

The *Odionwere* Rule and Socio-Political Development in Benin up to 1897

By

Dr. Frank Ikponmwosa
Department of History and International Studies,
Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City
frank.ikponmwosa@uniben.edu
Gsm:+2348052209330

Abstract

This paper examines the *Odionwere* rule and socio-political development in Benin. It brings to the fore the role of the *Odionwere* and its impact in the socio-political development of Benin prior to and since the later kingship rule up to 1897. The paper notes that before the evolution of kingship, the *Odionwere* system provided effective political structure which culminated in the the age grades responsible for the administrative and executive functions in villages. Though the study of the Benin has overtime dominated academic research, not much attention have been devoted to its pre-dynasty period by scholars as if Benin existence only begun as a kingdom. This implies that prior to kingship dynasty, there existed the *Odionwere* system which has been somewhat neglected in academic discourse. It is therefore the attempt of this current study to bring this obscure past into our knowledge. While trying to uncover this seemingly neglected aspect of Benin political history, this paper employed both primary materials; such as colonial intelligence reports on Benin, oral interview; and secondary evidence such as text books and journals for analysis and interpretation. The study discovered that the *Odionwere* rule was consensual and devoid of any imposition, hence it was never autocratic in nature. It also found that some of the socio-political structures prevalent in Benin kingship had their roots in the *Odionwere* system. Finally, the study equally found that the *Odionwere* system was assailed by the British following the imposition of colonial rule while its functions were absorbed by the native authority in Benin.

Introduction

Benin implies the people and the land consisting of low-laying plain covered with porous red sand, sometimes referred to as the 'Benin sand', which is its distinguishing feature in Southern Nigeria. Its territories stretched up to the Esan Plateau which is its boundary to the North. On the West Benin is bounded by Eastern Yoruba, on the East by Ika, Urhobo and Itsekiri people while on the South by the Atlantic Ocean.¹ Its total land area is about 8,482 square miles² with a tropical climate characterized by Wet and Dry seasons. Its natural vegetation is tropical rain forest with a

good deal of swamp vegetation in the South and West. This area formed the core of the Benin Kingdom with marked uniformity in culture, social organization, and language with a distinctive village administration under the village head known as *Odionwere* (plural, *Edionwere*). The village heads effectively governed the Benin territories and laid the foundation for the launching of the kingship rule. However, the later development of kingship did not obliterate the *Odionwere* system of administration of villages. Rather, its functions, efficacy and structures were recognized and retained by the Benin kingship as the most suited for the administration of villages. Although both systems later subsisted, the interest of this paper is the *Odionwere* system and socio-political development of Benin before the British conquest and imposition of colonial rule in 1897.

Villages in Benin consist of several families known as *egbee*, who may not necessarily be related by blood and who may not claim descent from the same lineage. They were compact settlements mostly divided into wards or *idumwun*, which were at times separated from one another by small patches of bush.³ Thus, two kinds of village plans existed; in the first type, each ward consisted of a cluster of houses round a central open space of short streets, while in the other type, all the houses in the village were arranged along both sides of a single street. Though both plans were traditional, the latter plan seemed dominant in most villages.⁴

The political history of Benin has received wide attention in academic discourse with emphasis on the power structure, authority and the organisational structure of the monarchy (kingship) in the kingdom. However, prior to the kingship rule and thereafter up to 1897, there existed the *Odionwere* system which has not attracted major attention in academic research. Consequently, the period and place of the *Odionwere* is ignored as if it is inconsequential in history. For example, J.U Egharevba, O. Osemwegie-Ero and U. Usuanlele⁵ commit their respective studies to the evolution, growth and development of the first kingship rule known as the

Ogiso dynasty in Benin. Their studies contain detailed analyses of the foundation of the Benin kingdom, the *Ogiso* rule and the administrative structures instituted while Usualele extended it to the *Oba* dynasty, the later Benin imperialism and the contact with Europe.⁶ Therefore, contrary to these orthodox scholarships, this current study examines the *Odionwere* system which was pivotal to the socio-political development of the Benin villages and also acted as the agent of consolidation and continued existence of the culture and tradition of the people.

Emergence of the *Odionwere* Rule

Benin had different levels of political organization and social interactions. However, at the village level, the administrative system vested the executive, legislative and judicial powers on the eldest male known as *Odionwere*,⁷ assisted by the three most senior adult males who together formed the *Edion ne ene*, meaning the four pillars holding the village. They had the overriding authority to formulate rules and regulation under which all other levels of interaction including family and wards operated. So, prior to the evolution of the kingship rule in about 900 AD,⁸ the Benin villages operated the gerontocratic government and instituted the age grade system headed by the *Odionwere* for the day to day administration of the village. Each *Evbo* (village) was independent and interacted with others villages on friendly basis. For example, friendly and cooperative ties existed between the contiguous villages of Ughoton, Ikpako, Agbatan, Abiala, Evbuode, Evbuorokhuo and Iguelegbon⁹ in the areas of common market and utilization of forest for farming and hunting activities.

Also, in the adjoining plains between the Ikpoba, Isekherhe, and Ogba steams, about 31 village communities therein cooperated and later merged into *Igodomigodo* meaning “Town of Towns” that subsequently metamorphosed into Benin City.¹⁰ This relations between contiguous villages necessitated a new form of socio-political interactions in which the respective village

heads known as *Edionwere* formed an enlarge council known as *Iko Edionwere* (Council of Village Heads) under the headship of the oldest *Odionwere* known as *Okao Edionwere* (First Among Equals). The *Iko Edionwere* did not interfere in the internal affairs of villages but decided on matters of common security and entertained cases of disputes between villages especially on boundaries matters.¹¹ Thus, the independence of villages was jealously guarded by the *Odionwere* and their respective *Edion*. In the same vein, there was minimum interference in village affairs by the King or *Oba* who seemingly had overriding authority over the Benin Kingdom since the advent of kingship rule.

It is often very difficult to give the exact date of the origins of the *Odionwere* system but tradition has it that it is as old as the first generation of Benin villages including but not limited to Ugbague, Errie, Eyanugie, Ughoton, Ugbekun, Ihogbe, Uselu and Ego.¹² In effect, it is the earliest political administrative system that emerged before the kingship rule. The emergence of *Odionwere* appears consensual in nature as it evolved or developed with the consent of the village community (people) and not an imposition or usurpation of any constituted authority. Following the introduction of iron technology and its consequent fabrication of farm implements for tilling the soil,¹³ agricultural products were produced in surplus quantities that resulted in exchanges within and between communities. In addition, part of this surplus was also disposed off through religious worship, festivals and gift-giving.¹⁴

These processes needed to be coordinated by a commonly recognized and accepted personality who must be the most senior, mentally stable male adult and free from contagious disease in the community.¹⁵ In this respect, the people agreed that such male together with the elders, should exercise authority over the village. Therefore, the *Odionwere* became strategically placed (by the community) as the custodian and priest of the ancestors interceding for the people.

The subsequent enthronement of kingship rule did not alter this tradition even though the *Edionwere* became the appointees of the king, they must first and foremost be the oldest males in their respective villages and acceptable to their people.¹⁶

The *Odionwere* possessed the highest political authority in the village, settled disputes between families within the village, and worshipped the village's ancestors, known as *Edion Nikaro*, on behalf of his people. "He presided over the village council, *Iko Odionwere*, where rules were made for the welfare of members of the community, command powerful supernatural sanctions; the repository of village traditions and the recognized authority on customary law".¹⁷ This was *ipso facto* the village head. This could account for the long survival of the system and the co-operation it fostered among the people. Hence the social structure of the *Odionwere* did not become in essence a static hierarchy with a large serf population serving ruling nobility and a king-god.¹⁸ The village administrative structure established by the *Odionwere* had already so advanced and satisfactory that with the emergence of kingship rule, there has been little improvement ever since.

The socio-political organization of the Benin village was dominated by the position of the *Odionwere* who was the supreme religious, civil and judicial authority in the village. Under the system, religion became intertwined with administration as the worship of the village deities by the people implied growth of a common body of beliefs. In this respect, religion assumed a wider political significance in the village as the *Odionwere* was the political leader and the Chief Priest of the village deities. He possessed numerable attendants such as *Odiboevbo* (Village Messenger), *Odibodionwere* (*Odionwere's* Attendant or Messenger) and *Ohen* (Priest) who performed the village rituals for the wellbeing of the people of the village.¹⁹

However, to ensure inclusiveness in village administration and execution of policies, every male was constituted into *Otu* (age grades) Each grade had defined obligations in community's services and each was jealous of its good name, and therefore, controlled and disciplined its erring members.²⁰ The eldest male in every family unit in a village was a member of the *Edion Evbo*, highest age grade that constituted the village council or council of elders for administrative, legislative and judicial matters. It had jurisdiction over all aspects of the village affairs but in a matter of urgent importance concerns or cases of emergency, the *Odionwere* and the three most senior members of the council, *Edion ne ene*, took decisions on behalf of the council of elders. Beneath the *Edion* were, the middle-aged males- the *Ighele*, mostly of the ages 25 – 45 years, headed by *Okaighele*, and the *Iroghae*, who were between 15 and 25 years. They implemented the decisions of the village council and therefore, were kind of the members of the executive arm of the village administration.²¹ They performed the skilled, strenuous and menial communal jobs respectively. In addition, the *Ighele* formed the strong fighting force of the community, arrest of criminal and anyone of doubtful characters and defended the territorial integrity of the community against any attack.

The existence and performance of these grades was as a result of the effective control and regulation by the *Odionwere* thereby enabling him and his council to concentrate on policy-making and judicial adjudication. First the *Odionwere* ensured that peace and tranquility prevailed in his village. He resolved quarrels or disputes and misunderstanding between families peacefully at the village council without disturbing the peace of the village. It should be noted that trivial matters such as quarrels between husband and wife and dispute within families were not brought before the *Odionwere* as they were settled within the family by the head. Conversely, only complicated and serious disputes involving members of different families, or wards, cases of witchcrafts among

others were referred to the *Odionwere* and his village council for settlement.²² Prior to kingship rule, he was the final arbiter in all matters within the village and Osemwegie-Ero aptly captures that the *Odionwere*:

Is also the final judicial authority in the community. The *Odionwere* was vested with a lot of powers including the power to social sanctions against any erring member of the society. Such erring member was usually ostracized and disallowed from entering homes of members of the community (till appropriate fine is paid or reprimanded). The *Odionwere* provided leadership for the community, arbitrated in disputes and saw to the well being of the people.²³

This socio-political authority of the *Odionwere* prevailed and any decision reached by it and his council of elders was final and binding on all within the village. Any difficult individual who acted contrary to the council's conventions was properly sanctioned according to the gravity of the offence. For example, if such an offender was an elder, such punishment included demotion from the highest to a lower grade in the society. Anyone accused of witchcraft was meant to swear by the village deity that it would not be used to retard or destroy the destiny of any members of the village communities. However, if such an accused refused to swear he or she was banished from the village by the council.²⁴

Second, the *Odionwere* ensured that ties of friendship and mutual cooperation existed between his village and neighbouring villages especially in the areas of joint exploitation of farming and hunting territories. The Benin villages being agrarian in nature, it was a common practice for neighbouring communities to farm and carry out their hunting activities within the same forest and hunting territories without rancor. In most cases, everyone knew the boundary of his farming territories. However, where disagreement occurred over the boundary

or boundaries of farming territories between villages, it was amicably resolved by the *Edionwere* of the villages concerned or at enlarged *Iko Edionwere*. Therefore, the *Odionwere* made it possible the settlement of dispute within and between villages rather than resort to force, friction and war to resolve dispute.

But since the advent of kingship, especially the *Oba* dynasty, *Odionwere* ceased to be the final authority in judicial matters. *Oba*'s Council in Benin City became the final authority especially in cases of boundary disputes that could not be resolved between villages' *Edionwere* were normally referred to for final resolution. Several appeals from the villages were held by the council and appeal lay direct through the *Oba*'s representative in the village known as *Onotueyevbo*,²⁵ for final settlement. The *Oba*'s decision on land dispute or any other matters brought before it was the final judgment, hence the saying in Benin that *Egua Oba emwense* (*Oba*'s palace is the final arbiter). The expression stressed the pre-eminent position of the *Oba* in the Benin judicial system. However, in modern times, aggrieved individuals and communities have the right of appeal to, or seek judgment in the constitutionally constituted courts in all cases.

The *Odionwere* equally laid the foundation for the evolution and the subsequent survival of the monarchical tradition in Benin. It entrenched the socio-political pattern which was crystallized under the kingship rule. For example, the *Iko Edionwere* which was an extended administrative arrangement for common issues propped up the ambition for power among *Edionwere* (village heads) which in time perspective finally neglected the gerontocracy principle in favour of achieved attributes.²⁶ It was the leader of this administrative arrangement *Okao Edionwere*, who eventually dominated the council, assumed its headship and acclaimed himself *Ogiso* (Sky King) in about 900 AD.²⁷

Also, the *Edion ne ne* in Benin City which later metamorphosed into the *Uzama n'Ihiron*, the seven *Uzama* (most senior title Chiefs in Benin) became 'king crowners', contrary to popular held view that they were 'king makers' in Benin. This group ensured the survival and continuity of the kingship dynasty following the stress, strains and temporary aberration as a result of the death of *Ogiso Owodo*, the last of the *Ogido* dynasty, without available heir to the throne.²⁸ Consequently, their positions, unlike the other *Edionwere*, were made hereditary by the *Oba Eweka I* of the *Oba* dynasty "because it was, they who sent to Ife to fetch Prince Oranmiyan" in order for the monarchy to be re-installed in Benin.²⁹

In pre-dynastic periods, voluntary services were rendered by different age grades and craftsmen for the sustenance of the *Odionwere* in the village. For example, the *Ighele* mobilized their labour for work in the farm of the *Odionwere* once every farming session to ensure that it was not neglected while he commits his time to attending to several contending village issues. In addition, hunting for games in the forests was common among village farmers who in most times combined farming with hunting activities. Therefore, any farmer or hunter who killed big animals such as *esi oha* (bush pig) within the village forests was customary required to send one of the forelegs to the village head. Furthermore, every craftsman practising his trade within the village recognized the authority of the *Odionwere*. Although the crafts, according to Agbontean, grew and developed under the aegis of the guilds or associations in kingship period,³⁰ there is no doubt that some of them (crafts) such as smithing, hunting, weaving, etc., had their origins in the *Odionwere* period. The age long practice of remitting a share of, or royalty on their products to the kings in the later years actually began during the *Odionwere* rule as he was made the first point of supply of the products of the craftsmen in the village.³¹

These practices were not by compulsion but tacit recognition of the headship of the *Odionwere* and to elicit his prayers of blessing and success in their respective trades.³² In kingship period, it became the function of the people to care for the maintenance of the *Egua Oba* (*the palace of the Oba*). “Every Benin man till now and in the future sees this as an obligation to the Oba”.³³ Consequently, *Edionwere* assumed sources of tributes both in kind and voluntary labour, *ugamwen*, for the services of the *Oba* from their villages. In this regard, annual tributes were collected and remitted by the *Edionwere*, who also mobilized able bodied men though infrequently, for the maintenance of the palace building and wall. This was to ensure that the specific needs of the *Oba* were met for his wellbeing. Hence, the *Oba* on the other hand, never prayed for himself but always to his ancestors for the blessings and wellbeing of his subjects acknowledging that their overall progress will translate to his. The annual tribute system stands out as a measure of control of the villages by the *Oba* since the advent kingship dynasty. Although there was great deal of independence of villages, the *Edionwere* must obtain royal sanction and looked upon the *Oba* as their supreme spiritual and temporal head.

In addition the *Oba* had, and still has the right to create a hereditary village head such as *Enogie* (plural, *Enigie*) or “Duke” usually from members of the royal family to oversee the affairs of village or group of villages. The title of the *Enogie* was hereditary and in a village where it existed, it performed the function of the village head, and not the *Odionwere*, who in effect became second in order. However, in a village such as Ughoton which was centred around the *Olokun* shrine, there existed hereditary priest known as *Ohen-Okun*, who performed the functions of the village head.³⁴ Where both *Ohen* and *Enogie* existed, gradually the distinction between the two became so obscure that the latter title assumed prominence. However, whether the village head was an *Odionwere*, *Enogie* or *Ohen*, he was always subservient to the *Oba*.

Conclusion

The *Odionwere* emerged as the first system of administration of Benin villages before the enthronement of kingship dynasty. The emergence and functioning of the system was not backed by any force yet it was very effective in the administration of all spheres of the village lives being it political, judicial and religions; as its rules and regulations or conventions were willingly obeyed by the village communities. The peoples' allegiance to the *Odionwere's* rule and order could not be unconnected with the fact that it evolved consensually among the people without any force of imposition of one's will. Yet, the system also envisaged the prevailing challenges that the issues of security, boundary disputes and exchanges thrown up were far beyond the control of one village. Therefore, contiguous village heads decided to form an extended system of administration or a sort of national government *Iko Edionwere* to profess solution to matters of common concerns. Thus, the *Odionwere's* socio-political organization of village appeared so effective that at the enthronement of kingship rule, its structures and functions were not jettisoned but retained and empowered as the *Edionwere* were subsequently claimed to be the appointee and representative of the *Oba* in villages.

However by 1897 the system was assailed by the British sequel to the imposition of colonial rule. Hence, the *Odionwere* rule and functions were subsumed by the native council that was established by the British to oversee the administration of Benin Division. Consequently, the *Odionwere* was virtually deprived of all administrative and judicial functions except the unpopular one of collecting tax for the colonial authorities.

Endnotes

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