



## Ugo History and Socio-religious Perspective in Edo State

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### Abstract

*Ugo is a town in Orhionmwon Local Government Area of Edo State, the people live communally. Doors' are always open when neighbours knock. There are no walls to secure privacy, no need of it. Life goes on much as it might have been three decades ago. At night all one hears is the wind whispering through the treetops. The town has a serene environment usually associated with the district. In most Ugo community there is a general traditional festival that is celebrated in remembrance of the goddesses. The traditional ruler is central in the celebration of the festival, particularly as regards rituals. The rituals in the festival is a re-enactment of the events that took place at the initial inception, when the ancient ancestors began the feast. The worshippers have held on to the belief that Igbaghon was responsible for both the divine protection and provisions that has led to the growth and development of the community. The festival was an avenue to show the rich culture of Ugo people and to seek the continued protection of the goddess over the community. The method adopted in this work is socio-historical techniques.*

### Introduction

In the 1960s, Ugo belonged to the Benin East division and was the District head of Iyeko-Orhionmwon Council. When district councils were abolished in the 1970s, Ugo lost its position to Orhionmwon Local Government Council with its head at Abudu. Historically, Ugo would have come into existence around 13th century AD, though there are no accurate data to confirm this claim.

Legend says the Ikuo people were the first inhabitants of Ugo. The first Ikuo inhabitants lived in a Land the current members vacated referred to as the old Ikuo. This old Ikuo was migrated from by the ancient inhabitants before 1960. The reason for this migration was the need to live in close proximity with the other occupants of the landscape. There were no isolated home-steads. All the houses in the Village were crowded together. It was as though those who live in the houses fear the land and found comfort in crowding together (Abraham, 1979). When the British Colonial officers discovered this

community, a portion of Land for farming and livelihood was demarcated for them. This Land which contains cash crops was later exchanged in the 1980s with the Forest Reserved Land that demarcated the old Ikuo from the other Ugo indigenes. When the old Ikuo people migrated, they sought permission from the other occupants to co-habit in their midst. They were no longer united as a community but were scattered. After exchanging their portion of Land for the new one, the contemporary Ikuo began the process of re-congregation of their clan in 1980s (Omorehia John).

There are eight clans in Ugo, next to Ikuo in the order of seniority is Eguae Enogie. The inhabitants of the king's quarter believe the first Enogie was sent by the Oba of Edo (Benin Kingdom) to Ugo, a prince from Ugonke along Benin- Agbor road to prevent the Enogie of Umughunokhua from threatening the superior king. The Enogie of Umughun was an heir apparent to the Benin throne, but was denied the throne, so he went to his mother's kinsmen who agreed to crown him. The Enogie of Ugo went round the communities around Ugo area who accepted him and build him a house. This first Enogie, Owemwen was the person who wanted to marry a young Ikuo girl called Igbaghon from the family of Alakalaka, she refused the marriage but the people forced her into it. In the three days she stayed in the Enogie's house, she refused food and sexual advance, therefore the marriage was not consummated. She left the house in the afternoon when nobody was around and ran to the nearby river, Ugo people believe to this day, she became that river. The Enogie on his arrival traced her foot prints to the river and fetched some water from it with his calabash. In those days ordinary people do not become title holders but people with knowledge of charm, magic, and with the gift of sight. On his way home his body gave him signs and at the spot where the shrine is today, he kept the calabash there. He told the people what happened. Immediately, a hot was built around the water pot and later images were moulded and that was the beginning of Igbaghon worship (Otasowie,2005).

As a way of filling the gap in Jacob Egharevba's short history of Benin and Isidore Okpewho's contribution to Benin historic traditions, this author is of the view that the Agboghidi mentioned by the two authors was not the first Enogie of Ugo, Isidore corrected Egharevba in the dating of Agboghidi event. Agboghidi was not the Enogie who wanted to marry Igbaghon as was recorded by Isidore account.

## Agboghidi

Many Enogies have ruled in Ugo traditional system, the one whose history was extant is Agbohidi, a principal figure in Benin oral tradition. His real name was given as Emokpaogbe, born to the Enogie of Ugo after having some daughters. He succeeded his father with the name Agboghidi. His reign was popularized by his engagement in two wars, first he led the Edo people to war against Oboro-uku. Second, he fought war against the superior king, Oba of Edo, the battle that claimed his life (Aisien,2006).

The Edo people have been a royal race ruled by kings and magical people. The word 'Edo' in this paper refers to the 'Bini', and the people speaking 'Edo Language' as an ethnic group whose capital city is Benin. Agboghidi was a magical ruler and leader, who according to legend became blind at a certain stage after marrying Emokpolo, nu uyi nugo (Emokpolo, the pride of Ugo). His blindness was attributed to Agboghidi refusing to heed oracles which wished not to embark on a hunting expedition in the forest set aside for the goddess Igbaghon. He lost his sight in the process of hunting, and remained in this awkward position until his wife took him to Oboro-uku. The wife engaged in trading, on market days selling Edo beans cake (Emeki) and some other articles, she was a beautiful woman by nature. Her beauty was rumoured to Obi of Oboro-uku in his palace. He wanted to marry her but she behaved like Sarah (Genesis 12: 11 – 18), complained that he should help cure her brother first. This was how Agboghidi first appeared in Oboro-uku, he was healed at the palace of the Obi. He was also given other charms to fortify him against any mysterious attacks.

When the Oba Akengbuda and his chief, the Ezomo declared their intention to fight the Obi of Oboro-uku because of his murder of Adesuwa, their daughter and love, the Agboghidi of Ugo was called upon to lead Iyekorhionmwon troops. Adesuwa first came to the attention of the Obi when he visited the Ezomo of Uzebu, and the father instructed the girl to present kolanut to the Obi. Thereafter the Obi became interested in the girl. Adesuwa also engaged in trading to different markets, and when she went to Oboro-uku, the Obi got to know and sent for her. The Obi wanted to marry her but she refused and insulted him as she did in Benin calling him bush ruler without Iwu tribal mark. The Obi ordered for her to be killed by his warriors therefore she was slain (Okpewho, 2008).

The Benin warriors went to war at Oboro-uku led by Imaran Adiagbon from Oredo while Agboghidi led the Orhionmwon group. After severe fighting the town was conquered and the Obi was beheaded. Agboghidi went to war again against his superior king, Oba of Benin when he became dissatisfied with the rewards given him after Oboro-uku war. This war took place at Ugboko-niro and Sokponba, river Jamieson (called Igbaghon traditionally) area very close to Ugo. The Benin troops engaged Ugo people led by Agboghidi himself, when the battle became very tough he started using his teeth to eat or pieces a plant soft like sugarcane or wild sugarcane. After which he jumped into the river and drown himself.

Kingship system in Edoland has been based on primogeniture, although it was not strictly practiced in the ancient time. Nosakhare Isekhure report on prince Ogun challenges before becoming the king of Benin, show that sons of the same king ascended the throne one after the other in the ancient world. Such a system had since been eradicated for primogeniture (Isekhure, 2006).

## Emokpolo

Emokpolo was the wife of Emokpaogbe, her village was Ugboko-niro. She was talented in sorcery, trade, music and a faithful housewife. She used her talents to assist her husband, although she was lowly being a barren woman. She composed the song popularly known in Benin and Ugo as Eghughu Agba. Her love for her husband lead her to compose a song of lamentation that she sang in the midst of battle at Sokponba as she looked with pity at her husband piecing the wild sugarcane (orieman). The song is not necessary here, expect to say when Emokpaogbe saw her he was shocked and grieved, wave her away from the danger. The song echoed with great power in the forest and the opposing forces were moved with pity. They took her home to Benin along with some other Ugo women. In Benin she sang the song in the palaces of chiefs, gradually her song became popular among palace women especially at Iyase, Ezomo and Ologbosere harem (Okpewho, 2008). The song is still popular among Ugo women. The current Enogie of Ugo is His Royal Highness Edugie Ogieriakhi Oguigo (JP). The other most recent Enogies from 1920 to 1970 were Erhumunse, Okundaye, Atelekpenhi and Ogiemonyi, while in the regency era Okoro and Igbinosun between 1970 and 1980s, (Princess Oguigo).

Ugo comprises seven clans, having discussed two, the others are Idumune Ogba, Ugbukeun, Evbiogban, Idumune ore and Idumune Ibieguae each of these have Odionwere as their head. Odionwere is the oldest man in a clan, the title is bestowed on an individual after the death of the predecessor. However, there is a particular family that can become Odionwere, therefore strangers are not eligible no matter how old he may have lived in the clan. Odionwere administers the clan, but takes instruction from the Enogie. Edo land has been a patriarchal society which means that the Odionwere has always been a male. He has been the executive, legislative, judicial and the spiritual authority in the clan. He has been the leader at Ogu'edion that is, edion /elders council. The holder of the clan ukhurhe, the staff of authority and the object that links the living with the ancestors; the entire members of the community are loyal to the Odionwere. The Odionwere gives instruction to the Edion, (the elders), the Eghele and (Middleage) the Eroghae (youths), including the women group (Aisien, 2006). It has been the Odionwere who elevates the men in the clan from one age grade to the other especially during the end of year ceremony, popularly called Igue festival.

## Otu System

The word 'otu' refers to different concepts, first age grades, in this case the Edo people believe it is usually people within three years ringe that are mates (ikpia ra ya mu otu), this refers to Edo system of judging ages by two years. However, within families and in neighbourhoods, the people know the Lunar month and some special mnemonic event that

took place when children were born. Members of *otu*, all mates are age-grades, at about 14 years the young ones called '*emwin r'oba evbo*' would be recruited into the first age-grade system called *eroghae*. The function of *eroghae* has been to do menial work in the community, such as cleaning the road to farm, arranging where special event was taking place and joining masquerade dance of the elders. At about twenty-eight years the *eroghae* group are moved en masse to the next age-grade called *eghele*. The head of the group was called *oka-eroghae*, he summons the group to any function. The *eghele* group are adults between 28 years and 50 years, they maintain security in the community, assist in community building, farming, hunting, trade and masquerade dance. Elevation into *Edion* age grade has not been not automatic, some of the criteria needed are wisdom, character and achievements in life. The *eghele* who successfully buried his father can be elevated immediately and any other feat of outstanding benefit to the village (Aisien, 2006). The word '*otu*' is also applied to political parties, associations and clubs in the town. It applies to secret societies as well.

## **The Family**

The oldest social group in Edo society has been the family. It is a unity of father, mother and children, the nuclear family and the oldest form of community grouping. In most Edo traditional society, a man was married to two or more wives, each of the wives having children co-habiting. In a big family, there will be a grandfather with wives, and two other men who are his sons also having wives and children in the same large building. It was a polygamous society, where people are proud to have more than one wife.

Edo family system was patrilineal, that is, people traced descent through father's line; as the lineage grows beyond the immediate family, unit heads began. Rules was formulated long ago to combine and unite members of the evolving lineages. The rules discouraged indiscriminate sex especially incest and inter-marriages between close relations (Igbe, 2009). The Edo houses were built in a quadrangular courtyard with living rooms at the back and sitting rooms opening onto the street. The front rooms were shops while women's apartments were at the back of the compound. The women were in the harem (*eghodo*) in a lot of cases (Ighodaro, 1994). The Children play naked outside their houses, Men and Women use pit lavatory of public nature. The bulk of the people live in most awful poverty, every man takes care of his house hold through subsistent farming.

## **Economics**

The cash crops in this environment has been Timber, Rubber, farming were the main occupation. The village market has been viable and productive since ancient time in the entire Iyekorhionmwon district. The big market days was fixed at nine days interval, while

the small market falls between four days. The strategic location of the community plays a great role in attracting all the neighbouring villages to sell their farm products in the market and people from far away communities especially Onitsha, Agbor, Warri, Sapele, Abraka, Benin come to purchase the crops displayed in the market. The market opens at 7am and closes 8pm, it has been busy since ancient time servicing the entire district. Farming at Ugo has been mainly at government Lands and until it was approved by Forestry department farming does not commence. Each year Forestry department inform the community to come to nursery department to collect trees for planting. Farm Lands at Ugo are fertile because it takes many years before Lands are approved again for farming. Farmers at Ugo do not make hips to plant, instead little holes are dug and yam seedlings are planted. Plantain, cassava, cocoyam, pepper are the other farm products common in Ugo community and the neighbouring villages (Aifuwa, Ighodaro). Ogor has been the god of agriculture among Ikuo people, the giver of the life force.

### Religious Activities

Religion in Ugo like many communities in Edo Land serves many purposes. The most important are administrative, economic and socio-political purposes. Hence all traditional political office holders in Ugo as it is in other Edo communities must undergo some religious rites in order to acquire the right to rule the people.

The Enogie and his Odionwere's, including the other title holders are being respected not only because of their power but also because of religion. This is in consonance with the practice in many communities in West Africa in general and Edo communities in particular (Basil, 1965). Hence it is necessary to ensure that the people have great reverence for the different deities in the society. The efficacies of these deities are usually re-enacted during festivals held in their honour, through sacrifices offered either for their appeasement or for thanksgiving.

The laws and regulations were based on ancient myths and customs of Edo Land enforced by the elders with their calling on the gods to take control. If anyone should violate them without anyone knowing of the infringement, the offender would fall sick and might die if the cause is not discovered early. That is when any sickness is usually prolonged or serious, there might be a need to recourse to magic (Omozusi, 2008). The traditional authorities in the village setting owes much of its success to religion. There are common rituals in honour of Igbaghon, clan ancestors and individual gods.

### Olokun

Edo Mythology say, Olokun was the son of Osanobua, the supreme deity. However, to the people of Ugo, Olokun has been conceived as the deity of Urhonigbe, 'Olokun nu

Urhonigbe'. Ugo people believe Olokun originated from Urhonigbe river. Urhonigbe river has been referred to as Eze-Olokun. Urhonigbe people have their own story about the origin of Olokun, which will not be discussed here. Olokun worship has not been restricted to a fixed location since ancient time because the deity was vested with power and authority by the father. In Edo concept, Olokun was oba n'amen, that is king of the waters, and master of the demons who rule the under realm.

The devotees of this deity believe in its ability to provide children and wealth. This has been the reason many women have been attracted to Olokun from the time of Oba Ohen (1334-1370) who named his son uwaifiokun which means "prosperity from Olokun does not come too late" (Osemwegie, 2010). Olokun has been the god of whiteness and purity, the shrine is decorated or painted white with kaolin, pots containing water and other emblems are decorated white.

## **Ogun**

Ogun is the god of Iron and it has been worshipped at Ugo as in the other villages in Edo Land. It was believed to be a god of fire and it can cause accident to those that incur its wrath. Recourse to it aid is capable of averting any type of danger. The deity also brings fortune to its worshippers hence hunters and warriors are devotees of Ogun. Ogun shrine is not restricted to a particular location and every worshipper is a priest in his own shrine having received his authority from another priest who formally initiates him.

The origin of Ogun has been traced to Yoruba Land, Ogun according to Yoruba myth was the earliest hunter, he cleared the way with his magical tool (Jacobs, 1977).

A religious belief is the product of the social environment in which it is located. Religion at its most fundamental level will always be the primary agent of social cohesion in the society. A social cohesion can be observed during group worship, festival and dance (Hill, 1973).

## **Igbaghon**

Igbaghon is the deity that is significant to the whole Ugo people, the Enogie fixes the date for the national festival, the Ekaba. He appoints the Iyase, the priestess of the deity. There are two Iyase, Iyasenamen and Iyasenoke; Iyasenoke leads people at worship while nemen takes people to river. She visits the shrine every Edevhieki, that is, the small market day to clean and perform the normal rites. If there is any body coming for private worship, they meet her on that day. Among the taboos of Igbaghon has been prohibition of sexual intercourse in the day time. Any native of Ugo who commits the act will sometimes fall ill until the required purification rites are performed. Igbaghon shrine has been fixed at a particular location, those who seek her aid go to the shrine. Igbaghon has been a mother goddess and she love purity.

There are many other gods and goddesses in Ugo, in fact the people adage has been “Ebo kpa yan uhi no yan Ugo”, meaning there are more than one hundred gods and goddesses in the community. This author will briefly look at Olokun, Ogun and ancestor spirits.

## **Ekaba Festival**

Festivals are normally joyful occasions when people sing, eat and celebrate a particular occasion or event. There are festivals to mark harvest time, the start of the rainy season, the birth of a child, and victory over enemies (Mbiti, 1982:10). Igbaghon festival is normally observed around March/April, the beginning of planting season. This is the period the weather is conducive; the raining season is yet to begin so carnivals can easily be paraded along the streets.

Africans like to celebrate life. They celebrate events in the life of the individual and community. The occasion of Ekaba festival has been observed by the whole community. It has a religious meaning and through its observation religious ideas has been perpetuated in the community. Festival not only provides a lot of fun but adds drama to the event. It last six days, everyone in the community participates in it. Women are not very much involved in the dance but watch what men are doing. The festival involves wearing different customs, dancing, feasting, making offerings, praying and general jubilation.

This serve as a resting time for most farmers, therefore through festivals the life of the community is renewed. Festivals bring together the people as a group, strengthening their unity and cohesion. Religions and social values are repeated and renewed through communal festivals (Mbiti, 1982:136).

Ekaba festival is organized around Igbaghon to mark generational transitions. It incorporates diverse form of singing, chanting, drumming, miming, costuming, with episodes of theatrical enactments ranging from the sacred and secretive to the secular and public (Ogbonna, 2010: 135). It is an occasion to celebrate Edo cultural heritage.

## **Celebration of Ekaba**

Three months prior to the celebration, the Enogie informs the people of the need to organize the festival at a fixed date. Ekaba festival celebration has a lot of ritual aspects. There are sacred ritual and secular drama involved. The sacred ritual refers to those rites which are conducted in seclusion by the priests and priestesses, which reaffirm the sacred bonds and reopen the pathway between Supernatural and human beings. It is only the inner circle members, the initiated ones who can witness the sacred rituals (Badejo, 1996:107). Secular ritual drama on the other hand, refers to those ritual activities which are witnessed by the general public

The opening day of the annual Ekaba festival is the day five people are sent to the river

led by the Iyasenemen where Igbaghon hard its source to bring her spirit home by fetching some water. These five people are expected to perform some sacrifice to the goddess of the river. The sacrifice involves killing a goat, pounding and eating of the Holy Meal at the river side. And then invite the spirit to come and part-take of the offerings at the festival that will commence tomorrow. The ritual of symbolic clearing of main road leading to Igbaghon shrine and cleansing with euphorbia hirta leaf called 'afo'. Kaolin (orhue) mixed in water will be sprinkled along the streets to remove all pollution (Ogbeiwi, 1996). Going to the river is the introductory rite, on their return inner rituals will begin immediately with the slaughtering of cows. The animal sacrifice enthrone the deity to take control of the festival. What follows will be the different clans organizing themselves in a dancing carnival, wearing carnival clothes and costumes each day to the shrine one after the other lead by the Oka-Ighele, the leader of the Youths in each clan.

The final dance will be all the different communities coming together on the last day lead by their various Oka-Ighele. Then they will meet at one spot before, the Enogie's palace later advancing to the shrine lead by the Enogie, with a big umbrella on top of him. The different groups will move in a grand carnival called 'okulugbe' dance, the heartbeat of these days to the shrine.

Many cows are slaughtered to entertain people. The Odionwere of Ugbugwen clan is in charge of animal slaughtering. The community contribute towards the festival, yams and money. It is an annual festival but it is not performed yearly. The different clans summons their subjects to the head's house either through trumpet, 'oru' or passing message from house to house through a messenger. The sound of trumpet becomes a common feature in the town until the end of the festival.

The different clan heads organize a procession from his house to the shrine with dancing carnival. Procession is an integral part of Igbaghon festival because it is a form of entertainment with symbolic characteristics of the deity. The last Ekaba festival day starts about two pm (2:00 PM) with different clans procession carnival to Enogie palace and around four pm (4:00pm), procession carnival leaves the palace to the shrine. All the clans will mingle together dancing in clockwise direction, it is a colourful occasion.

## **Conclusion**

Ugo philosophy is that of hard work and discipline. These people do not believe in laziness as every person go to farm on daily basis or trade. Farming in the community is communal, individuals own plots of land in the large community approved hectares of land. Few people own private farm lands inherited from their parents. The activities in the village are organized either through clan or particular family lineage system. As R. E. Bradbury mentioned in his work, ancestor worship has been common in Edo traditional life. There are four layers of ancestors, they are as follows: the royal ancestors (Erinwin Enogie), the

elders ancestors (Erinwin edion), the extended family ancestors (Erinwin Egbee) and the immediate family ancestors (Erinwin Owa), it has been ghost worship.

The gods were made by men, out of men who had died and has been incorporated into society by virtue of the status positions they occupied before death. These are human spirits, not natural spirits in the theory of John S. Mbiti. The observation of Bradbury is partially correct, because in the case of 'Igbaghon' she did not attain any special status except the king's failed marriage.

Paula G. Ben-Amos observation was that Olokun worship have been common among Edo women, and young girls were installed a small shrine of the deity for protection and well-being. When they marry, such cults were transferred to the new home. This was an attitude of bringing demonic spirits to dwell among the living. A god has knowledge none other have, dragon or man but the gods are not of the physical world. Traditional religion encourages natural law which discouraged murder, stealing, taking another man's wife and property or dishonour of one's parents.

This festival immortalises Igbaghon deified by the Enogie in the 13th Century AD. The sacrificial rite for bringing Igbaghon home is performed at the river side, cutlass used to slaughter the first animal are dipped into the river. Water symbolizing Igbaghon is brought from the river to the shrine. The deity is honoured by the whole community unlike the different gods and goddesses owned by clans. The festival unities the community and the Enogie solidifies his position through it. The energy generated during the procession and carnival is a sign of the spirit taking possession of the entire community.

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