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# REPUBLICAN MONARCHY IN URHOB COMMUNITIES: EXPLORING THE DILEMMA OF CHOICE

By

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## Abstract

The defunct Benin Empire has influenced the fringe states in economic, social and military areas. But, amazingly, the fringe states did not copy the centralised political system of the Benin Empire. The reason behind this choice is what this paper investigates. This paper argues that the decentralised socio-political structures of most of the fringe states of the great Benin Empire are derived from the need to abandon the Benin socio-political model. Using the Urhobo people as a case study, the paper draws from illustrations embedded in the oral arts to bolster the motifs of fear of dictatorship, personal liberty and the need to subtly repel the overriding influence of the Benin royal court on the intellectual indoctrination of the young ones, influence the Urhobo people's choice of republicanism. Further, the paper foregrounds that through the portrayal of the themes of sycophancy and loyalty to the Benin court and inordinate ambition among some Urhobo people, the monarchical model of the Benin Empire is imported into the political landscape of the Urhobo people. These create a conflict of choice. The quest to harmonise the people's republican aspirations with the imposed monarchical structure leads to a republican monarchy among the Urhobo people.

**Keywords:** Republicanism, Monarchy, Influence, Conflict, Survival

## **Introduction**

The Urhobo people in the Delta Central Senatorial part of Delta State, a rainforest region, are Republican. The focus of this paper is to investigate the influence of Benin in rejecting absolute monarchy, the eventual choice of republicanism, and the present acceptance of republican monarchy as the social, political, and organisational structure among the Urhobo people. The relationship between the Benin Kingdom and the Urhobo people is closely tied to the development of the Benin (*Aka*) and the tradition of origin of the Urhobo people. The Benin people and the Urhobo people share a common boundary. While Benin occupies the northern part of the old Bendel State of Nigeria, the Urhobo and other minorities like the Isoko, Ijaw and Itsekiri are domiciled at the western and southern fringes of the great River Niger.<sup>1</sup>

The creation of more states in 1991 separated the Benin and the Urhobo people into two separate states, Edo and Delta. This artificial separation has not diminished the relationship between the two groups, especially in culture and art. This relationship and the traffic of influence continue to attract the attention of researchers. This is what this paper sets out to examine. The postcolonial theoretical perspective is deployed to study the positive and the negative influences from Benin that spur the Urhobo to jettison the Benin style of a centralised state structure political system to pitch their tent in a decentralised and republican monarchy system. Several Urhobo tales, legends, proverbs, maxims, and aphorisms are used to illustrate Benin's influence on the choice and formation of the social and political structures in Urhoboland.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This research examines the Urhobo people's history, migration and relationship with the Benin Kingdom. It was specifically designed to explore the concepts of the Republican and Monarchical systems of governance and the reasons behind the adoption of the Republican Monarchical system by the Urhobo people.



## **Methodology**

This study is ethnographic and library-based research with oral data (stories, songs, tales, proverbs) carefully selected based on their thematic thrust. They are collected from in-depth interviews and observations. The stories are transcribed and translated from the Urhobo language to English. They are subjected to literary analysis with secondary materials, mostly gathered from books and journal articles and employed to support opinions and ideas raised in this research.

## **Republican and Monarchical System of Governance in Perspective**

The origin of the monarchical system of governance can be traced to the ritual practices of man in the earliest times. This argument is supported by Hocart (1954) when he argues that “the first kings must have been dead kings” (p. 77). This statement means that it is the celebration of the rituals of the passage of dead notable figures of the earliest societies by the living that motivate the living legends to don the garb of nobles. After that, the praises led to the crowning of these great men as kings. This idea of Hocart is developed further by Graeber and Wengrow (2021) when they explain that sovereignty also extends from man's experimentation with supernatural might. In their detailed analysis of the cultures of the people of the Yurok and those around them, the scholars discover that the Yurok are slaveholders. However, their neighbours, the Maidu, Wintu, Pomo and others, “rejected the institution entirely”. Also, drawing an analogy from the numerous differences between Athens and Sparta in ancient Greece, Graeber and Wengrow assert that the need to define their distinguishing identity makes two neighbours operate entirely different systems. Graeber and Wengrow's views are enlightening as far as the Urhobo-Benin situation is concerned. But their explanation that republicanism is the elementary stage in the political development of centralised societies when they say that “participatory democracy is natural in small groups but cannot

possibly scale up to anything like a city or a nation-state” is disputable.

The work of Scott (2009) becomes essential to this paper as it helps to dispel the argument that republican societies are undeveloped politically. Scott's work on the stateless Zomia people of Southeast Asia, who are at the fringes of great kingdoms like the Han, shows that the ideology of statelessness is consciously determined. This is proven through the flexibility of the tradition of the origin of the Zomian people, who, to adjust to emerging circumstances, recount short genealogy to reflect their autonomous status and thus remain on the stateless periphery of powerful kingdoms. To protect their identity, these stateless people practice 'opening' and 'closure' in times of prosperity and depression of their powerful neighbours. Further, Scott argues that the characteristics for which centralised 'peoples are stigmatised are precisely those characteristics that a state-evading people would encourage and perfect to avoid surrendering their autonomy” (337). According to Scott, stateless people are not “pre-anything ... in fact, they are better understood as post-irrigated rice, post sedentary, post subject, and even post-literate people” (337). Scott's ideas are revolutionary. Instead of lying at the bottom of the political development pyramid, stateless people have tasted centralisation and have subsequently rejected the idea. However, Scott limits his illustrations to the peoples of Southeast Asia, thus making the argument of this paper necessary that the Urhobo people of West Africa are post-centralized.

Several studies (Otite, 2003; <sup>2</sup> Aweto, 2005) <sup>3</sup> tend to lay the Urhobo migratory origin from Benin. This implies that apart from being neighbours presently, the Urhobo people were active participants at one time in the building and development of the great Benin Kingdom. This may be what plies when implies Urhobo became more or less the residual fragment that embodied the Ogiso tradition from when Benin was evolving.”<sup>4</sup> The separation and the surrounding circumstances leave a heightened tension in the Urhobo people's imagination. As such, the Benin Kingdom became a symbol of might

and majesty for the Urhobo people with its court of the Oba and military formations. These ideas are domiciled in the creative imagination of the Urhobo people, whose setting for most of the detailed folktales and traditions of origin is the great Benin kingdom. Three such stories are “Princess Oyeghe,”<sup>5</sup> “Jateme,”<sup>6</sup> and “Favoured and the Unfavoured Wives,”<sup>7</sup> performed by Cousin Onofekohwo of Kokori and Sarah Abohweyere of Olomu, respectively.

In the three tales, the imaginative setting is in the great Benin Empire. In “Princess Oyeghe”, the narrator explains that “this is the story; the tale of an Oba’s daughter called Oyeghe/the princess was so beautiful that she rejected all suitors who came for her.” This opening immediately transfers the intuitive and dynamic signals of the listeners to the Benin kingdom. Similarly, but more explicitly, Abohweyere opens her story that “there was a town, a city of an Oba/the Oba has so many wives.” The two openings portray the extent of Benin as a majestic place where both actual and imagined events are happening. This imagination of might and majesty hurts the psyche of the Urhobo people. The motif of fear of dictatorship is created, which may as well be the dominant reason for the Urhobo people going against the Benin social-political model. One way this motif is manifested in the Urhobo imaginative arts is the events of the separation from Benin embedded in the story of “Princess Oyeghe.”

“Princess Oyeghe” story is narrated on 19 August 1975 by Chief Cousin Onofekohwo to Godini G. Darah at Kokori town in Ethiope East local government area of Delta state. The tale is about the kidnap of Princess Oyeghe, the daughter of an Oba (King of Benin kingdom), by a wicked spirit referred to as One-Hand-One-Leg-Goblin in the story. The story also details the adventures of Omokpufi (Yaw-Infested Boy), Oyeghe’s elder brother, in the rescue effort. Oyeghe, who has been selecting suitors, falls to the guile of Goblin, who takes the duo of Oyeghe and Omokpufi to the den of spirits to be killed and used for food. In the thick of the rescue effort, Arhwaran, with twenty-digit fingers and toes, is a giant of the Goliath’s

proportion summoned to the fight. But Arhauran is no match for Goblin. When all hope is lost, Oyeghe solicits the assistance of Almighty God, who intervenes and separates the emotional relationship between humans and spirits. On a symbolic level, the capture and rescue of Oyeghe and her brother refer to the inhabitation of the Urhobo people in Benin and the eventual separation, which cannot happen without a fight. The role of Almighty God in the separation, as narrated in the story, reflects the attendant luck that enables the Urhobo to survive the eventual onslaught on the group by the overwhelming military force of Benin. For, according to the narrator, “and Almighty God rumbled in the complaint/When I passed here a moment ago/my drinking glass fell off my hands/As I was returning through this way/my kola nuts fell from my hands/What turbulence is troubling the earth.”<sup>8</sup> The turbulence that heralds the migration of the Urhobo from Benin may have created a state of fear. Even when the Urhobo people arrived at their present abode, the fear of domination became an ever-present traumatic imprint in the psyche of the Urhobo people to date. This may have created the need for them to vigorously pursue policies that will assist them in securing their cultural independence and, most importantly, protecting their group and individual freedom.

As the paper stated earlier, Urhobo and Benin share the same boundary. The question that arises is what Okpewho (2008) also asked: "How did Benin come to loom so large in the narrative imagination of these subject people that ... it was fabled to be just around the corner?"<sup>9</sup> Okpewho uses the critical results of several scholars' research into the relationship between Benin and the fringe states to conclude that “the memory of Benin origins and contacts among these Bendel communities would hardly have been so dramatic and pervasive had that history been a happy one.” Okpewho argues that “it is true that some narratives portray the Oba as just and wise (even Solomonic) in his decisions. But most recall experiences so harsh that the Oba, as Benin in general, frequently emerges as a menace which must be confronted and overcome.”<sup>10</sup> The fear of Benin becomes the beginning of wisdom, judging from the activities

of the Oba's court with its intrigues and sinister plot of secession disputes, which at most times led to the death of members of opposing groups in the past. For instance, Okpewho details the events that led to the emigration of the Abraka clan of Urhobo from Benin. In the words of Okpewho, “according to an Abraka tradition, their founding ancestor Avbeka was a son of an Oba of Benin whose birth it has been necessary to keep secret to save his life, because the then Oba, his father, had given instructions that all male children born to him should be killed so that there would be no obvious heir to the throne who could become the centre of palace plots.”<sup>11</sup> In this scenario, once the Abraka people can relocate from Benin, they will rather not have anything to do with the Benin Kingdom and its systems but rather practice republicanism.

According to Fink, a republic is a “state which was not headed by a king and in which the hereditary principle in whole or in part is determining the headship.”<sup>12</sup> Although Western ideas do not influence the Urhobo people's adoption of republicanism, Fink's ideas are in tandem with the operations of the Urhobo republics. Urhobo people's earliest social-political organisation revolves around the indigenous term “*ekpoto*”. Other Urhobo terms used to define the geographical conglomeration of a group are “*ekuoto*” and “*ubroto*” (Ekeh 2008).<sup>13</sup> Ekeh explains further that “the British had coined the word “clan: a century ago” as an English equivalent of the Urhobo words *ekpoto*, *ekuoto* or *ubruto*.”<sup>14</sup> Ikime has enlightened his readers that “Urhoboland comprise clans ... the village was divided into quarters ... the quarter was itself made up of several extended families.”<sup>15</sup>

In summing up this arrangement, Darah states that the clan “was a federation of several families that trace their origin to a common ancestor through the male line ... a social network comprising five layers which, in a descending order of supremacy, are: the clan, the sub-clan ... the village or town ... the ward ... and the extended family.”<sup>16</sup> The essence of this clarification is to foreground the fact

that “these basic subunits of Urhobo culture were prehistoric” (Ekeh 2005); that is, the ideas for the formation of the republics are mainly indigenous. Migrating from a centralised state requires avoiding conflict, which will arise when another centralised state close to the Kingdom of Benin is created. Thus, the overriding need to protect the Urhobo identity, preserve the freedom of groups and individual and at the same time remain independent of their powerful neighbour are the main reasons for the choice of republicanism. This choice is not an easy one; there are repercussions and reprisals. The tricky nature of balancing the Urhobo independence while maintaining a mutual relationship with the Benin kingdom is embedded in the Urhobo tale “Avwebo and Avwierovwe” (The Favored Wife and the Unfavored Wife) narrated by Sarah Abohweyere.

The story of “The Favoured and the Unfavored Wife” concerns the rivalry of two of the numerous Oba of Benin wives. The favoured wife, Avwebo, is the favourite of the Oba of Benin's wives but not necessarily the senior wife. But by sycophancy, guile and sheer brutality, she corners the domestic staff of the palace to do her bidding. This is the situation when the Unfavored wife, Avwierovwe, is married into the palace as the newest wife of the Oba. In her introduction, Avwierovwe, sensing the dangers, has to hide her identity. The narrator puts the events this way:

The Oba asked the latest wife, “What is your name?”  
 She said, “Avwierovwe.” (An unfavoured wife) ...

The Oba asked in surprise, “You so beautiful, are you Avwierovwe?”

She confirmed it so.

Tortoise heard and said, “Avwierovwe is her name, *ehen*, then, show her the attitude meant for Avwierovwe.”

They then locked the door of the kitchen (laughter).

They built a house for the woman; they made it near the toilet ...

There, they told her to go.<sup>17</sup>

The urgent need for the unfavored wife to hide her identity is for the protection and safety of her life and liberty. She knows that she cannot contend with the entrenched and well-oiled machinery of the favoured wife in the palace. In such a dicey situation, the unfavored wife has to move to the fringe of the palace, where the toilet is. There is hardly any need to see her as a threat in this place. This is the situation of the Urhobo people when they separated from Benin.

The events that heralded the separation and the eventual crisis of migrating to the fringes of the kingdom are fresh in the memory of the Urhobo people. It is noteworthy that even though the formation of the Benin Empire dates recently to 1440, that cannot be said of the prehistoric Benin Kingdom. The Urhobo people remember those prehistoric times as the Ogiso period (Ekeh 2005, 140). The documentation of the Ogiso period is not lost in Urhobo culture. The tale, “Jateme,” narrated by Chief Cousin Onofekohwo, captures the tyranny and oppression the Urhobo people suffered, eventually leading to the bloody fight for separation. The story of “Jateme” is about the struggle in the Ogiso palace between two of the Ogiso's wives – Inarhe, a vicious and subservient wife, and Jateme, a virtuous woman. Inarhe murders Jateme. Later, Inarhe persecutes Jateme's only son, Omovodjotu, to the point where Jateme has to resurrect from the land of the dead to avenge her death and her son's persecution. Both the Ogiso and Inarhe are killed in the putsch that takes place. The interesting fact in this tale is the reference to the Ogiso. Interestingly, Ogiso has been translated to mean “rulers of the sky” (Hocart 1954, 77; Bondarenko & Roesse 2014).<sup>18</sup> The title suggests the power, invincibility and majesty of the rulers of Benin at the time the Urhobo people gained their independence.

The fight for independence and freedom is also vividly captured in the tale: “Princess Oyeghe.” The battle between the Goblin and Omokpufi symbolises the clash between the forces of subjugation and those of separation. The severity of the struggle is demonstrated in the exchanges between Goblin and Omokpufi described by the narrator thus,

The gong sent out an alarm that delicious meat was escaping.

One-Hand-One-Leg Goblin

Heard the alarm in his banana plantation.

He applied a spring force to his crutches

*Phuuuuuuuuuuu gi.*

And landed in the centre of his compound.

He saw the shrine gates open.

He threw off his wooden crutches.

And began to spin in fury.

Recall Oyeghe

And her brother.

Oyeghe complained she was tired of running.

Pleaded they have short rest

In a nearby farmstead.

There they sheltered under cassava leaves.

There they lay prostrate, panting.

Sleep is like death.

Soon, sleep took over them.

And they slept off.

Goblin climbed to the top of his crutches

And saw them far off;

Far off in a deadly sleep ...

*Agbro-erhe*, (the talkative bird found in plantain orchards)

Flew in and perched on the nearby cassava farm

Where Oyeghe and the brother were asleep.

The bird chattered to arouse them up thus:

*Vren, vren, vren, vren*, (Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up).

*Vren, vren, vren, vren.*

*Vren, vren, vren, vren ...*

Suddenly, brother and sister sprang up.

They woke from sleep.

Goblin saw them as they rose.

The ritual kola is eaten earlier.



And the drink is taken then.  
Where offering was being made  
Will now have their intended effect ...  
Narrator: At this Juncture, Goblin intoned a magical  
chant thus:

Oyeghe, Oyeghe, Oyeghe  
Oyeghe, daughter of a king

Chorus: Oyeghe, Oyeghe, Oyeghe ...

All Group: Oyeghe, Oyeghe, Oyeghe-eeee  
What an encounter

Narrator: As Goblin sang the song, Oyeghe suddenly  
found herself moving backwards. Then the brother  
exclaimed: "What! I am a doctor of magic. What  
temptation is this? Before any danger can overwhelm  
both of us, let me show my expertise in magical arts."  
So he aimed a counter chant at Goblin

I command you, be rooted

I say be rooted

Goblin, be rooted so that I may escape

Chorus: Be rooted to one spot

Narrator: Goblin be rooted that I may escape

Chorus: I say, be rooted

Narrator: Goblin be rooted that I may escape

Chorus: Remain rooted

Narrator: Remain rooted that I may run away

Chorus: Remain rooted

Narrator: All this while, Goblin was hopping on  
the same spot.

Chorus: Be rooted, I command you

Narrator: Goblin hopped *chue*, *chue*. He hopped  
*chue, chue* ...

Narrator: Every song must come to a conclusion

All Group: I command you, be rooted, transfixed,  
chained!

Narrator: Hear an epic event

Chorus: Grand and fantastic

Narrator: Again, Goblin countered with his magical song. (Repeat Goblin's song above)

Narrator: Behold a gigantic encounter

Chorus: A grand tale indeed!

Narrator: Unconsciously, Oyeghe started to walk backward again. Then the brother exclaimed in desperation then the brother exclaimed in desperation: “What predicament is this? How come that excrement finds its way to the region of the beard? What peril can overcome my sister and me when I am a doctor of the magical arts? I must try my utmost effort.” Then he intoned a marshal tune thus:

There is danger, imminent peril, a great challenge

Tragedy threatens, a big predicament looms

Parrot, go fast across distant seas

Chorus: Danger looms, tragedy is imminent

Narrator: A desperate situation, Parrot sojourn abroad

Chorus: Desperation, great peril

Narrator: Go tell Arhwaran the Giant

Chorus: Danger looms, death summons

Narrator: Tell Arhwaran war has come

Chorus: Grave peril, death is imminent! <sup>19</sup>

This lengthy excerpt is deliberately reproduced to relate the extent to which the Urhobo people's abandonment of Benin's socio-political system for republicanism was premised. The totality of the strife the Urhobo people encounter is summed in the proverb “*Ivwiri re Aka*” (literally meaning “Benin smoke”). The Benin smoke can only come from the artillery fired at the departing Urhobo people by Benin forces.

### **Negotiating the Boundary of Choices**

The Urhobo territory shares a common border with the Benin territory along the Ologbo River creek and the Benin River axis. The implication is that a mobile military task force from Benin can invade

the Urhobo territories in days. More so is the traffic of commercial and official correspondence between Benin and the fringe states. The extent of the fluidity of movement and information between Benin and the Urhobo territories is portrayed in the legend of Ubiesha Etarakpo, narrated by Ogute Otan from the Udu clan. Nabofa's narration states that Ubiesha Etarakpo, who hails from Kokori, in Ethiope East Local Government of Delta State, Nigeria, lived in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> He is a trader who travels to the then-Benin Empire selling bangles (*ikoro*). His wife is Erukainure. In his later years, Ubiesha founded the Igbe-Orhe Religious Movement when a female spirit endowed him with a divine orhe (white chalk). The efficacy of the *orhe* in healing diseased bodies and souls of its adherents soon spreads throughout the lands where Ubiesha has traded.

Eventually, the report of Ubiesha's powers gets to the Oba's palace through those who visited Ubiesha for healing and those who carry out trade between Benin and Urhobo territories. Customary of the inquisitive nature and intelligence structures of great powers, the Oba confirms the efficacy of Ubiesha's religion. Otan, the narrator of the Ubiesha legend, continues the story:

He (the Oba) will investigate if Igbe Ubiesha is not a fraud...

The Oba changed to a yaw-infested child (*omokpufi*); he robbed balm all over his body.

As Ubiesha and his followers were worshipping, Ubiesha became aware of the presence of the Oba.

Ubiesha hits his magical fan on his lap and exclaims, "The owner of the world is coming! Today is a great day!"

When they (the Oba and his missives) got to the temple, Ubiesha embraced the yaw-infested child with his flowing white gown.

Ubiesha sits the yaw-infested child on his royal chair.

The people grumbled: "The ways of the insane are frightening; madness is never cured totally. How he

sits the dirty yaw-infested child-sickler in the imperial chair”.

Ubiesha entertained the visitor with the *orhen* saying: “This is all I have. Please, bear with me!”

After the all-night session, the Benin people left.<sup>21</sup>

Later, the Oba visits the temple in his royal capacity. He endorses the divine powers of Ubiesha and the healing powers of the *orhen*. In return for his endorsements, the Oba is bestowed as “Uku Akpolokpolo” (custodian of the divine healing powers) Summing the relationship between the Urhobo people and Benin through the diplomatic activities of Ubiesha, Erhiurhoro explains that the relationship is unique in that “Igbe advocates call God Almighty “Orise” or “Oweya”. These two names for God are Benin words ... the Oba of Benin even till today still uses the holy chalk, a fired lump of clay soil (orhe) that he took from Prophet Ubiesha Etarakpo as instrument and property of worship ...”<sup>22</sup> Nabofa concludes that “Ubiesha was found dead while standing upright on his two feet without been supported by any material.”<sup>23</sup> The essence of this digression is that the Oba of Benin can get to Urhobo territories whenever he wants to confirm thus Scott's idea of “opening” in times of prosperity. This adds to the fear and awe that the Urhobo people have for the Benin kingdom and, thus, will do everything possible to avert the wrath of the Benin King, referred to in the Ubiesha legend as the “owner of the world.”

The threat of the Benin Kingdom and the extent to which it influences the formation of social and political structures in Urhobo land is also demonstrated in the events leading up to the conquest of the Benin Kingdom in 1897, popularly referred to as the Benin massacre. As a powerful neighbour, the Benin military task forces enter Urhobo land to occasionally take promising young boys and girls to serve in the Oba's court. Among those who have been taken to Benin is Ominigbo, a psychic (*oboevwa*). To fully comprehend the reality of the existential threat from Benin, it is necessary to reproduce parts of the legend of Ominigbo narrated by Okpan Aribio, a popular singer of

tales in Urhobo.<sup>24</sup> According to Aribo,

The Oba of Uselu does not come to Urhobo for nothing.

My mother gave birth to only me.

Then, she took me to the Oba of Benin palace.

My mother brought me to the Oba of Benin ...

It is only those who understand proverbs that can practice Ominigbo's divination.

The situation's complexity is summed up in the narrator's last words. But from the extract, one can glean the fact that the narrator is living in the Oba's palace. Through the relocation technique, the narrator transports himself to the Oba's palace, thus eliminating the audience's denial of beliefs.<sup>25</sup>

The intimacy of living in the Oba's palace gives Ominigbo the leverage to provide the Oba with intelligence forces and timely messages from the spiritual realm about imminent doom or security breaches that can imperil the Oba. This situation gives birth to the intelligent report by Ominigbo that there is imminent danger to the palace. The narrator captures this thus:

**Narrator:** The intelligence report from the oracle of Ominigbo that day

The report was negative.

The Oba should not venture outside the palace before 12 noon

The Oba should not leave the precinct of the palace

The palace officials summoned Ominigbo to confirm the accuracy of the security report.

Ominigbo replied in the affirmative.

If the report does not come to pass,

Then Ominigbo should be sacrificed on the Oba's altar.

Ominigbo continued steadfastly in the face of interrogation.

It was not yet 12 noon

The sun has not reached its highest position in the sky.  
 The court officials lay hands on Ominigbo that,  
 “The report you brought is falsified”.  
 Ominigbo cried: “My oracle does not give false  
 reports!”  
 Then, it was not yet noon. They dragged Ominigbo  
 away and executed him.  
 After his death, Ominigbo's intelligence report  
 continued to exact ominous signs.  
 The time has not yet arrived.  
 When it was noon,  
 The enemies of the Oba invaded the palace.  
 They carried swords and battle axes,  
 They have guns and mortars.  
 They captured the Oba of Benin and took him away.  
 Oba's army chased the enemies but could not recover  
 the Oba.  
 Oba's army chases the enemies, but Oba is never seen.  
 Let me run in bewilderment to search for the Oba of  
 Uselu.  
 Where can I run to get back to the Oba of Uselu?<sup>26</sup>

This excerpt highlights the ironic situation of palace intrigues in the then-Benin Empire. Filial loyalty is paid for with the supreme price. Ominigbo's execution for his loyalty and steadfastness is highlighted as part of the degeneration of the once magnificent Empire into a period of recklessness. This fact is also documented by the Benin historian, Egharevba, that “the character of the Benin people had sunk very low as shown by the numberless human sacrifices which they offered ... the old Benin, with its barbarities and horrors, had to fall ....”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the British invasion of 1897 serves to highlight the efficacy and efficiency of Ominigbo's oracular prowess and the accuracy of that particular day's security report. The Oba of Benin, Overami, is captured and deported. The fear that arises from this singular event of paying the supreme price for speaking the truth leads to the compressed metaphor that “the Oba's vision is always

reported in the positive” (*oyoyovwi a gba evwa re Oba*). As from this time, some Urhobo people developed the art of rendering sycophantic service for the Oba's palace to get a favour.

As has been highlighted earlier, most of the aristocratic figures in the clans of the Urhobo people have biological and social roots in the Oba's palace in Benin. A case in point is the founder of the Abraka clan. As such, though there is a need to protect their independence and liberty, this does not foreclose any diplomatic relationship with Benin. The case of Ubiesha, whom the Oba of Benin visited, is still fresh in our memory. Even as the Urhobo clans are organised in a republican system where the people are closely knit along family lines, the fear of Benin continues to dominate this arrangement. In this vein, some wealthy, aristocratic and notable Urhobo people who are related to Benin or may have travelled to Benin begin to take advantage of the looseness of the republican systems in the political structure of Urhobo people to perpetuate self-aggrandisement. Some of them, with close leverage from the Benin palace, started to impose the Benin style of monarchical system on Urhobo clans. This means trying to turn the republican clans into monarchical kingdoms. Darah documents this effort in the Ughievwen clan of Urhobo as resulting in total failure.

According to Darah, “The Ughievwen had a brief experience of monarchical rule in pre-colonial times when one Evwerha from Oginibo tried to impose himself on the entire division as king. Popular resistance to this administrative innovation prevented it from maturing into an institution.”<sup>28</sup> This effort in Ughievwen is replicated in the various clans of the Urhobo people. An instance is in the Agbon clan. Ekeh describes the rejection of monarchical system in Agbon when he quotes the hypothesis that “*Okpako r' Agbon oy' Ovie r' Agbon*. This statement means that the “eldest man in Agbon is the King of Agbon.” Ekeh defines the invocation of this maxim to mean that “any gatherings from village to town councils – was usually accompanied with a rebuke of kingship conveyed in stories of the wickedness of kings in ancient Okpe and even Benin.”<sup>29</sup> Unknown to

many in Urhobo in those times, this is an epoch-making situation in Urhobo land. It is a period of transition from republicanism to monarchy in Urhoboland. How will the Urhobo handle this situation?

As documented by Darah, the initial success in the rejection of the monarchical system in the Ughievwien clan of Urhobo and the resistance to the transition from republicanism to monarchy, however, sparked a more subtle and dangerous trend in the social and political organisation of Urhobo people. This is the shift or the transformation from republicanism to monarchical republicanism. Incidentally, this period marks the British adventure in the governance of the Urhobo people. This coincidence has made several critics link the Urhobo social-political structure transition from republicanism to monarchical republicanism as an offshoot of British pressure for a more amenable centralised system. However, the truth is that the influence of the pressure from Benin moves the Urhobo people to merge the republican system with monarchy, which then translates into republican monarchy.

Regardless of the failed efforts witnessed in Ughievwien, some other Urhobo people clans tried to experiment with the monarchical system. The Okpe clan tried the monarchical system, but the experiment ended in regicide. This is the story of King Esezi of Okpe. However, the experiment was highly successful in the case of Ughelli and her sister communities of Ogor and Agbarha. One of the objectives of this paper is to link the Benin influence as the spur for the transition from republicanism to monarchy. In his paper on the historical development of the Ughelli clan, Erhiayondavwe explains that Ajuwe Adagwe, who ruled from 1648-1706, consolidated the kingship of Ughelli. In the words of Erhiayondavwe, Adagwe “made a maiden trip to the Benin kingdom where (sic) he was warmly received, and this marked the beginning of the fraternal relationship with the Benin Kingdom. The Benin monarch presented various gifts to him and some of these are still extant and relevant in the kingdom to date”. The gifts may have included the royal “crown, royal beads, elephant tusk, *Aberen*, the red royal scarlet cloth and the traditional



staff of office.”<sup>30</sup> The introduction of the royal Ema Dance in this period also speaks volumes of the contribution of the Benin Kingdom to the establishment of the monarchy in the Ughelli clan.

Similarly, the role of the Benin Kingdom in establishing the monarchy in Agbarha-Otor, close to Ughelli, is also linked to the Benin influence. Agbarha is a brother to Ughelli, one of the four sons of Oghwoghwa. According to Ovie, “the adventurous character of Agbarha made him travel to far places including the Benin Kingdom where he got engaged to an Ebelle princess and had his first son, Ebelle, who became the first king of Agbarha-Otor due to the royal equipage he acquired from his maternal grandfather.”<sup>31</sup> Ebelle (the First) reigned in Agbarha-Otor from 1573 to 1610. These dates dispel the notion that the British pressured the Urhobo people into developing a monarchical system for easier colonial administration. The Europeans had not assembled in Berlin to partition Africa at this time. Therefore, the influence from Benin is the most probable influence, as seen from the oral and documented evidence of the rise of these monarchies in Urhobo land. So, why did the Urhobo who rejected monarchy later accept it?

At this stage, there is a need to rely on Graeber and Wengrow's three fundamental realities facing state-less people in their quest to protect their identity: “(1) the freedom to move away or relocate from one's surroundings; (2) the freedom to ignore or disobey commands issued by others; and (3) the freedom to shape entirely new social realities, or shift back and forth between different ones” (456). The Urhobo people have utilised the first option in migrating from Benin to the lower rainforest region close to the Atlantic Ocean. Further migration is closed with the Ijaws, the Isokos, and the Itsekiris along the coast. Disobedience to the commands from the mighty Benin Kingdom is suicidal. So, the only option is to “shape entirely new social realities”; this is the merger of republicanism with monarchy to create a republican monarchy.

## Conclusion

The transition from the republican system to the republican monarchy system is unsuccessful. This is because, as the aristocrat begins to grab power, they become alienated from the people who continue to cherish their republican values. Therefore, as the clan is configured into a kingdom, the concentration of the monarchical power remains at the clan's headquarters (palace of the king). As one moves away to the towns and villages of the kingdom, the power of the monarch wanes. The council of elders (gerontocracy) and the various plutocratic institutions (*ehonvwores* and *iloroguns*, Chiefs and High Chiefs) limit the monarch's powers. Even the people who are still afraid of the devastation arising from ancient Benin kings' centralised wielding of powers are not ready to surrender their rights to the new kingship institution. This has led to the proliferation of kings in Urhoboland as groups who feel threatened by the overwhelming power of one monarch easily cry to the government to create a kingdom for them; presently, the power to create kingdoms in Delta State lies with the government.

Nonetheless, the Benin influence is still very much around as most installed kings still go to 'Uselu,' imitating the ancient Benin rite where the Crown Oba goes to Uselu for royal training and fattening. More so, the legitimacy of these kings is enhanced with a visit to the royal palace of Benin, where they are endorsed. As such, the influence of Benin is still critical in creating the republican monarchies in Urhobo land. In all these, the question that arises is: are the stateless people of Southern Nigeria pre- or post-centralised people? This is a gap to be filled next.

## Endnotes

1 Benin in this respect refers to the whole of the areas that are part of the Benin kingdom.

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4 Peter Ekeh. "A Profile of Urhobo Culture" (New York, Urhobo Historical Society, 2005)

5 Cousin Onofekohwo. "Princess Oyeghe" *Oyeghe and PM*. (Translated by G. G. Darah, 1974).

6 Cousin Onofekohwo. "Jateme" *Jateme and Igho* (Electromat Records, 1985, Trans. Henry Unuajohwofia 2010).

7 Sarah. Abohweyere, "Avwebo and Avwierovwe." (Translated by Unuajohwofia Henry, 2010).

8 Cousin Onofekohwo. "Princess Oyeghe" *Oyeghe and PM*. (Translated by G. G. Darah, 1974).

9 Isidore Okpewho. "Once Upon a Kingdom...: Benin in the Heroic Traditions of Bendel State, Nigeria", 57

10 Ibid 57

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12 Zera Fink. *The Classical Republican: An Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of thought in seventeenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945) ix.

13 Peter Ekeh. "On the Matter of Clans and Kingdoms in Urhobo History and Culture." (New York, Urhobo Historical Society, 2008), 52-67.

14 Peter Ekeh. "A Profile of Urhobo Culture", (New York & Lagos: Urhobo Historical Society, 2005), 1-50.

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16 Godini Darah. *Battle of Songs: Udje Tradition of the Urhobo*. (Lagos, Malthouse Press Limited, 2005) 5.

- 17 Sarah Abohweyere, “Avwebo and Avwierovwe.”
- 18 Dimitri Bondarenko & Peter Roesé, “Between the Ogišo and Oba Dynasties: An Interpretation of Interregnum in the Benin Kingdom.” *History of Africa, Vol. 31*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- 19 Cousin Onofekohwo. “Princess Oyeghe”
- 20 Michael Nabofa. *Igbe Ubiesha: An Indigenous Charismatic Movement of the Urhobo People*, (New York: Urhobo Historical Society, 2005) 320.
- 21 Ogute Ottan and His Lucky Star Group. “Ubiesha”. *Ubiesha*. (Felix Records, n.d.)
- 22 Young Erhiurhoro, “How Founder of Igbe Religion, Ubiesha Attracted Benin Monarch to Urhobo Kingdom” *Urhobo Today* (Urhobo Today, 2019) 10
- 23 Nabofa. “Igbe Ubiesha: an Indigenous Charismatic Movement of the Urhobo People”, 320
- 24 Okpan Aribo, “Medje-Sememroba 'Risenu”, track 2 on *Delay is Dangerous* (Musik Tempo Records, 2008, compact disc).
- 25 Modupe Brodericks. *The Tori: Structure, Aesthetics and Time in Krio Oral Narratives*, (Diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1977), 224,225.
- 26 Okpan Arhibo, “Me dje-Sememroba 'Risenu,”
- 27 Jacob Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, 3rd edn, (Ibadan, 1960), 44.
- 28 Godini Darah. *Battle of Songs*, 10
- 29 Peter Ekeh. “A Profile of Urhobo Culture”, (New York & Lagos: Urhobo Historical Society, 2005), 1-50.
- 30 Engr. Erhiayondavwe. “A Synopsis of the Royal Dynasty of the Great Ughelli Kingdom: In the Beginning” (Ughelli Gist, 2018) 5,6.
- 31 Ovie Bethel. “Today on Royalty: Agbarha-Otor Kingdom” (Ovibel.com, 2020) 3.