

A study of the Portuguese-Benin Trade Relations: Ughoton as a Benin Port (1485 -1506)

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Abstract

The study examined the Benin – Portuguese Relations: Ughoton as a Benin Port (1485 – 1506). It further examined the coming of the Portuguese through the Benin port, Ughoton to Benin City. It also analyzed the articles of trade to Ughoton. It accounted for the factors responsible for the decline of Portuguese trade in Benin and Ughoton and the significance of the relationship to Benin and Ughoton.

The study relied on both oral interviews and documentary data. The oral data were based on unstructured interviews with the Odionwere (Oldest man in Ughoton), Ohen –Okun (The Chief Priest of Olokun temple) and other elders in Ughoton. The documentary data were sourced from intelligence reports, divisional reports, colonial letters, dispatches, government reports and correspondences. The data were subjected to internal and external criticisms for authentication and then to textual and contextual analyses.

The study found that Prince Ekaladerhan, the only child of ogiso Owodo, the last Ogiso of Ogiso dynasty was the founder of Ughoton in about the eleventh century. The study also found that from the fifteenth century Ughoton was the port of Benin kingdom during the period of Benin Portuguese trade relations. The study demonstrated that this trade brought a lot of benefits to the people of Ughoton, Benin kings and the Europeans. It was discovered that, the trade declined due to bad climatic conditions, the Benin's refusal to accept Christianity fully and that the trade did not bring the expected returns.

Keywords: Trade, Diplomacy, Relations, Port, Decline

Introduction

The international relationship between Benin and the Europeans started in a 15th century. Nation needs other nations for exchange of ideas, for the promotion of trade and for diplomatic purposes. No country is an island unto itself and no country or kingdom can provide all the resources it needs for development within her territorial borders. Every country is therefore relevant in the exchange of goods and services provided in the international system. The needs of states have therefore created an interdependence international system that affords countries of the world the opportunities of securing from other countries what they lack themselves. S.E. Orobator sees international relationship as constituting the sum total of the relationship between two or more sovereign nations at both governmental and non-governmental levels.¹

The main purpose of this international relationship between Benin and the Portuguese, British French, Dutch was trade. Other reasons include diplomatic purposes and Christianity. At least, from the point of view of the Portuguese, it was also an opportunity to introduce Christianity to Benin apart from trade.

Ughoton featured prominently as a port or the chief port of Benin during this period under focus. Ughoton also known as Gwatto which lies about 42 kilometers southeast of Benin was said to have been founded by Prince Ekaladerhan, the only child of Ogiso Owodo, the last Ogiso of Ogiso dynasty in about the 11th century.

From the rudimentary status, Ughoton essentially witnessed rapid social, political and economic transformation from the 15th century. This could be attributed to the ancient Ughoton market which was the hub of economic activities before and after the coming of the Europeans. It could also be seen from the strategic location of Ughoton in Benin River where it served as the Bini port. Gwatto or Ughoton, the port of Benin became the depot to handle the pepper, ivory and increasing numbers of slaves offered by the Oba in exchange for coral beads, textile materials, European-manufactured articles including tools and weapons, manilas used as currency². Oba Ozolua of Benin who showed readiness to permit trade with the Europeans, allowed the Portuguese to establish a factory at the port of Ughoton (Gwatto), thus was established a long period of regular maritime contact between European and Benin City with Ughoton as seaport.

The Coming of the Portuguese

There is some controversy as to the first Portuguese to visit Benin. However, it is said that, Ruy-de Sequeira was the first Portuguese to visit Benin territory in 1472 who reached the bight of Benin during the reign of Oba Ewaure. The Portuguese sent out explorers in the 1440's in search of a new sea-route to the East and it was during one of the voyages of exploration that a Portuguese sailor named Ruy de Sequeira arrived in Benin in 1472. Antonio Galvao attributed the first Portuguese voyage through the Bight of Benin to one Ruy de Sequeira in 1472.³

However when the first Portuguese came in 1472, he stopped at the coast and began to gather information about the goings on in the kingdom Oba Ewuare who was the king at that time was busy with domestic restructuring of Ubini to enable him to hold the entire territory of Iduland under his firm control and so showed little interest on the visitors. So the Portuguese came at this time, they saw the spices, they felt the pulse of the African monarchy of Great Benin, but could not enter when Ewuare the Great was on the throne. So no meaningful contact was made until 1486.

The situation was not the same when John Affons d' Aveiro visited Benin in 1486 during the reign of Oba ozolua. Oba Ozolua was the first Oba to receive Europeans at his court. From the account of Philip Koslow, it was established that, not until 1485 did a Portuguese emissary Joao Afonso d' Aveiro make the journey from the coast to Benin City.⁴ Like most European visitors or traders to Benin City, Afonso D' Aveiro made the journey through water to Ughoton, then overland to Benin City. Unlike Oba Ewuare who was so busy with domestic affairs and did not receive Ruy-de Sequeira, Oba Ozolua readily received Afonso d' Aveiro in 1485. Oba Ozolua was ready to allow the Portuguese to trade in slaves and other products that may interest them. So the Portuguese came to Benin at a time in its history when it was in an especially favourable position to supply slaves. It was indicated by Parry that, the decision to send an emissary in search of Benin has to be seen against a background of intense African activity inspired by John II who ascended the throne of Portugal in 1481.⁵

From the forging, it is possible to say that, while it may be correct to say that , Ruy-de Sequeira was the first Portuguese to visit Benin territory in 1472 during the reign of Oba Ewuare, but his activities was restricted to the coast and the monarch was busy with many domestic cleansing hence little attention was paid to this visitor. It is probably for this reason that Ruy de Sequeira visit was not given enough publicity by European and African scholars.

The visit of Afonso d' Aveiro was highly acknowledged by scholars and given enough attention in European historical literature. The reasons for this are numerous. First, when Afonso d' Aveiro came in 1486, it was with full backing of the New King of Portugal, John II who came to the throne in 1481. We may suppose therefore that in sending d' Aveiro inland, the king of Portugal was guided by reports that, a considerable kingdom existed there and that he desired to know more about the ruler, the people, the government and the religion and the products of that country.⁶ Second, in the visit of 1486, the Oba Ozolua was interested in the visitors and ready to trade with them. He was ready to allow the Portuguese to trade in slaves and other products or items that may interest the Portuguese especially their king, John II. Oba Ozolua welcomed d'Aveiro and sent one of his leading officials, the chief of Ughoton back to Portugal with the emissary to meet the king and discuss the opening of trade relation. It was for the above reasons that, most scholars tend to ignore the visit of 1472 and concluded that Jaao Afonso d' Aveiro was the first Portuguese visitor or explorer to Benin.

However, there is no controversy that, Oba Ozolua sent Ohen-Okun, the chief of Ughoton to accompany Afonso d' Aveiro to Portugal as Benin Ambassador to learn more about Portugal and its way of life. Visits of this nature were regularly sponsored by the Portuguese government in order to impress African dignitaries with the power and wealth of the homeland. Another version says ... "And the king of Benin sent to the king of Portugal as Ambassador, a negro who was his captain in a seaport known as Ugato wishing to have news of our lands, the people of which had been in Beny considered a great novelty"...⁷

The chief of Ughoton was received with great festivities and was shown many of the good things of the kingdoms and he was returned to his land in a ship of the king of Portugal.⁸ One question arises, why was the Ohen-Okun of Ughoton chosen as ambassador to Portugal? Many villages existed in Benin Empire during the period of Portuguese visit to Oba Ozolua. At of all, Oba Ozolua requested Ohen-Okun of Ughoton to accompany the visitors to Portugal.

Many reasons could be adduced. First, the Ohen-Okun, the chief of Ughoton was at this time the head of the village as well as the chief priest of Olokun temple, who was direct descendants of Prince Ekaladerhan, the founder of Ughoton village. So sending the chief of Ughoton as an ambassador to Portugal was like sending a Prince from the palace of the Oba to Benin. Second, the chief was the priest of a very important deity worshipped by the Oba and his people. The Oba of Benin usually sent for the annual celebration 'Ekpan or attribute in the form of cows. This tribute apart from adding colour to the annual celebration, it shows the loyalty of the Oba to the deity. So sending such an important personality to a mission of that nature was not a misplaced priority. Third, the most important factor was the fact that Ughoton was a seaport or the main port of Benin during the period of Benin-European trade from 15th to later 18th centuries. This trade brought a lot of wealth to the kingdom. Akenzua I is remembered by tradition as one of the richest kings who ever sat on the throne of Benin. Akenzua I reintroduced the export of male slaves which was previously banned by Oba Esigie in the 16th century. His son, who reigned after him was so rich that the floor and walls of his house were lined with cowries shells, the money of the time.⁹ It could be said that, trade generated by Benin-European relation and the wealth derived from it were the basis of sustenance of Benin empire at the time. The coming of the Portuguese rapidly internationalized Benin as a power and in quick succession ... as the empire was besieged by traders of various nationalities in search of varying items of trade including ivory and slaves.¹⁰

It is possible to suggest that, the choice of the chief of Ughoton may perhaps be attributed to the importance of his village as "the port of Benin and the one most immediately concerned with the opening of European trade. Finally, it can be argued that the chief of Ughoton possess some personal qualities that benefit an ambassador. It needs some level of intelligence, diplomacy, patience and endurance. One should be able to project the image of his country to the outside world and counter any negative reports about the country. Ruy de Pina wrote of the Benin ambassador to Portugal, their Ambassador was a man of good speech and natural wisdom.¹¹ This comment is an eloquent testimony that, the appointment of Ohen-Okun of Ughoton as Benin Ambassador to Portugal was well deserved.

It was not only the reign of Oba Ozolua that the chief of Ughoton served as Ambassador to Portugal. When John Afonso d'Aveiro came to Benin City, for the second time, during the reign of Oba Esigie, he advised the Oba to become a Christian. Oba Esigie therefore sent Ohen-Okun, the Olokun priest at Ughoton with him as an Ambassador to the king of Portugal asking him to send priests who would teach him and his people the faith.¹² It is said that one of the Ohen-Olokun, the priest of Olokun juju in Ughoton himself visited Portugal in the time of Oba Orhogbua, the son of Oba Esigie.

At the moment of parting, the king of Portugal presented him and his wife, rich dresses and sent at the same time to the king of Benin a rich present of things which he thought the latter would greatly esteem. In fact the chief of Ughoton had brought to the Oba of Benin, a rich present of such things, as he would greatly prize on his return from Portugal.

A present delivered in the name of king Manuel in 1505 consisted of a caparisoned horse, necklace of Indian bead, a piece of printed chintz from Cambay, a marklota, white satin, six linen shirts and a shirt of blue Indian silk.¹³ This visit of Ohen-Okun as Benin Ambassador to Portugal promoted Ughoton to a higher level. Ughoton became known in the world apart from its relevance as the port of Benin.

During this time of Portuguese trade with Benin, warehouses were established and factories were built at Ughoton. Ughoton village experienced a considerable economic prosperity and development as a Benin port. It was for this reason, it was said that when the Portuguese arrived in the western delta they focused attention on Ughoton the port of Benin.

Articles of Trade

The main articles of trade from the side of Benin were pepper, slaves, Ivory, Coris beads, local or cotton cloth. J.W. Blake observed that, at this time, the Portuguese were seeking in particular a variety of pepper which could compete more satisfactorily with Indian pepper than could the Malagetta which was the only spice they had so far discovered in Guinea¹⁴. The discovery of Benin pepper (Pipper Guineense) which could compete favourably with Indian pepper, gave them hope of economic potential of the empire. It is important to say that, the relevance of Ughoton to Benin-Portuguese trade relations is based on the fact that the whole trading transaction took place there as the chief port of the kingdom.

The supply of slaves in the Slave River was the combined effort of Edo, Ijo and the Itsekiri. The sources of these slaves were criminals sold as slaves and outcasts. The slave markets in the hinterland were sources for purchasing slaves. Some prisoners were sold as slaves. The Oba of Benin sometimes presented slaves as gifts to important persons at Sao Tome. Sao Tome this time needed a lot of slaves for agricultural and domestic purposes and the slave markets in Portugal also needed the slaves from Benin where they were bought for sale by agents of the Casa

da Mina and private contractors. After the discovery of the Indian pepper, the purchase of female slaves became the main interest of European traders in Benin. This was as a result of the fact that, there was an embargo on the sale of male slaves by the Oba Esigie from the beginning of the 16th century to the last decade of the 17th century when the ban was lifted by Oba Akenzua I. The embargo on the sale of male slaves in Benin this time became necessary because Oba Esigie was facing some military challenges at home. This was the need to keep the large empire intact. He took over from a king, Oba Ozolua who was described as the conqueror. Also there was serious threat from Udo as a result of activities of Arhuanhan. Lastly was a serious attempt from Idah, that was planning to invade the empire.

The Portuguese also discovered that certain varieties of stone beads available in Benin could be exchanged for gold on the Costa da Mina so they began to buy them in large quantities. The Portuguese called them Coris because most of the beads were fashioned from a blue stone reined with red. Others, were yellow and some grey had greater value as objects of barter and were treated by the Portuguese as semi-precious stones. In his twenty months management of Ughoton post, Bastian Fernandez bought 33,382 Coris, 900 of the yellow beads and 162 of the ivory.¹⁵

Another article of trade which attracted the attention of Portuguese was cotton cloth. The cotton cloth was principally used to clothe their slaves.

Large quantities of Ivory were also purchased from Benin through Ughoton. In exchanged for these goods produced in Benin, the various European nationals trading with Benin from the 15th to the 17th centuries, brought in similar items with only few variations. One major item which the Portuguese brought to Benin through the port at Ughoton was copper. Cowries were another important trading item. Portugal was the first European power to import cowrie's shells to Benin which were the currency, even of the far interior. Other items imported to Benin by the Portuguese were textile imports, European manufactured articles, iron rods, silver cloth, red velvets, red caps, brandy necklace, coral beads, umbrella etc. The Portuguese through their trade with Benin introduced crops such sugar-cane, maize, cassava, pineapples and all these crops came to Benin through the Benin port, Ughoton.

The provision of firearms, guns and gunpower by the Portuguese to Benin suffer serious setback. This is because religion played a major role in the international relations of Portugal. The desire of Oba Esigie to build his military strength seems plausible this period. The people of Idah were on him and he had the problem of Udo to contend with. So Oba Esigie needed these ammunitions to assist him in wars. The Idah's forces are said to have reached the gates of Benin City before being driven back across the Niger.¹⁶ The acceptance of Christianity was the basis under which the Portuguese would supply him guns and other ammunitions. Although during the reign of Oba Esigie, attempts were made to promote Christianity but it was done to achieve certain political agenda, which was principally to encourage the Portuguese to supply ammunitions to boost his military. Unfortunately, the Portuguese were aware of this selfish interest of Oba Esigie, as De Barros observed.

“He sought the priests rather to make himself powerful against his neighbours with our favour than from a desire for baptism.”¹⁷

King Manuel of Portugal refused to send arms until Oba Esigie proves the sincerity of his professed inclination to Christianity. While it is true to say that, Oba Esigie ordered his son and two of his nobles to embrace Christianity and accept baptism, it is equally true to comment that, none of the rulers of Benin in this period and centuries after manifested real interest for the Christian creed.

The essential feature of this Benin-Portuguese trade was that Ughoton was the commercial centre or port town where there items of trade were either exchanged or sold. Hence, it is possible to say that in the heydays of Ughoton as a main port of Benin, without Ughoton, no trade could have been transacted between the Europeans and Benin.

Decline of Portuguese Trade with Benin and Ughoton

It is not under contention that Ughoton was a seaport or the main port of Benin during the period of Benin European trade from 15th to later 18th centuries. Hence reigning Obas of Benin took adequate measures to ensure that the proper regulation of the trade at Ughoton. This is against the background that what affect Ughoton trade will also affect Benin positively or negatively.

Many factors were responsible for the decline of Portuguese trade with Benin and Ughoton as the seaport.

First was the religious factor. During the period under survey, the factor of Christianity was very vital in Portuguese relationship with Benin. Portugal’s attempt at establishing diplomatic relations, religious influence and commercial monopoly were not successful because of Benin kingdom’s refusal to accept Portugal’s commercial monopoly and the kingdom’s non-commitment to Portuguese Christianity. The Oba of Benin did not respond as expected from the assessment of the Portuguese.

Benin 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. The disappointment the Benin’s gave to the Portuguese as regard accepting Christianity was a major setback to strengthening the trade relationship between Portuguese and Benin. In his reply to Oba Esigie through his envoy, King Manuel said:

“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 things we are not sending you now, as you requested because the law of God forbids it”¹⁸.

It was this religious factor that was considered as the basis for supplying firearms to the kingdom. This issue of Christianity played a major role in the decline of Portuguese trade with Benin. Second was the bad climatic condition. The climate was very harsh as most of the men sent to Ughoton became sick and died. The history of the Portuguese trading post at Ughoton is very obscure¹⁹.

Aveiro himself died there, the first known European victim of a place which soon became notorious for the high mortality rate among those serving there as Duarte Lopes also died in Ughoton a few months after his arrival in 1504²⁰. On September 8, 1695, father Monteleone was set to sail to Benin but he never saw the Oba, for he fell mortally ill at Ughoton and died same year²¹. The place was afterwards found to be very unhealthy and not so fruitful as had been expected, their trade stopped.

J.F. Landolph, a French trader who came to Ughoton in 1778 lost about one third of his crew of 90 through disease. Also out of 140 British who sailed for Benin through Ughoton, only 40 returned. Even the leader of the Voyage Captain Thomas Wyndham also died due to weather and tropical disease particularly malaria.

Third, the trade did not yield the great returns expected of it. So most hopes of the Portuguese government were dashed. The main attraction of the Portuguese trade in Benin which was pepper faced serious challenge from the East. When much quantities began to come from India, pepper ceased to be profitable for the Portuguese Crown to exploit the small quantities coming from Benin. Before the discovering of the Indian pepper, Ughoton as a seaport to Benin kingdom witnessed considerable boom because of the high demand of Benin pepper by the Portuguese. The situation became worsened when the Portuguese crown promulgated decree forbidding Portuguese's subjects to buy Benin pepper. This decree forbidding Portuguese's subjects from buying Benin pepper affected Ughoton adversely because only few Portuguese traders came to the seaport to purchase pepper as attention now shifted to the East. The motives which prompted the decree of 1506 may be appreciated by comparing the 75 quintals of Benin pepper sent to Antwerp in 1504 with the 2,000 quintets that came from India in the same year.²² Thus it was said that the commerce upon which the profitability of the Ughoton post had rested was deliberately proscribed and soon afterwards the factor was finally withdrawn.

The purchase of slaves from Benin could have salvaged the dwindling nature of Portuguese's trade in Ughoton yet it was not to be. There was an embargo or ban on the sale of slaves by Oba Esigie which lasted for two hundred years. With the accession of Esigie to the throne, a prohibition was placed on the sale of male slaves to Europeans which remained in force almost two hundred years. Also there was high price on slaves from Benin compared to slaves

from other new slave markets which offered lower prices, hence the Portuguese saw Benin as an unsatisfactory market.

To some extent, the decline in the number of slaves taken from Benin was balanced by the opening of a slave market at a village on the Benin River, known to the Portuguese as Oere, which was probably an Itsekiri settlement²³. It was said that the total number of slaves shipped from the Benin River seems to have fallen from about 1520 onward.

Since the early efforts of the Portuguese did not yield the expected dividends, the trading post at Ughoton was closed in 1506-1507. With the closure of the trading post at Ughoton, the Portuguese Crown from this period took little interest in Benin trade.

Although Portuguese Monarch decided for a fresh attempt in 1538 to negotiate with the Oba of Benin, the effort failed because Benin was interested in unrestricted trade relationship with Portugal. However, by the 1540s, Benin was much less important to Portuguese trade in West Africa that it had been at the beginning of the century. However, it is necessary to add that Benin-Portuguese trade in slaves lasted till the middle part of the 16th century.

The Significance of Benin-Portuguese Relations to Benin and Ugoton

Benin-Portuguese relationship which started in the 15th century brought a lot of benefits to Ughoton in particular and Benin in general. The first contribution of Portuguese in this direction was the introduction of Christianity to Benin through Ughoton. The initial attempt by the Portuguese to introduce Christianity did not succeed. However, Oba Esigie later found genuine interest in Christianity. The Oba instructed his son and two of his nobles to become Christians and be baptized. Also on his orders, churches at Ogbeleka, Idunmwrie and Akpakpava were built.

The letter written by Duarte Pires to the king of Portugal in October, 15th illustrates the extent of acceptance of Christianity by Oba Esigie. He wrote that; it is true I am a friend of the king of Benin. We eat with his son...when the missionaries arrived, the king of Benin was very delighted, the missionaries went with the king to the war and remained a whole year²⁴. At the end of the war in the month of August, the king ordered his son and those of his greatest noblemen to become Christians and he ordered a church to be built in Benin.²⁵

An important event came out clearly in the letter and that has to do with the assistance the missionaries gave to Oba Esigie during the war with Idah. It was asserted that, the missionaries went to the war to assist the Benin armies and at the end, the Benins got victory. This war was very crucial in Benin history as the Idah war was a major challenge to Benin and marks the last occasion before 1897 when Benin City itself was seriously threatened by an external enemy. The war with Idah is one of the outstanding traditional events in Esigie's reign. Although these churches are no more in existence but the present Holy Arousa Church built by Oba Akenzua II is erected on the former site of the church of Akpakpava. Later, the Benins saw the need to embrace

Christianity. To day almost 70% of the Benin population is Christians and different churches of different denominations are spread in almost all the streets in Benin City. The people of Ughoton worship many gods. Some of them also saw the need to embrace. Christianity and reasonable proportion of Ughoton people are now Christians. The Assembly Church of God and the Ark of God are examples of Churches currently built at Ughoton.²⁶

Second, the exchange of ambassadors between Benin and Portugal promoted the image of Benin in general and Ughoton in particular to the outside world. When Affonso Aviero visited Benin during the reign of Oba Ozolua, the chief of Ughoton, Ohen-Okun accompanied the Portuguese to Portugal on the instruction of Oba Ozolua. Ohen-Okun went to Portugal as Benin ambassador to that country. The chief of Ughoton promoted the image of Benin to the outside world particularly as he was a man of high intelligence and natural wisdom. As for Ughoton where he hails from became a household name in the world.

As chief of Ughoton, Benin's centre of International trade, the ambassador was in the best position to discuss commercial relations with his hosts and the Oba's representative learned commercial Portuguese which enable him to act as interpreter in business transaction²⁷. On the strength of this, it is possible that some of the natives of Ughoton also learnt the Portuguese language and also serve as interpreters which could be a means of livelihood. Oba Esigie's reply to the king Manuel's letter dated 20 November, 1514 was carried to the Portuguese monarch by a Benin Christian Pero Barroso, an interpreter at Ughoton²⁸. Even today, the Portuguese words dominate the pidgin English spoken in Ughoton and other Benin villages and towns. For example, "dash" (give) and "Sabby" (to know) are Portuguese words. There is a Portuguese record to the effect that an Oba of Benin visited Portugal in 1544 which is believed to be Orhogbua, who was said to have gone away with Portuguese for some years and could speak Portuguese²⁹. Oba Esigie learnt to speak the Portuguese and it is said that he had his son Orhogbua to be educated by them.

Also, the European introduced important crops to Ughoton through its trade relationship with Benin. Such crops include maize, cassava, sugarcane and pineapples. The food crops were introduced to Benin during the period of slave trade from the New World. The slave trade was of more fundamental economic importance because of the introduction during the era of two vital subsistence crops, maize and cassava. Maize appeared in Benin near the beginning of the slave trade while cassava was introduced towards the end of the slave trade. Since then, they have revolutionized the feeling and farming habits of Benin in general and Ughoton in particular.

From the ancient time till now at Ughoton cassava and maize are stable food items. Maize is commonly eaten by the people of Ughoton. Flour is also produced from maize. The local food "Akamu", usually eaten in the morning by both males and females in all Benin villages is produced from maize. Also from maize, Agidi is produced commonly eating by all the Binis; Corn cake, (Uloka) is also produced from maize. Maize can be roasted or cooked for consumption. It is fried into pop corn. Pop corn, Agidi, corn cake, corn flour can serve domestic purpose while majority of women take the items to the market for sale to raise money to meet other needs.

Cassava has sustained families from generation to generation in Ughoton Women fry garri from cassava every four days for domestic use and to be sold to purchase other food items for the family like pepper, meat, fish, tomatoes, melon, okro, magi to enable the women prepare soup or stew to sustain the family for four days. When the items are exhausted, the women go back to uproot cassava tubers and fried it into garri to be sold in the next market day. The cultivation of yams is now highly limited to few aged ones while majority of the adults both men and women are fully engaged in cassava cultivation³⁰. Cassava cultivation is very important to Ughoton people. Apart from garri, starch is also produced from cassava. Starch although mostly consumed by the Ijos, Isokos, Urhobos but most Benin people now eat starch. Also the local food called “fufu by the Yorubas and “Agbon” by the Igbos and Benins is also produced from cassava. In the past the food was classified as Igbo food. Today, the Benins are widely engaged in fufu preparation and consumption. Infact the importance of cassava to the economic wellbeing of the Ughoton and Benins generally can be over-emphasized.

Ughoton was a sea port or the chief port of Benin in its trade relationship with the Europeans. It was the port for the loading and off loading of goods. Alogoa noted that, the Portuguese arrived in the western Delta, they focused attention on Ughoton, the port of Benin and some point up a left branch of the forcados River which from internal evidence he identifies with Ode-Itsekiri³¹. Oba Ozolua allowed the Portuguese to establish a factory at the port of Ughoton. Thus, a period of regular maritime contact between European and parts of what later came to be known as Nigeria started. This goes to show the importance of Ughoton in the Benin Portuguese trade. During the period of Portuguese monopoly, warehouses were established at Ughoton, which experienced a considerable economic prosperity and development as a Bini port.

The presence of factories and warehouses connote many good things for Ughoton where they were established. The trade brought many white traders to Ughoton exerting their influence on the people. Natives of Ughoton and the neighbouring villages like Ekenwua Ugbineh, Uduana definitely worked in the factories as the business of factories seriously involve division of labour.

The trade promoted and enhanced the development of the Benin kingdom. It is correct that by the 15th century, the Benin Empire was already asserting its political and economic domination over its neighbours because the kingdom had at that period warlike kings like Oba Ewuare and Oba Ozolua. Oba Ewuare who was described in history as Ewuare the great is known in history as the Oba who conquered about 201 towns and villages. There is no doubt also that, the importance of Benin as a centre of trade was galvanized or accelerated by the coming of the European. Hence S.E. Orobator asserted that the coming of the Portuguese rapidly internationalized Benin as a power and in quick succession, as the empire was besieged by traders of various nationalities, in search of various items of trade including Ivory and slaves³².

A source noted that the trade generated by Benin-European relationship was the basis of sustenance of Benin empire. It is important to add here that, trade as the basis for the sustenance of

Benin Empire may not be tenable because Benin was already at the height of its glory especially among the African States before the coming of the Europeans. However, the trade oiled the military machine with which Benin developed and sustained her political power.

The trader brought a lot of wealth to the people of Ughoton and the Benin Kings. Oba Akenzua I was a case in point, whose reign is linked with a revival of the fortunes of the kingdom. He is known in Benin history as one of the richest kings that reigned in Benin. The son's reign also witnessed much prosperity.

Part of the reason for this prosperity was the re-introduction of the sale of male slaves in Benin which was banned in 16th century and lasted for 200 years. The trade in Benin slaves was very important to the Europeans. That was why Elizabeth Isichei argues that, Oba Akenzua I is remember by tradition as one of the richest kings who ever sat on the throne of Benin and that his son, who reigned after him was so rich that the floor and walls of his house were lined with cowries shells, the money of the time³³.

Conclusion

Ughoton was founded by Prince Ekaladerhan the son of the last Ogiso, Ogiso Owodo of Ogiso dynasty. From the 15th century, Benin entered into international relationship, with Portuguese. The principal aim of the relationship was trade. At the initial stage, the Portuguese carried on an exclusive trade with the Benin Kingdom. The period also witnessed the establishment of warehouses and factories at Ughoton, which was a seaport or the main port of Benin and the village had significant economic prosperity as the centre of trade.

Generally, the articles of trade which captured the Europeans interest in Benin were slaves, pepper, cotton cloths, gum, beads, Ivory and red wood. However, the Portuguese trade with Benin in early sixteenth century witnessed decline because of the refusal of Benin people to accept Christianity bad climatic condition and that the trade did not yields the expected returns.

The significance of these Benin-Portuguese relations to Benin and Ughoton cannot be over-emphasized. Christianity came to Benin through Ughoton for the first time and the missionaries assisted Oba Esigie to fight Benin-Idah in which Benin got victory in 1515-1516. The Ohen-Okun was the Benin Ambassador to Portugal between 1485-1580. Also the Portuguese introduced important crops to Benin and Ughoton particularly maize and cassava which are staple food today.

More especially during this period, warehouses and factories were established at Ughoton which experienced a considerable economic prosperity and development as a Bini port. On the whole, the trade promoted and enhanced the development of the Benin kingdom and the trade brought a lot of wealth to the people of Ughoton and the Benin kings who regulated the trade.

Endnotes

- ¹ S.E. Orbator, "Trade of Imperial Benin with the Portuguese and Dutch" in O.N. Njoku (ed.) Pre-Colonial Economic History of Nigeria (Benin: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 2002) pp.109-110.
- ² G.I. Eluwa and M.O. Ukagwu, History of Nigeria (Nigeria: Africana-First Publishers Limited, 1988) p.110.
- ³ Antonio Galvao, Tratado Dos Descobbrimentos, Porto. (Lisbon: Portugal, 1944) p.129.
- ⁴ Philip Koslow, The Kingdoms of Africa, Benin Lords of the River (Chelsea House Publishers, 1995) p.32.
- ⁵ J.Parry, The Age of Reconnaissance. (London: 1963)
- ⁶ A.F.C. Ryder, Benin and the Europeans. (London: Longman, 1969) p.29.
- ⁷ H.L. Roth, Great Benin, its Customs, Art and Horrors (Metro Books, Inc. North Brook II, 1972) P.5.
- ⁸ Ibid, p.5
- ⁹ Elizabeth Isichie, History of West Africa since 1800 (Macmillan Publishers, 1969) pp.90-93.
- ¹⁰ S.E. Orobator, "Trade of Imperial Benin with the Portuguese, p.109.
- ¹¹ Ruy de Pina, Chronica de Ruyi Domfoa II, Combra, 1950, P.24
- ¹² J.U. Egharevba A Short History of Benin, (Benin City, fortune Publisher, 2005) p.29.
- ¹³ A.T.T. Nucleo Antigo, Maco 166, FF 23rd, 24r Quoted in Ryder, Benin and European p.41.
- ¹⁴ J.W. Blake, European Beginning in West Africa 1454-1578 (London: 1937)
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Ryder, Benin and European.
- ¹⁶ R.E. Bradbury, Benin Studies (ed.) Peter Morton Williams (Oxford University Press, 1973) p.36.
- ¹⁷ J.D. Barros, Da Asia (Lisbon, 1552).
- ¹⁸ A.T.T. Fragmentos, Maco 9. 20 Nov.1514. Quoted in A.F.C. Ryder, Benin and Europeans, p.7.

¹⁹ A.F.C Ryder, *Benin and Europeans* P.33

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.33

²¹ A.T.T. Nucleo Antigo Maco, 166.

²² H.V. Wee, *The Growth of the Antwerp Market and the European Economy*, Vol.11 (Hague, 1963) p.126.

²³ A.F.C. Ryder, "The Trans Atlantic Slave Trade" in Obaro Ikime (ed.) *Groundwork of Nigeria History*. (Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980)

²⁴ R.E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies* , P.33

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.33

²⁶ Interview with Mrs. F. Iguakun, Age-46, Venue Ughoton, Occupation-Nursing. Interview conducted on 15-4-2013. For further information on religion at Ughoton, see interview with Christopher Enodunmwemben, Age-59, occupation – farming, venue-Ughoton. Interview conducted on 6-4-2013 and interview with Rolland Obazee, Age-71, Occupation-Retired Soldier, Venue-Ughoton Village. Interview conducted on 6-4-2013.

²⁷ S.E. Orobator. "Trade of Imperial Benin with the Portuguese" p.113

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.114

²⁹ P.A. Talbot *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*. (Oxford, vol.1, 1926).

³⁰ Interview with Thomas Okunhon, Age-75, Occupation-farming, Venue-Ughoton Village. Interview conducted on 6-4-2013.

³¹ E.J. Alagoa, "Long Distance Trade and States in the Niger Delta, *Journal of African History*, Vol. xi, No.3 1970. pp.319-320.

³² S.E. Orobator, *Benin and Portuguese*, p.109.

³³ Elizabeth Isichei *History of West Africa*, pp93-95.

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