



An Assessment of Itsekiri Middlemen, the Rise of Sapele and Its Negative Effects on the Benin Trade with the Europeans, 1593-1897

Ediagbonya Michael

Senior Lecturer, Ekiti State University

Email: michael.ediagbonya@eksu.edu.ng

Abstract: The paper examines Itsekiri Middlemen, the rise of Sapele and its negative effects on the Benin trade with the Europeans. It discusses the shifting of trade from Ughoton to the factories or warehouses nearer the sea by the Dutch. It assessed the factors behind Dutch's action. It demonstrated the role played by Itsekiri in the British invasion of Benin in 1897. The data was obtained from primary and secondary sources. Oral interview constitutes the primary sources. Books, newspapers, articles, theses, dissertation etc were used as secondary sources. The study found that the shifting of trade from Ughoton to the factories nearer the sea affected Benin-European trade negatively. It was also found that the purpose of the Dutch shifting the trade to factories along the main Benin River was to reduce the control of Oba of Benin over the trade. It was demonstrated that the Itsekiri now possessed more power, and they contributed to the British invasion of Benin in 1897. It concludes that the sudden rise of Sapele was due to the establishment of the vice-consulate of the Benin River in the town.

Keywords: trade; relations; vice-consulate; benins; europeans

I. Introduction

From the 15th Century, trade and diplomatic relationships started between the Benin's and Europeans. The Europeans were the Portuguese, British, French and the Dutch. The basis of Benin European relationship was trade Ughoton was critical to the organisation of trade as the Seaport of Benin Kingdom for 4 Centuries. In fact, Ughoton, which the Benin River located, served as the Port of the Benin Kingdom for its trade and diplomatic relations with the outside world. Its relevance as a trade centre was borne out of the fact that the Europeans, especially the Portuguese, established factories and warehouses at Ughoton to facilitate trade. No country is an Island unto itself, and no country or kingdom can provide all the resources it needs for development within its territorial borders (Ediagbonya, 2015:207). The needs of states have therefore created an interdependent international system that affords countries of the world the opportunities of securing from other countries what they lack themselves (Ibid, 207).

S. E. Orobator sees international relationships as constituting the sum total of the relationship between two or more sovereign nations at both governmental and non-governmental levels (Orobator, 2002).

II. Review of Literature

2.1 The Shifting of Trade from Ughoton to the Factories or Warehouses nearer the Sea and the Rise of Itsekiri Middlemen

a. The Origin of Itsekiri:

The Itsekiri people occupy the western lower part of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. Like Urhobo, they migrated from Benin Kingdom. They occupy a difficult terrain of Mangrove swamps in Delta State. They concentrate in Warri, Burutu and Bomadi areas (Ibid). Itsekiri Language is a mixture of Yoruba, Edo and Portuguese languages. The people have a rich aesthetic culture, which is reflected in their social and political organisation. The Socio-Political Organisation of the Niger-Delta people is strongly established based on village group or clans, the Itsekiri constitute the only exception (Ogundele and Soetan, 2017:60).

The Itsekiri represents the only Kingdom that does not have to grapple with the political problems arising from internal fragmentation, multiple dialect and so forth (Ibid). The Itsekiri people have socio-political organisation similar to that of Benin Kingdom. The Palace and titles, for example, were modelled after that of Benin. The Kingdom is ruled by the Olu. He alone presides over a council known as Ojoye, which was made up of seven nobles or title holders (Ibid).

III. Discussion

3.1 The Role of the Dutch in Shifting of Trade from Ughoton to the Factories or Warehouses nearer the Sea

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Dutch were fully in-charge of the Benin trade, having taken over from the British and Portuguese. It is essential to note that all European trade was conducted a 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 and 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 Benin people like the Ijebu, Ijaw and the Itsekiri to participate in the trade outside the Oba's sphere of effective power. This development attracted traders from areas outside the Benin kingdom like the Ijebus, Ijaws and Itsekiris as they made their way by canoe into the Benin River to sell their slaves and cotton clothes to the Dutch (Igbafe, 1980:31).

The shift of trade from the Oba's dominions probably contributed significantly to the shift in power relationship. The significance of Ughoton as the port of trade declined drastically because of 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 brokers entered into the Benin-European trading scheme, which had the effect of weakening the Oba's grip on the trade (Ryder, 1969:38).

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. 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 riches of the eighteenth century (Ibid, 237). Adams opined that the new town would provide the most convenient centre for the palm oil trade in the Benin River and that it would be sufficient to send small-craft to Ughoton (Ibid). 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. By 1851, it was clear that the kingdom 'Benin was isolated

from the coast because the new English factories were all stationed at the mouth of the river, directly under the control of the Itsekiris.

Bold gave an early account of the oil trade in Benin as he confirmed the rich palm oil-resources of the area and noted that oil could be bought in bulk from the Itsekiris of Ode-Itsekiri and Japka (Ibid. 234). The palm oil trade could have helped 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 of the slave trade, 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 rapid growth and expansion of industries, accelerated the demand for a wide range of tropical products, notably cotton, palm oil and groundnut oil 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 Toyin Falola express the view that oil-palm products were among the earliest Nigerian commodities to enter the European market (Ahazuem and Folala, 1987:83). It was not until the nineteenth century, when the legitimate trade was inaugurated that 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 (Ekundare, 1973:79). 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 (Ibid.).

Unfortunately, Benin was only one among several oil Rivers and never the most important in the production of palm oil. Benin was not the only area where palm oil was produced as the Urhobo producers were more promising and reliable in the production of palm oil in the assessment of the European traders. Hence, all attempts were made to penetrate Urhobo producers in the hinterland. As the oil trade expanded, an increasing volume of European merchandise must have found its way into the hands of the Urhobo producers, and it is reasonable to assume that some of the wealth flowing into Urhobo country eventually found its way to Benin. This was because the Oba of Benin could tax the palm oil trade at the produce stage, for the Itsekiris and Ijaws who sold the produce to Europeans depended for their supplies upon the Urhobo country which was still subject to Benin. It is, however, necessary to add that, this indirect profit from palm oil trade cannot be equated to the hey-days of the kingdom during the period of pepper, cotton cloth, ivory and 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. 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 the 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. Obaro Ikimi posits that by the middle of the nineteenth century, an Itsekiri had been appointed Governor to the Benin River without any reference to

Benin (Ikimi, 1968:76). 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 constructed large war canoes which enabled 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 (Ryder, 1969: 245-246).

3.2 The Contributions of Itsekiri Chiefs and Traders to the Fall of Benin Kingdom in 1897

In another sense, the Itsekiri Chiefs and traders contributed to the fall of Benin Kingdom in 1897. In an 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 ineffective.

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 (F. O. 2/102. 16 November, 1896).

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 effects so forcibly exaggerated by the Itsekiri middlemen and trading firms on the Benin River, came to the inevitable conclusion to use force against Oba Ovonramwen of Benin. 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 (N.A.I, Ibadan, 16. Nov., 1896).

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 complaint about the Oba's anachronistic commercial policy of restriction (Igbafe, 1979:33-36). It was the Oba's determination to defend his ancient prerogative of controlling the trade of his kingdom by 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 (Ibid).

Even Oba Ovonramwen specifically expressed his displeasure of the conduct of the Itsekiris when he appeared to testify in the court of Palaver thus:

Since I was a king, I have been a friend to the Whiteman. The consul could come and see me when he liked, and the people did that entire thing to put trouble on my head. If a person wants to play with a person, he cannot kill him. The whole palaver came from the Jekri... when the people who were massacred were coming they brought news that the Whiteman was bringing war (N.A.I, Ibadan. (SO/1/13/9, 1897).

In the same vein, Chief Ero added that, At the commencement of the palaver, the Jekri men sent from the waterside to tell the king that the Whiteman was coming with war and that the king must prepare for him... The chiefs and people, on hearing this, put themselves in readiness to fight the Whiteman (Ibid, 278).

The above messages left no one in doubt of the dangerous politics played by the Itsekiris to put Benin into trouble and then come to the centre stage of trade relations with the British. This is against the background that later events showed that the Europeans were not armed, this is clear from the comments of Wobari, Sobo boy from Jesse:

I lived at Ikpaku, close to Gwatto. We were all assembled to fight Whiteman at Ikpaku, Egbini and Agbatan near Ikpaku... Amaregbomo came and told us that the Whiteman had arrived. We got up from Ikpaku and went up to Egbini in the bush. When the Whiteman came, my master sent two boys to Gwatto to look them and see if they brought guns, they came back and said the Whiteman had neither guns nor swords and came only for play with boxes of chop (Ibid, 269).

The port of Ughoton decayed with the shifting of the 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.

3.3 The Rise of Sapele in the Nineteenth Century as a Vice Consulate in Benin

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 calculated that a vice-consul established there would be able to break Nana's monopoly in that commodity as well as to grow other crops (Salubi, 1960; 111-113)

According to Adogbeji Salubi, "Sapele which is today one of the most important industrial port towns in Nigeria was a small village belonging to the people of Okpe in Urhobo country" (Ibid, 117). 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 sea coast, had contacts with Ijaws 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 River District, Captain H.L. Galwey, surveyed the Urhobo Oil markets along the Ethiope River in October 1891 and suggested that a vice-consulate constabulary and barracks should be established at Sapele. His comments can be seen below:

The anchorage here is deep and roomy and the ground high, though on 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. (Gallway, 1892:122-130).

This was approved by the Commissioner and Consul-General, Major Claude Maxwell Macdonald, on his visit to Sapele on the November 14, 1891. In his Dispatch No.30 to the Foreign Office dated December 12th, 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 (Dispatch, No. 30 To F. O., 1891).

That was the beginning of Sapele village being 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* sailed to Benin River and there it was anchored, fitted up as Itsekiri traders and hulk towed to the Sapele anchorage. The hulk was said to have provided excellent accommodation for four Europeans, a custom, office, a consular court, a bursary, a prison, barracks for civil police (Ibid). 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, Benin River office was used as a customs post until when the post was removed to Koko town. Under the provisions of the European Reservation Proclamation 1902, a part of Sapele became a Reservation (Order No. 6 of 29/1/1903). Also, the employment opportunities offered by the Sapele rubber plantations and U.A.C. Sawmill and wood factories attracted a large number of people seeking gainful employment. During this period, the 33 miles of the Sapele-Warri road was completed at a cost £840 and the 11 miles of the Sapele-Ologbo road was also completed at a cost £500.

All these developments were taking place at Sapele in the nineteenth 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 matters worse, there was the transfer of the vice-consular office from the Benin River, which was followed by the removal of the European trading firms from the Benin River to Sapele.

The state of Ughoton at this period can be seen in the following comments by Captain Richard Burton, who, 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 splendour" (Burton, 1865:88-89). These factories are business houses which once offered employment to inhabitants of Ughoton

G.H.L. Galway, who visited Benin on March 21st 1892, described Ughoton as now only a small village (Galway, 1893:123). Also commenting on the dwindling fortune of Ughoton, E.A. Ayandele says that Ughoton, where Benin Kingdom consolidated its commercial relations with the Europeans, is now a very small village (Ayandele, 1980:265).

This was totally different from the impression of JF. Landolphe, a Frenchman, who rented a house in Ughoton to serve as a temporary warehouse and factory in c.1778 during the

period of slave trade. He puts the population of Ughoton as 3,000. Two French visitors who saw Gwatto in c. 1787 put the number of houses at around forty. Even Pereira said of Ughoton in c.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” (Roth, 1972:5). On the issue of the road which Pereira commented in c.1505 was goad but by 1862, the road between Ughoton and Benin deteriorated badly. The deterioration of the road, which probably set in at the end of the eighteenth century, was a result of the decline in European trade at 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 harrows in Indian file (Burton: 1865:88).

IV. Conclusion

Ughoton’s strategic position on the Benin River as the Seaport of Benin Kingdom brought much of wealth to the Kingdom and its monarchy. In the process, Ughoton during this period experienced considerable economic wealth and prosperity. However, the shifting of trade from Ughoton to the factories or warehouses nearer the sea and the rise of Itsekiri middlemen slowed down the economic fortune of Ughoton in particular and Benin in general. Again, the rise of Sapele in the nineteenth century as a Vice Consulate in the Benin River adversely affected the European and Benin trade and diplomatic relations particularly the British.

References

Ahazuem, J. O. and Toyin Falola (1987) “Production for the Metropolis: Agriculture and Forest Products” in Toyin Falola (ed.), *Britain and Exploitation* London: Zed Books, Ltd.

Ayandele, E. A. (1980). “External Relations with European in the Nineteenth Century Explorers, Missionaries and Traders” in Obaro Ikime (ed.) *Ground work of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann Books.

Bold, E. Cited from A. F. C. Ryder (1969). *Benin and European*. London: Longman, 1969.

Dispatch No. 30 to the Foreign Office of 12th December, 1891, quoted in Saubi, “The Origins of Sapele Township” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Volume 2, Number 1, December, 1960.

Ediagbonya, Michael. (2015). A Study of the Portuguese-Benin Trade Relations: Ughoton as a Benin Port (1485-1506) *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 2. Issue 2, July-September.

Ekundare, R. O. *The Economic History of Nigeria, 1860-1960*. London: Methuen, 1973.

F. O. 2/102. Philips to Foreign Office, 16 November, 1896.

Gallway, H. L. (1893). “Journeys in the Benin Country, West Africa”. *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, Vol. 1

Igbafe P. A. (1980). “The Pre-Colonial Economic Foundation of the Benin Kingdom” in I. A. Akinjogbin and S. O. Osoba (eds.) *Topics on Nigeria, Economic and Social History*. Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press.

Igbafe, P. A. (1979). *Benin under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom*. London: Longman Group Limited.

NAI, CS0/1/13/9, Ralph Moore to HM, Secretary of State. Evidence of Chief Ero at the Court of Palaver, No. 120 of 18th October, 1897.

NAI, CS0/1/13/9, Ralph Moore to HM Secretary of State. Evidence of Wobari Sobo Boy from Jesse at the Court of Palaver, No. 120 of 18th October, 1897.

National Archives, Ibadan. CS01/12, 6. Philips to F. O. No. 105 of 16 Nov. 1896.

Obaro, Ikime (1968). Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta. Ibadan: Heinemann.

Ogundele, J. A. and Soetan, S. O. (2017). "Culture Area of Nigeria and their Characteristics" (eds.) Oluwadare, C. T., Ajayi, I. A. and Ajayi, L. B., Nigerian Peoples and Cultures, Niyi Comm. & Printing Ventures, Ibadan.

Order No. 6 of 29/1/1903, Southern Nigeria Protectorate Government Gazette No. 1 Volume 4 of 31. 1. 1903.

Orobator, S. E. (2002). "Trade of Imperial Benin with the Portuguese and Dutch". In O. N. Njoku (ed.) Pre-Colonial Economic History of Nigeria. Benin Ethiope Publishing Corporation.

Quoted from Roth H. L. (1972). Its Customs, Arts and Horrors. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

Richard, Burton (1965). "My Wandering in West Africa: A visit to the Renowned City of Benin". Frazers Magazines an F. R. G. S., Part II, Vol. LXV II, March.

Ryders, A.F.C. Benin and Europeans (1969). London: Longman, 1969.

Salubi, Adogbeji (1960). "The Origin of Sapele Township", Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, Volume 2, Number 1, December.

The Hindustan" Cost \$ 1,800, a further \$1.800 was spent to adapt it for the Government's Purposes. F. O. 84/194.