and as others died of sickness probably malaria<sup>6</sup>.*

However, malaria fever is not peculiar to Ughoton alone, but a household name in all the villages in the Benin kingdom. Infact, malaria is not only prevalent in Benin villages, it is an endemic disease in the World particularly in Sub Sahara Africa. The presence of mosquito in the village could be attributed to the location of Ughoton in Benin River especially Ughoton waterside or Creek<sup>7</sup>. The World Health Organization reports that there are about 150 malaria countries in the world<sup>8</sup>.

The Malaria fever is caused by parasite "Plasmodium" which is injected into the body through mosquito bite. The malaria scourge is a serious threat to maternal and child health and very deadly. Its create serious complication to the human body which ranges from excessive sweating, weakness, cold, internal heat, vomiting, serious headache, loss of appetite, loss of blood, severe anemia. Death results if adequate care is not taking. That is part of the reason why the Governments of the Local, State and Federal of Nigeria have taken different pro-active measures to eradicate the disease in country. This include the compulsory immunization for children, distribution of free treated nets and provision of anti-malaria drugs. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, vaccine for the prevention of malaria has not been discovered. Mosquito thrives much in an environment with over grown weed, stagnant water where the mosquito breeds.

To authenticate the presence of mosquitoes in Ughoton and its effect on the Europeans, A. F. C. Ryder states:

*"Men sent to Ughoton sickened and died with alarming rapidly and the trading post at Ughoton was closed in 1506-1507<sup>9</sup>.*

Infact the invention of the use of quinine as an antidote to malaria fever could not salvage the situation. The presence of these mosquitoes in Ughoton which was a threat to the Europeans traders and visitors made the place very unattractive to do business.

### **The Factor of Christianity**

The Oba of Benin did not respond as expected from the assessment of the Portuguese, despite the efforts of Oba Esigie to promote Christianity during his time. It is true to saythat, initial attempt by the Portuguese to introduce Christianity did not succeed. A comment from De Barros is a pointer to that fact. He said:

*"He sought the priests rather to make himself powerful against his neighbours with our favour than from a desire for baptism<sup>10</sup>.*

In the same vein, King Manuel of Portugal doubting the sincerity of Oba Esigie about Christianity sent him the following message:

*"We earnestly exhort you to receive the teachings of Christian faith with that readiness we expect from a very good friend for when we see that you have embraced the teachings of Christianity like a good and faithful Christian. There will be nothing in our realms with which we shall not be glad to favour you, whether it be arms or cannon and all other weapons of war for use against your enemies of such things we have a great store, these thing we are not sending you now<sup>11</sup>.*

It was for this same reason that, Pacheco Pereira comments that, the manner of life of these people is full of abuses, fetishes and idolatry<sup>12</sup>. In spite of the bold attempt by Oba Esigie to promote Christianity despite stiff opposition from the Benin people, the Portuguese saw the attempt as selfish ambition as he desires to acquire arms and ammunitions to promote his military might. The desire of Oba Esigie to build his military strength seems plausible this period. The people of Idah were preparing to go to war against him and he had the problem of Udo to contend with. Oba Esigie found himself hard-pressed by his enemies so he needed these ammunitions to assist him in wars. So baptism as the Portuguese repeatedly stressed to him and to other princes would bring him guns and other ammunitions.

*"For Benin, they saw the coming of the Portuguese only a marginal development insufficient to bring about any major change in the economic*

*pursuits or way of life of the people. Benin culture was too ancient and fully developed to collapse on the first encounter with Christianity*<sup>13</sup>.

The disappointment the Binis gave to the Portuguese as regard accepting Christianity was a major setback to strengthening the trade relationship between Portuguese and Benin. The factor of Christianity played a major role in the decline of Portuguese trade with Benin, hence the seaport, Ughoton where the trading took place was adversely affected. However, the presence of other European nationals like British and the Dutch closed the gap. As the Portuguese relationship with Benin was declining, the gate was widely open to the British and Dutch to enter into the profitable trade. Hence, P. A. Igbafe maintains that firearms like flint-locks which the Portuguese were hesitant to export to Benin were brought in by the Dutch towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>14</sup>.

The people of Ughoton worship many gods. The Olokun widely accepted by the Binis as god of sea, plenty, children, prosperity originated at Ughoton<sup>15</sup>. In such a place, the people will be reluctant to accept Christianity. This was equally applicable to many Benin villages.

### **The trade did not produce the expected results**

The Europeans expected much from their trade relationship with Benin, with Ughoton as the port. So it appeared that their hopes and aspirations became dashed which brought discouragement on the parts of the Europeans, especially the Portuguese and the Dutch. The Benin pepper (Piper Guineans) which brought a lot of profit to the Europeans later became unprofitable. At this time, the Portuguese were seeking in particular a variety of pepper which could complete more satisfactorily with Indian pepper than could be malagetta (Aframomum Malagueta) which was the only spice they had so far discovered in Guinea<sup>16</sup>.

As for the French by 1539, pepper was the main attraction. The Oba of Benin welcome the British very well and knowing that their primary concern was to buy pepper, the Oba agreed to sell to them. Also Dutch source confirmed that the nation was first attracted to Benin by pepper. Unfortunately during the period under survey, Benin pepper started facing serious challenge when the Portuguese discovered that much quantities of pepper could be bought from India at cheaper rate. So the Portuguese Crown began showing little interest in Benin pepper and focused attention on large quantities coming from India. The situation of Benin pepper became worsened when the Portuguese Crown promulgated decree forbidding Portuguese's subjects to buy Benin pepper. H.V Wee argues that, that the decree of 1506 became paramount from the Portuguese point of view that the quantities of pepper coming from Benin became very insignificant compared to the large quantities coming from India<sup>17</sup>. In his numerical analysis, he placed side by side 75 quintals of Benin pepper sent to Antwerp in 1504 with the 2,000 quintets that came from Indian in the same year<sup>18</sup>.

A.F.C. Ryder argues that the trade upon which the profitability of the Ughoton post had rested was deliberately proscribed and soon afterward the factor was finally withdrawn<sup>19</sup>. Although other articles of trade existed in Benin like local cotton, beads, ivory pepper, slaves and gum were far ahead in the estimation of the Europeans. The purchase of slaves from Benin could have rescued the situation yet that was not the case. There was an embargo or ban on the sale of male slaves by Oba Esigie which lasted for two hundred years. Coinciding with the death of Oba Ozolua and the accession of Esigie, a prohibition was placed on the sale of male slaves to Europeans which remained in force almost two hundred years. It was Oba Akenzua I who unbanned the sale of male slaves in Benin Kingdom. Also there was high price on slaves from Benin compared to other new slave markets which offered lower prices, hence the Portuguese and other European traders saw Benin as unsatisfactory market which also affected the seaport, Ughoton.

As for the Dutch, they were highly interested to transact trade in gum because of the high profit in Europe. The profit derived from gum compelled the Dutch to enter into a formal treaty with the Oba of Benin, Oba Akenzua I in 1715. With time, the profit generated by the trade in gum continued to witness sudden decline and all attempts by the Dutch to diversify Benin trade proved abortive hence its enthusiasm about the Benin trade suffered greatly.

**Even the issue of trust brought problem.** The burning of Arbo was a case in point. This was a place where the Dutch opened a factory as an alternative to Gwatto in 1644. The dispute over the trust compelled the Dutch to burn down Arbo completely and a total stoppage of trade in the Benin River which also affected Ughoton. However, the prospect of redwood and gum trade and the new prosperity of Ivory trade, Dutch resumed their Benin voyages in 1713 by sending a ship to Ughoton to trade on Ivory and to get more information of how redwood and gum could be traded on. Trust refers to a system whereby goods are given on credit and with these goods, they have some items e.g. cloth made in five or more months. This trust system generated in Benin trade with the Dutch because of the upsurge of the local cloth trade during the later part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The cloth were not obtained readymade, the Benin traders obtained goods on credit and with these goods, they have the cloth made in five or more months. The trust system was later misused by the traders that were given.

However, Ughoton survived this difficult period inspite of the manipulation of different European traders and nationals at different time before the final collapse of the village in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was as a result of the free trade policy of the various Obas of Benin Kingdom. All attempt to establish commercial monopoly

with Benin by the Portuguese failed as the Obas were diplomatic enough to understand the benefits of trading with other Nations that came to trade. The Portuguese had to contend with the first challenge to their monopoly of their West Africa trade when they became involved in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade<sup>20</sup>. The Oba and his chiefs were aware that, they were dealing with Europeans at longer heads with the Portuguese and they adopted a readiness to trade with all comers<sup>21</sup>. Despite all attempts by the Dutch to compel Oba Akenzua I in the treaty signed by both parties on 26<sup>th</sup> August, 1715 to grant trade monopoly over Benin trade, the Oba refused to change from the well-established practice of dealing with all nations. This free access to trade to all nations assisted Ughoton greatly during this trying periods, so the seaport became avenue for cut-throat competition among the European nations.

### **The shifting of trade from Ughoton to the factories or ware-houses nearer the sea and the rise of Itsekiri middlemen was another factor that led to the decline of Ughoton**

By the end of sixteenth century, the Dutch were fully in-charge of Benin trade having taken over from the British and Portuguese. It is essential to note that all European trade was conducted at the port of Ughoton before the building of factories in the mid-seventeenth century on the main Benin River. A major feature of Dutch trade relation with Benin was the shifting of the centre of activity from Ughoton to factories along the main Benin River e.g Arboh, Boededoe, Meiborg. The main reason was to drastically reduce the control of Oba of Benin over the trade. P. A. Igbafe argues that, it was done to lure other non-Bini people like the Ijebu, Ijo and the Itsekiri to participate in the trade outside the Oba's sphere of effective power<sup>22</sup>. This development attracted traders from areas outside the Benin Kingdom like Ijebus, Ijos and Itsekiri as they made their way by canoe into the Benin River to sell their slaves and cotton clothes to the Dutch.

The shift of trade from Oba's dominions probably contributed significantly to the shift in power relationship. The significance of Ughoton as the port of trade declined drastically since the shift of trade from the Oba's dominions to factories or centres nearer to the sea or along the main Benin River. A class of independent traders grew up, economic individualism was fostered and a class of traders entered into the Benin-European trading scheme, which had the effect of weakening the Oba's, grip on the trade<sup>23</sup>.

An occasional ship reached Ughoton where elephant teeth, palm oil, hides, skins, cloth of native manufacture and utensils of various kinds were bartered for European and Indian commodities<sup>24</sup>. According to Bold, customs were paid to the Oba in an assortment of goods which resembled those given to the Olu of Warri but his income from this source had become small and uncertain compared with the riches of the eighteenth century<sup>25</sup>. Adams opines that new town would provide the most convenient centre for a palm oil trade in the Benin River and that it would be sufficient to send small-craft to Ughoton<sup>26</sup>. Since Benin was only one among several oil Rivers and never the most important, it follows that, much of what the British government did there and in the kingdom of Benin was dictated by wider even extraneous considerations<sup>27</sup>.

Bold gave an earliest accounts of the oil trade in Benin as he confirms the rich-palm oil-resources of the area<sup>28</sup>. The palm oil trade could have help to revitalize the decay posture of Ughoton during this period. This is because palm oil was very important to the Europeans after the abolition of slave trade. After the abolition, legitimate trade emerged. The industrial revolution in Europe brought in the use of machines to take the place of human labour. The palm oil was used to lubricate the machine and for the production of soap. British economic interests dictated that an alternative to the slave trade must be found. The industrial revolution which brought about the use of machines and a rapid growth and expansion of industries accelerated the demand for a wide range of tropical products notably cotton, palm oil and groundnuts oil of which could not be produced in the West Indies. When the slave trade had outlived its usefulness, British industrialists and capitalists shifted their interests to legitimate trade in forest products. J. O. Ahazuem and ToyinFalola express the view that oil-palm products were among the earliest Nigerian commodities to enter the European market<sup>29</sup>. It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the legitimate trade was inaugurated that the palm oil became a major European import. R. O. Ekundare asserts that, in Europe, it was realized that the intrinsic qualities of palm oil placed it at the head of the vegetable fats and that no other oil was capable of being put to such a variety of uses<sup>30</sup>. Besides its value in the soap and candle industries, palm oil found a large application in the manufacture of tin plate hence it was necessary to increase the production of palm oil in order to cater for both internal consumption in Nigeria and the industrial demand in Europe<sup>31</sup>.

Unfortunately, Benin was only one among several Oil Rivers and never the most important in the production of palm oil. Urhobo producers were more promising and reliable in the production of palm oil in the assessment of the European traders, hence all attempts was made to penetrate these Urhobos producers in the hinterland. As the oil trade expanded, an increasing volume of European merchandise must have found its way to the hands of the Urhobo producers and it is reasonable to assume that, some of the wealth flowing into Urhobos country eventually found its way to Benin<sup>32</sup>. This was because the Oba of Benin could tax the palm oil trade at the production stage, for the Itsekiris and Ijos who sold the produce to Europeans depended for their supplies upon the Urhobos country which was still subject to Benin. It is however necessary to add that, this indirectly



profit from palm oil trade cannot be equated to the hey-days of the kingdom during the period of pepper, cotton cloth, ivory, beads boom.

The decaying position of Benin during this period which also affected Ughoton adversely can be seen in the event of April 1, 1851. That year, Diare of Jakpa was elected the chief of the Benin River, without any reference to the Oba of Benin. This could be interpreted to mean that, Ughoton the seaport of Benin was no more useful to the Europeans, as attention shifted to Itsekiris. Until, he died in 1870, Diare took charge of Benin River. The Oba of Benin was not given any share of the custom dues which Diare was entitled by virtue of his office to collect from ships entering the river.

Obarokimi posits that by the middle of the nineteenth century an Itsekirihad been appointed Governor to the Benin River without any reference of Benin<sup>33</sup>. The rise of Itsekiri traders in the Niger Delta brought about the decline in the trade relationship between Benin and the Europeans in the nineteenth century. The Itsekiri possessed more power and influence. They constructed large war canoes which enable them to establish an area on the coast and to control the trade routes to Benin. Since few vessels, if any found it necessary to go as far as Ughoton, a once important and expanding source of revenue remained closed to the ruler and chiefs of Benin<sup>34</sup>. In another sense, the Itsekiri chiefs and traders contributed to the fall of Benin kingdom in 1897. In attempt to have their way with the Europeans, they were always involved in campaign of calumny against the kingdom of Benin. From time to time, they reported to the Protectorate Government of the restrictions placed on trade in Benin River by the Oba of Benin. Among the people, Acting-Consul Philips consulted before writing a loyalty dispatch to the foreign office, rehearsing the history of the protectorate's relations with Benin were Itsekiris. In that letter, Philips came to the conclusion that, the pacific means advocated by Lord Salisbury had proved completely in effective:

*"I therefore ask His Lordship's Permission to Visit Benin City in February next to depose and remove the king of Benin and to establish a Native Council in his place and take such further steps for the opening up of the country as the occasion may require"*<sup>35</sup>.

The Acting Commissioner and Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, James R. Philips reviewed the whole situation since the treaty of 1892 and the developments which led to the complete stoppage of trade in the middle of 1896 with all the effect so forcibly exaggerated by the Itsekiri middlemen and trading firms on the Benin River, Philips came to the inevitable conclusion to use force against Oba Ovonramwen of Benin. "I am certain he wrote that:

*"There is only one remedy, that is to depose the king of Benin from his stool. I am convinced from information which leaves no room for doubt as well as from experience of native characters, that pacific means are now quite useless and the time has now come to remove the obstruction"*<sup>36</sup>.

In another development, P. A. Igbafe argues that, it was not long before the British Consuls and traders decided to subdue Benin and reduce it into a client state because of Itsekiri complaints about the Oba's anachronistic commercial policy of restriction<sup>37</sup>. It was the Oba's determination to defend his ancient prerogative of controlling the trade of his kingdom exacting duties from the Itsekiris middlemen or when they defaulted, seizing their goods and closing the markets which precipitated the events from treaty to massacre that finally brought down the kingdom<sup>38</sup>.

The port of Ughoton decayed with the shifting of main centre of European trade nearer to the sea, a development which favoured the growth of Itsekiri commercial power. British invasion of Benin in Feb. 1897 affected Ughoton adversely as the houses were destroyed, the chief priest of Olokun temple killed and the prestigious Olokun shrine or temple was destroyed by the invading forces.

### **The Rise of Sapele in the nineteenth century constituted a serious threat to Ughoton**

The sudden rise of Sapele followed the establishment of the vice-consulate of the Benin River there, based on the special recommendation of Henry Galway. Galway saw Sapele as the boundary between Itsekiri and Urhobo territory and was attracted by the many settlements of palm oil traders. Galway calculation was that a Vice-Consul established there would be able to break Nana's monopoly in that commodity as well as to grow other cash crops<sup>39</sup>.

According to AdogbejiSalubi, Sapele which is today one of the most important industrial port towns in the Western Region of Nigeria was a small village belonging to the people of Okpe in Urhobo country<sup>40</sup>. There is evidence that from the time of what came to be known as the legitimate trade' Sapele the first Urhobo market to be reached from the seacoast had contacts with Ijos and Itsekiri traders. These traders acted as middlemen between European supercargoes and merchants on the coast and Urhobo people who are agriculturists and producers of raw materials from the hinterland.

The first Deputy Commissioner and Vice Consul in charge of the Benin District, Captain H. L. Galway, surveyed the Urhobo Oil markets along the Ethiope River in October, 1891 suggested that a vice-consulate

constabulary, barracks should be established at Sapele. His comments can be seen below:

*The anchorage here is deep and roomy and the ground high, though one mass of forest. A most suitable spot to establish factories especially as all the produce from the Sabo markets passes here on the way to the towns near the mouth of the River. I consider Sapele to be a very good place to establish a vice-consulate, constabulary barracks etc<sup>41</sup>.*

This was approved by the Commissioner and Consul-General Major Claude Maxwell Macdonald, on his visit to Sapele on the 14<sup>th</sup> November, 1891. In his Dispatch No. 30 to the foreign office dated 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1891, he wrote:

*"I consider the Sapoli would be very good situation for the establishment of a constabulary station. The ground is high and though covered with forest, could be easily cleared. The people of sapoli informed me that if I would come and build there, they would clear as much ground as I wished<sup>42</sup>.*

That was the beginning of Sapele village been patronized and accepted by the Government of Oil River protectorate and later Niger Coast protectorate in 1893 which started the modernization process of Sapele. A little later, a ship named the "Hindustain" was sailed to Benin River and there it was anchored fitted up as hulk and towed to the Sapele anchorage<sup>43</sup>. The hulk was said to have provided excellent accommodation for four Europeans, a custom office, a consular court, a treasury, a prison, barracks for civil police<sup>44</sup>. Sapele by its strategic location, was considered to be an important military and administrative station for the projection of power and authority.

By 1895, the Sapele Vice consulate had already been sufficiently established as to warrant the closing down of the vice-consulate at Benin River. Thereafter, the Benin River office used as a customs post, was removed to koko town. Under the provisions of the European Reservation proclamation 1902, a part of Sapele became a Reservation<sup>45</sup>. Also the employment opportunities offered by the Sapele rubber plantations and U.A.C. Sawmill and plywood factories attracted a large body of people seeking gainful employment. During this period 1906, the 33 miles of the Sapele-warri road was completed at a cost of £840 and the 11 miles of the Sapele-Ologbo road was also complete at a cost of £500.

All these development were taken place at Sapele in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century without any reference to Ughoton, the town popularly known as the main or sea port of Benin. No attempt was made by the Governments to rehabilitate the old Benin-Ughoton road which promoted Benin trade with the Europeans. To make the matter worst, there was the transfer of the vice-consular office from the Benin River which was followed by the removal of the European trading firms at Benin River to Sapele.

The state of Ughoton at this period can be seen in the following comments by Captain Richard Burton in his 1862 visit to Benin described Ughoton as: Once a place of considerable importance and studded with factories and business houses, Gwatto now contains from twenty to thirty habitations mostly ruinous but sometimes showing traces of former splendor<sup>46</sup>. G.H.L. Galway who visited Benin on 21<sup>st</sup> March, 1892 described Ughoton as now only a small village. Also commenting on the dwindling of Ughoton, E.A. Ayandele said:

*"Ughoton where Benin Kingdom consolidated its commercial relations with the European is now a very small village<sup>47</sup>.*

This was totally different from the impression of J. F. Landolphe, a Frenchman, who rented a house in Ughoton to serve as a temporary warehouse and factory in 1778 during the period of slave trade who puts the population of Ughoton as 3,000<sup>48</sup>. Two French visitors who saw Gwatto in 1787 put the number of houses at around forty. Even Pereira said of Ughoton in 1505 that:

*"There is a good road from Gwatto to Benin and Gwatto is a league across from gate to gate, there are no walls but there is a deep ditch all round<sup>49</sup>.*

On the issue of the road which Pereira said of Ughoton in 1505: as good, but by 18<sup>th</sup> century, Burton saw the road between Ughoton to Benin to have deteriorated badly. The deterioration of the road which probably set in at the end of the eighteenth century was as a result of the decline in European trade in Ughoton.

Richard Burton describes the road as:

*An occasional tunnel in the bush and a route or rather rut, which might accommodate a quartette of wheel barrows in Indian file<sup>50</sup>.*

### **The effect of British Expedition of 1897 on Ughoton**

The conflict of interest between Benin and the British which unfortunately led to the British expedition of Benin Kingdom in Feb. 1897 greatly affected Ughoton adversely. Infact the last straw that broke the camel's back was the British invasion of Benin which affected Ughoton adversely. The British invasion of Benin which started on 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1897 affected Ughoton badly as the village was one of the areas which witnessed devastating effects of the war. The Benin soldiers including Ughoton able bodied men led by Ebeikhinmwinn fought gallantly to preserve the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Benin Kingdom.

Against the advice of Oba's messengers to Consul-General Philips to obey the order of Oba Ovonramwen to defer the journey to Benin by one month and that of Itsekiri, traders who informed him of the presence of Benin soldiers at the Ughoton, he went ahead to visit Benin City. Consul-General Philips and other officials of the Niger-Coast Protectorate arrived Ughoton on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1897 but on getting to Ugbine Ughoton, located along Ughoton-Benin road on 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1897, they were attacked by Benin striking force organized by Iyase and commanded by Ologbosere, a senior army commander. Infact, they ran into an ambush where they were all killed except few carriers with Boisragon and Locke who hide in the forest for some days and escaped through Ughoton Creek.

The aftermath of that massacre of the officials of the Niger Coast Protectorate was the British invasion of Benin which affected Ughoton. Those killed were Acting Consul-General Phillips, Major Copland Crawford, Vice Consul of the Benin and Warri Districts, Captain Mailing, the commandant of the Niger-Coast Protectorate Force Detachment based on Sapele, Mr. Kenneth Campbell, Dr. Elliott and Lyon. Others were two representative of European trading firms and Two hundred Africa carriers.

It is true that the military confrontation which took place at Ughoton saw the killing of many British soldiers including the commanding officer when the column was attacked at its base by the Benin striking force. In the same vein, the houses at Ughoton were destroyed by the British soldiers. 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 at Ughoton was burnt.

### Conclusion

Ughoton which serves as the seaport of Benin kingdom for about 4 centuries became a small village in 1897. Many issues were involved, the first was the unfavourable climatic condition of the community. Ughoton was seen as a whitemen's grave because of the high death rate among the European traders and visitors who came there. Again the non-acceptance of Christianity by the Binis was a major setback to strengthening the Europeans and Benin trade relations. This was particularly true of the Portuguese, hence Ughoton as the seaport was also negatively affected.

The trade in Benin did not produce the expected results. The Benin pepper which brought a lot of profits to the Europeans later became unprofitable. The situation became worsened when the Portuguese discovered that much quantities of pepper could be bought from India of cheaper rate. For the Dutch, the profit generated by the trade in gum continued to witness sudden decline and all attempts by the Dutch to diversify Benin trade proved abortive hence its enthusiasm about the Benin trade suffered greatly which also affected the seaport of Benin, Ughoton.

Also the shifting of trade from Ughoton to the factories or ware-houses nearer the sea and the rise of Itsekiri middlemen also constituted a problem. The establishment of vice-consulate of the Benin River at Sapele and the removal of the European trading firms in the Benin River to the area, shifted the attention of colonial government from Ughoton to Sapele.

The last straw that broke the camel's back was the British invasion of Ughoton in Feb. 1897 in which all the houses were destroyed, the celebrated Olokun temple burnt and the Chief Priest of the temple, Ohen-Okun killed.

### END NOTES

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