A Counterfactual Insight of Africa’s Historical Past: 
The Case of Ughievwen Social and Political Institutions of 
Western Delta, Nigeria, c.1800-1939

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Abstract

The paper opines that the underdevelopment of the communities of Contemporary Africa is due mainly to the crisis of governance and poor leadership. Drawing from the case of Ughievwen Social and Political institutions in the pre-colonial times using the methodology of counterfactual approach, the paper explores the importance of history in charting a new direction for the continent. The discussion is in six parts. The first section introduces the discussion by showing the gap between the potentials and the in-roads of the continent since the end of colonialism. The second part examines briefly the geographical and historical background of Ughievwen while the third section examines pre-colonial Ughievwen social and political institutions up to the first half of the twentieth century to show the insights that could be drawn from it with regards to policy-making. The fourth section examines the evolution from kinship to kingship political system in Ughievwen land to demonstrate the internal dynamics of pre-colonial societies. The fifth part discusses aspects of the colonial policies of the British and how it influenced the course of Africa’s history. The concluding section of this paper challenges African historians to re-focus their attention on how to make history relevant in proffering solutions to African developmental challenges.

Keywords: Counterfactuals, Ughievwen, Institutions, Western Delta, Nigeria
Introduction

In the writing of African history, a lot of energy and time have been devoted to explaining ‘what happened’ based on evidences. For the professional historian, such enterprise has been anchored on authenticity and credibility of source materials. This, in itself means that historians are faced with the arduous task of data collection and interpretation. However, in recent times, the point have been emphasized that the writing of history goes beyond analysis of “what happened and why certain events took a particular turn.”

Recent historical scholarship now emphasize “what might have been.” This is the focus of the new strand of interpretation in history that concerns scenarios of epochal events in history. Olukoju has argued that “counterfactuals might also intrude when historians deal with contemporary issues and consider scenarios.” The issue of the challenge of development in Africa is one area where the use of counterfactuals is vital. R.T. Akinyele, quoting Cohen, three years ago avers that “Histories make men wise; poet witty; the mathematics subtle; natural philosophy, deep, moral, grave, logic and rhetoric, able to content.” Unfortunately, Africa with a lot of natural resources vast enough to make life comfortable for its citizens have struggled with one challenge of development or the other. Nigeria for instance, described to be “well ahead of the south East Asian countries of Malaysia and Indonesia which have become the envy of many countries” has also fumbled in many areas of development. Irrespective of reasons that could be adduced for this poor state of affairs, it needs to be stressed that “the relegation of history to the background in national affairs also contributed to the problems.”

Africa’s history in the last decades of the twentieth century have been characterised of crises and clashes among neighbouring states with the result that development in these countries have been halted. While these developments have been argued to have their roots in colonialism, much attention have not been devoted to what could have been the case had colonialism not been introduced to most of these countries. Two illuminating cases in this regard are Sudan (Khartoum) and south Sudan (Juba). The problem in these areas are said to be traceable to “unresolved cultural differences between the North and South Sudan as well as the absence of a defined boundary between the two countries.” If Africa is to come out of the myriad of challenges of underdevelopment, the need to explore ways of analyzing what could ‘have been the case’ by historians is therefore, or paramount importance. Such efforts would in the final analysis, provide alternatives that could assist policy-makers. History must move from the state of antiquarianism to fashioning contemporary solutions to contemporary problems.

It is against the aforesaid background that this paper focuses on Ughievwen social and political institutions of Western Delta, Nigeria, c.1800 – 1939 as a tool of analysis. This transformation of this mini-state in Nigeria, demonstrates and counters the argument that developments in Africa as presented by some European writers was externally-stimulated. The analysis takes cognizance of four major events within the period of study, namely, the
abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, introduction of ‘legitimate’ commerce, colonial rule and policies embarked upon by colonizers by the second half of the twentieth century.

Geographical and Historical Background of Ughievwen Society

Ughievwen society is situated in the rainforest region of Nigeria. The sub-culture area, has Otujeremi as its administrative headquarters. The area occupied by the Ughievwen is bounded on the south and south-East by Okpare, or Ekiagbodo creek; on the west by Gbekebo creek; on the North and North-West by Saba creek in Udu Local Government Area of Delta State, on the North-East by Agbarho clan, and on the East by Ughelli clan. The area lies wholly in the tropics and could be located roughly at 5, 12N and 5, 80E covering a landmass of about 279 square kilometres.

Early history of the area speaks of traditions of origin traced to places like Egypt, Benin, the Niger-Benue confluence area and Oloigbobri, in present day Bayelsa state of Nigeria. However, most discourse by historians of Nigeria extraction tend to emphasise the dislocations caused by the amalgamation exercise of 1914 for the Nigeria state such that there are now volumes of scholarly essays on it. While such efforts are salutary and help to properly position an understanding of Nigeria’s and by extension, Africa’s historical past, there is still the need to look even more backwards because most African communities whether overtly or covertly would still have continued with their natural course of history if colonialism was not introduced. The case of the Ughievwen of Western Delta of Nigeria as would be seen from this paper, demonstrates the past of a people gingered by internal dynamics and thus could have continued even if there was no colonial incursion. The people could have continued to develop on their own.

Ughievwen Social and Political Institutions c.1800 – 1850

By the first half of the nineteenth century, Ughievwen operated a system of government that was anchored on kinship. This system, according to Pippah was one “…in which the natural genius of each native community evolved for themselves.” Powers were decentralized right from the family, lineage or kindred level up to the village, while the basic social institutions were dances and slavery controlled by political authorities like Okpako Orere, Ahware Ovworho, Uwwie and Ewheya. In the kinship structure, the family played a major role. It was made up of the nuclear and extended members. Each extended family was headed by the oldest man in the family (Okpako Orua). The oldest man represented the immediate family in lineage or kindred and village meetings, but women were not allowed to be family heads. This was not strange because as noted by I.M. Okonjo, “women were not involved in the mainstream of decision-making in pre-colonial Nigeria because of the acephalous nature of some communities. Decisions were taken through democratic process and family pronouncements were made by family heads. In fact, in Ughievwen land as in other Urhobo and Izon areas legislative, executive and judicial functions were not regarded as separate functions.
There was also the lineage or kindred. This was made up of a group of related extended families. The size of lineages varied from one village to another. The lineage was headed by the oldest man and his authority was respected by all members of the lineage in all village meetings¹⁸. The lineage maintained law and order among its members and also ensured that decisions taken during village meetings were strictly obeyed by all lineage members. At the village level which was the basic unit of political organization before the introduction of the trade in palm oil and kernels,¹⁹ rules and regulations for public security, welfare and protection from foreign aggression were also made.

Another important feature of the kinship system was the role played by age-grades. The highest grade that could be attained was the grade of Ekpako (plural of Okpako). When a man had passed through the stage of Otu, reached a fairly ripe age and became responsible authority for a small community which could be termed the ‘domestic’ family (as against the larger families that had risen to the dignity of sub-quarters or even quarters), he was admitted into the deliberations of his quarter council, and later to the sub-clan council and clan council. He was then said to be of the Okpako grade. The Ekpako had no “distinctive badge, dress or staff of office,”²⁰ but the head Okpako in the village group council was assisted by an Akpile who reduced the burden of talking in the council for the Otota (spokesman). Decisions of the village group council were transmitted by messengers known as Ukor. Each village group had its own Ikor (plural of Ukor) who were engaged by the council on errands of importance to summon council meetings at the instance of the Otota and brought before the council, persons summoned²¹.

The Awhare Ovworho (Peoples Assembly) on the other hand, was a meeting of all adult males of the village. It was held at the residence of the eldest person in the village (Okpako Orere). Males within the community or village attended and expressed their opinions on issues for deliberation. The population of attendance at such meetings depended on the degree of public interest in the matters to be discussed²². At such meetings, issues were thrown open for free discussion by all present. After issues have been fully discussed, elders representing each of the lineages examined the matter under discussion more closely (referred to as Ume) and arrived at a consensus²³. Such decisions were presented to the Awhare (Assembly) for ratification. Inputs of the younger members of the village were also recognized. This group was known as Uwvie. These were groupings of young men of the village or community on the basis of age. Young men born around the same year or within two years formed an age-grade. The age-grades which were between twenty-one and forty years were responsible for the enforcement and execution of decisions taken by Ekpako. Sometimes, these age-grades took part in law-making and constituted themselves into vigilante groups to protect lives and property of people within the community²⁴.

Young women were also important in the kinship arrangement except that as earlier said they did not take decisions but could protest reported mischief to the Okpako orere to register their grievances²⁵. There were two groups of women associations – daughters of the village
known as Otu-Emete and married women of the village called Ewheya. Meetings of the Otu-Emete were held in the compound of the Okpako Emete, while those of the Ewheya were held in the compound of the Okpako-Ewheya who also presided in such meetings.

Apart from the political institutions discussed above, dances and slavery were also vital institutions of pre-colonial Ughievwen society. Some of these dances which would hereafter be discussed, in addition to slavery, formed an important aspect of Ughievwen society before the advent of colonialism. The analysis made excludes other cultural aspects of the people to avoid conceptual confusion because institutions like marriages, burial rites and chieftaincy are traditional institutions. Prominent among the dances for which the Ughievwen were famed were Udje, Ikenike, Ovenren and Egbada. These institutions went through transition that was dictated by the inter-group relations with Ughievwen immediate neighbours and the environment the people found themselves. From Udje dance, which was indigenous to them, others like Ikenike and Ovenren evolved, followed by Gbogoniyan and later Igbe Emete. These institutions never started once, they came in turns. They added glamour to their ceremonies such as burials, marriages and festivals, the most prominent being the Ogba-urhie festival. However, it was the trade in slaves (Eki-Evien) that formed the basis of the economy before the area was occupied by the British towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

By the early decades of the nineteenth century, slavery was abolished by Britain. For Ughievwen, this was a big ‘blow’ and the ‘legitimate’ trade that replaced it meant that the people had to adjust. They readily adjusted to the situation without crisis but in this adjustment they made forays in other parts of the country like Ikale land in present day Ondo State of Nigeria where they became major participants in palm-oil production. The impact of the abolition of the slave trade and the introduction of ‘legitimate’ commerce in the nineteenth century has elicited debates among scholars with the most recent being the conference held at the University of Stirling in 1993.

The result of the conference is published in a volume edited by Robin Law. From the papers presented at the conference, the position maintained by scholars like Kristin Mann, Susan Martin and A.G. Hopkins aptly captured the situation in Ughievwenland. Kristin Mann examined slave labour and the owner-slave relationship in coastal West Africa during the transitional period and concludes that the transition did not have the widespread liberating effect, hitherto predicted by some European observers and claims that slave owners maintained the smooth functioning of their economy. Susan Martin, on the other hand, examined local labour issue with emphasis on slaves and Igbo women. While recognizing the fact that women did most of the work in palm oil production in Igbo land, Martin concludes that the changes that occurred were primarily driven by local demographic, ecological and commercial contacts, that did not amount to a break with the past or the beginning of a new period in economic history. A.G. Hopkins on his part contends that the transition experienced by West Africa was part of a larger modernization plan by Britain after 1815 and pursued until decolonization.
Evolution of Kingship Political System in Ughievwen, c.1850 – 1900

Two major factors that altered the political system of Ughievwen society was the abolition of the slave trade and the new trade in palm oil.\(^{34}\) This is understandable when one recalls that before then, the trade in slaves was one profitable business the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, in addition to farming and fishing from which the Urhobo in the hinterland supplied agricultural products to the Itsekiri.\(^{35}\) The new trade in palm oil had two basic features, namely, the ‘trust’ system and the need for participants to have fleets of canoes, which according to Obaro Ikime, “were manned by slaves.”\(^{36}\)

For Ughievwen society, the change from kinship system to kingship system have been recently argued to have commenced around the beginning of the eighteenth century and the last ruler was on the throne about forty years before the Intelligence Report on the area was compiled by S.E. Johnson in 1932.\(^{37}\) The transition from kinship to kingship as noted by F.E. Oghi, in the second half of the nineteenth century, “was propelled by the emergence of a new class of merchants who desired to maintain their status in the Eki-Evien (slave trade).”\(^{38}\) Class struggle was thus a propellant to change and thereby confirms the idea by Lenin about five decades ago, that “where, when and in so far as class antagonism objectively could not be reconciled... [ ] changes are bound to occur.”\(^{39}\)

It is important to stress that the change from kinship to kingship political system in Ughievwen society was not propelled by an external authority. Rather, they were internal developments that were handed by the people without compounding the cohesion of the society as it were, but with the advent of the British many things changed. Thus, as in other parts of southern Nigeria, penetration and conquest of the Ughievwen society by the British collapsed the traditional framework of government. This collapse of traditional framework of government in African states as noted by O.B. Osadolor, resulted “in the disruption of the existing well-defined class and functional relationship in the indigenous political system.”\(^{40}\)

Aspect of Colonial Economic Policies and the African Developmental Challenges

European presence in Africa especially after the Berlin conference of 1884/85 witnessed the beginning of official foundations for economic exploitation of Africans. This according to R.F. Betts, was founded on the belief “that the world is divided into have and have-not countries, the developed countries work to keep the less developed countries weak or poor in order to exploit them”.\(^{41}\) However, it need to be noted that most African states were not static as their internal dynamics enabled them to cope with situations. As noted by S.O. Ehiabhi, “the histories of Egypt, Ghana, Mali, Ife and Benin are a few examples of societies that had high levels of civilizations before Europeans contact.”\(^{42}\) The mini-state of Ughievwen which this paper focused is another example.
There is no doubt that colonizers made attempts to improve on the situation they met in Africa, but such efforts were designed to achieve the economic goals of the colonial powers. For example, C.L.R. James noted that:

…[ ] by 1935, the total capital investments from abroad amounted to $6,111,000,000. Of this amount, 77 percent of $4,705,000,000 is in British territories and British investors have supplied 75 percent of this total. In trade it is the same. In 1935 the total trade of British territories formed 85 percent of the total trade in Africa. In 1907 it was 84 percent and for years it has never fallen below 80 percent.43

C.L.R. James went further to add that “capital alone cannot expect to flourish if this African native remains a slave.”44 This underscores the point that whatever measures undertaken by colonial powers in Africa, were designed to create a favourable atmosphere for the actualization of the coloniser’s interests. The undermentioned statement in a letter written by C.C. Wolley, the then Chief Secretary to the Government on the 8th of January, 1939 in Nigeria captures the point thus:

…[ ] it is, I suggest, no exaggeration to say that until a comparatively short time ago any direct financial assistance given by His Majesty’s Government to a colony was invariably given not for purpose of development, but in order to make up for unavoidable deficiencies in the revenue of the colony concerned…45

By the close of the twentieth century therefore, colonialism came to be perceived as a device by which “…[ ] the developed countries work to keep the less developed countries week or poor in order to exploit them.”46 Yet, some scholars have argued that developments and civilizations in Africa owed largely to the coming of the Europeans. Oliver Davies, P. Duignan and L.H. Gann are good examples. Oliver Davies, for instance, did not see anything exciting about West Africa and even contends that the activities of explorers like Henry the Navigator, was a major harbinger of development to West Africa sub-regions and claimed that even the early explorers “…[ ] had no desire to settle in West Africa…”47 P. Duignan and L.H. Gann, on their part, painted a bad picture of Africans when they claimed that “…[ ] local wars, civil wars, slave raiding and various forms of servitude were endemic over wide areas before the imposition of European rule.”48 These views are laughable when one considers the fact that the people so-described not only served as the source of labour during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, but also had fruitful trade transactions with the Europeans without harassment. This was a misrepresentation for Africans. As recently argued by S.O. Ehiabhi,

Pre-colonial Political Administrative Structure was holistic in nature …the pre-colonial African administrative resourcefulness engendered peace as the political actors were still the same forces that determined moral and economic matters…49

Even though colonial authorities introduced economic policies such as the use of currencies because existing medium of exchange lacked universal acceptance, such measures were done to facilitate trade.50 In the area of religion, S.O. Ehiabhi has noted that religious
worship in pre-colonial Africa was not considered a private matter, but public and that in that wise, spiritual ‘salvation’ was not personal but communal.”

Like Uromi area of Edo State of Nigeria where the Eghonugbele, Igene and Edion played vital roles in cleaning and military protection of communities, the Uwvie and Ekpako in Ughievwen society also performed similar functions. The subsequent penetration and conquest of Ughievwen society at the beginning of the twentieth century by the British meant a takeover of the people’s institutions as they were structurally re-designed to attain the coloniser’s economic objectives, For example, Ughievwen land was affiliated to the Native Court at Okpare and later extended to surrounding areas like Otokutu and Udu. The Okpare Native Court up till 1907 had jurisdiction over Ughievwen land, Ughelli, Olomu, Aghassah, Iyede, Uwhere, Emevor, Owhe and Ewu area.

Conclusion

The challenges facing the continent of Africa are myriad. Of these, leadership and governance problems seem to have taken the centre-stage. While it is fashionable in some cases to lay all the blame for the calamities of post-independence Africa at the doorstep of the colonial masters – and rightly so, in many respects – there is need to have a ‘re-think’ on the indigenous or internal forces that kept African societies intact before the coming of the Europeans. Recent developments in the Africa continent seem to indicate that after all, the leadership ‘headache’ would soon be a thing of the past when one considers the fact that a ‘sitting’ government can now concede defeat to the opposition as was demonstrated in the Presidential Election held in Nigeria on March 28, 2015. Otherwise, allusion were made to wrong decisions taken before and after independence that betrayed the intolerance, vanity, egotism and pettiness of post-independence Nigerian leaders.

For the Nigeria state and by extension the Africa continent as a whole, historical studies should begin to emphasise administrative history and not just ‘what happened’ but energies should be concentrated on ‘what could have been’ which is the thrust of counterfactuals. The justification for the study of Administrative History, lies in the lessons that could be derived to solve contemporary problems. J.C.N. Raadschelders has noted that a persistent and thoughtful study of the past “provide potential clues, not definitive answers, to understanding, not explaining present challenges and potential solutions to current problems.”

A counterfactual analysis of Africa’s historical past would help to provide the clue for solution to Africa’s developmental challenges. For Ughievwen society which was the focus of this paper, the transformation of its institutions was internally-induced before the coming of the British. An understanding of the cohesion that existed then is vital to present day leaders to draw from.
Endnotes


5. Ibid.


10. The town is the current headquarters of Ughelli South Local Government Area, Delta State, Nigeria.


15. Interview with James Yagbologha, 78years, retired trader, Otujeremi, Ughelli South Local Government Area, Delta State, Nigeria, 24/2/2011.


17. Interview with James Dase, Udubvo-Aw worho Quarters, 66 years, trader, Otujeremi, 24/2/2011.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.


21. Ibid.
27. Interview with Madam Usen Okpohie, traditionalist, 110 years, *Okpako Ewhey*, Owawha Village, 14/6/2008.
44. Ibid.
49. S.O. Ehiabhi, *op.cit*, p. 44.
53. F.E. Oghi, *op. cit, p.6*
54. In March 2014, the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, was suspended by the President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. The exercise as it were, confirmed that leadership deficit remains a Nigerian nightmare fifty-four years after independence. See *The Guardian*, 5 March 2014, p. 5.
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