

## THE BENIN FACTOR IN THE WEST NIGER IGBO HISTORY: THE EXAMPLE OF UBULU-UKWU\*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This micro study of the west Niger Igbo kingdom of Ubulu-Ukwu adopts the historical method of description and analysis to critically examine the much generalized influence of the great Benin Kingdom on its proximate and distant neighbours. It posits the Nri-Awka area as the source of the initial stimulus for peopling, kingship and title systems of Ubulu-Ukwu. Relations with Benin and the latter's attendant influence were stimulated by Benin's needs for the vital services for which Ubulu-Ukwu was famous. These included the security of Benin coronations and the mystical protection of the Oba's throne, state regalia and the magical paraphernalia necessary for his vitality and rejuvenation. Ubulu-Ukwu, being dynamic, through adaptation and emulation, effected adjustments to its monarchical system. Thus the Benin factor in political and cultural developments at Ubulu-Ukwu was not all encompassing, nor the result of conquest and imposition, despite a mid-18th century war between the two polities.*

**KEYWORDS:** Benin kingdom, intergroup relations, Nigerian history, Nri-Awka area, state formation, west Niger Igbo

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### INTRODUCTION

The Benin factor in the history of the Igbo-speaking people west of the Niger, a topical issue in the study of pre-colonial intergroup relations in Nigeria, is investigated in a micro study of the Kingdom of Ubulu-Ukwu. At issue is the fundamental question of cultural identity which is multifaceted, and may be gleaned from the hints provided by the people in their traditions of origins. The latter is, however, all encompassing, including the dawn of group consciousness in relation to a territory, as well as the evolution of distinct socio-political institutions and fundamental constitutional change (Atanda, 1980:63-76). Pre-colonial Nigerian communities preserved these fundamental developments in myths, which are subject to diverse interpretations. Their understanding and appreciation thus demands that the dynamics which produce and modify them be placed in their contexts from which they cannot be detached (Bradbury, cited in Afigbo, 1990:8).

Such has not been the case with the west Niger Igbo whose history is presented as "a kind of footnote to the history of the much-celebrated Benin empire". The situation was brought about by the obsession of British colonial rulers with building "up large paramountcies at the local level," as a means of implementing the indirect rule policy in the 1930s. They thereby reduced adjoining small scale societies "to dependencies of those empires" that were their neighbours. Thus every development in the small scale societies was interpreted "as derivations from the political systems of the said empires", which became the sole prism from which to explain "the origins and migrations of their peoples, their political structure and dynamics," indeed "their overall cultural heritage" (Afigbo, 1987:13).

It is thus necessary to study the people with material provided by them in the context of their cultural experience and fundamental constitutional change which identify them as a socio-political, territorial unit. Where did they come from? How did they evolve their political institutions? What was the nature of their relationship with Benin, and how did the relationship impact both societies? How much weight can be attached to extant Benin thesis which derives every achievement of note, including group consciousness of the affected group, from Benin? This paper attempts answers to these questions in a micro study of the Kingdom of Ubulu-Ukwu.

The influence of the great Kingdom of Benin on state formation and evolution of the monarchical system of government among the Igbo-speaking people west of the Niger, who now identify themselves as Anioma, has been the subject of scholarly debates and controversies. The latter were ignited and sustained by Jacob Egharevba. Probably under British influence he had published his work on Benin in 1934, which in 1968, boasted of a fourth edition, with a reprint in 1991. At least the fourth edition, published in 1953 clearly incorporated revisions, and new perspectives, including the claim of Egyptian origin for Benin (Usuanlele and Falola, 1994:307, 316). As it is well known, this small but influential book has stirred controversies by ascribing Benin origins not only to all the early Igbo-speaking people and their neighbours, west of the Niger, but also to their rulers who are claimed to have been invested in or simply dispatched from Benin to rule over the affected communities (Egharevba, 1968:6). But if Egharevba wrote as a non-professional, the same cannot be said of professional historians, Europeans and Africans alike, who got bitten by his bug of one-sided edification and glorification of Benin at the expense of other communities and peoples. Afigbo(1981) characterizes such exaggerated Benin grand achievements as presented by Egharevba as a mirage. Ikime (2006) further criticizes other Benin writers who wrote “legend rather than history,” but uncritically propagated by European scholars without consulting sources outside Benin kingdom. He thus revises his earlier positions with respect to the origins of peoples in the light of new evidence. Also revised is his “earlier position which sought to derive” the Isoko and Urhobo “title of *ovie* from the Benin *ogie*”, given “that nothing stops a people from developing their own socio-political institutions *in situ*” (63-67, 75).

It would appear, however, that for historians of Anioma extraction, Afigbo’s criticisms and Ikime’s revision have had little impact. Thus, for instance, Ohadike(1994), on one hand, talks about a first era marked “by the reproduction of the basic Igbo institutions in Anioma”. On the other hand, he recognizes a second period, about 1500-1750, characterized by “Benin expansion and Anioma resistance”, which culminated in “the spread of the Igbo kingship system based on the *ozo* title, and the Edo political system based on *obishop*”. To him, the Anioma shared boundaries with the large Benin and Igala kingdoms, yet they merely built small chiefdoms at Agbor, Ubulu-Ukwu, Issele-Ukwu and Ogwashi-Ukwu, and “never cared to build large kingdoms themselves, but organized themselves in small scale republics, ruled by their elders in association with titled chiefs...their political institutions remained unchanged...” In fact, he asserts that the rise of the Benin empire in the 15th and 16th centuries “resulted in the introduction and emulation of Benin political institutions in the forms of title systems”, and rise of “compact villages and towns which they based on war-readiness”( xvii-xix). Nwaezeigwe, relying solely on Egharevba, echoes similar sentiments, when he writes about the contact of the Igbo, west of the Niger “with the Benin kingdom with its consequent kingship system” (201).

Implicit in these generalizations of Ohadike and Nwaezeigwe is a resurrection and reaffirmation of the exaggerated influence of Benin on west Niger Igbo political evolution. Part of the reason for this is that they tended to emphasize panoramic surveys, not derived from in-depth investigations of the individual communities that constitute the Anioma area, or to simply accept Egharevba's assertions previously mortally assailed by Afigbo and Ikime. For instance, Ohadike discusses Ubulu-Ukwu before 1750 in only two paragraphs, while Nwaezeigwe, focusing on the Nri as intrusive elements from Igala, devotes no attention whatsoever to the Anioma to back his assertion. In fact, Ohadike(1994) is puzzled by "the manner by which Benin developed from a mini-state into a large empire" (24, 30). This sharply contrasts with the protest against the tendency by scholars to celebrate "the myth that essential African history must be written around, and in terms of, the grand achievements and at times the grand failures of large political agglomerations usually known as empires and kingdoms" (Afigbo, cited in Ikime,2006:75-76). Even if the oral traditions of the affected people lay claims to Benin provenance of their title institutions or investitures of their Obi in Benin, they need not be taken at their face value without detailed researches to provide the necessary material for a broader appraisal of the history of the community in question vis-à-vis Benin's claims of imperial dominion (Ikime, 2006:79). In fact, as Afigbo (1980) aptly observes, the need to collect and critically evaluate all surviving traditions and evidence related to determining the exact limits of the Benin empire "in all the communities concerned" still subsists, given that "So far only the Edo side of the story has been told"(84)

Against this background, this micro study sets out with the objective of contributing to the debate and expanding the frontiers of knowledge of the Benin factor in the history of the Anioma people. It interrogates material from Ubulu-Ukwu and related communities, to illustrate the limits of influence of a mega state on its mini counterpart. It adopts the historical method of critical analysis within a chronological framework to show that kingship institution in Ubulu-Ukwu was evolved before contact with Benin, and that, in spite of claims in Ubulu-Ukwu traditions of Benin origins, the evidence conclusively suggests that the original impetus for the establishment of a monarchy at Ubulu-Ukwu came not from Benin but from the Nri-Awka area. It further seeks to bring to the fore the fact that Ubulu-Ukwu relations with Benin were at the instance of the latter, based on a felt need to tap from the mystical and medicinal prowess for which Ubulu-Ukwu was renowned. Besides, exchange of diplomatic visits and contributions to the success of Benin coronations is acknowledged on both sides. Thus the study emphasizes the need in the study of Benin's relations with its west Niger Igbo neighbours not to focus only on the famed Benin military prowess and conquests, but also on the mutually beneficial nature of the relationships.

### **The Monarchy at Ubulu-Ukwu**

Ubulu- Ukwu, an agrarian, Igbo-speaking community, west of the Niger, is currently grouped in the Aniocha South Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. It is located about eleven kilometres west of Ogwashi-Ukwu, the local government headquarters. It is classified by Forde and Jones(1950) under Northern Ika( 47), and is situated about 90 kilometres east of Benin City. Located between latitudes 6<sup>0</sup> and 6<sup>0</sup> 30' east of the Equator and longitudes 6<sup>0</sup> and 7<sup>0</sup> 30'north of the Greenwich Meridian, Ubulu-Ukwu is generally low-lying, undulating at the centre and nowhere rises beyond about 2,789 metres above sea level. The 1963 census estimated the population of the community at 14,630(Mordi, 1982: 1-2), casting doubts on the 17,568 population estimate from the 1991 census, which projected a population of 20,026 for

the community by 1996(Emefiene, 2006: 1), given that Spencer who visited Ubulu-Ukwu in 1878 had estimated its population at about 10,000(Cited in Isichei,1977: 269).

The origin of the monarchy at Ubulu-Ukwu is tied by oral traditions to Ezemu, who is also presented as its eponymous founder. Recently, there has been an attempt, probably under the influence of Egharevba's account which traces Benin to Ile Ife after their alleged migration from Egypt and Sudan, to trace Ubulu-Ukwu origins to the Middle East, Ile Ife and Benin. Addressing Oba Erediauwa of Benin during his visit to the Ubulu-Ukwu palace in 1982, Obi Ofulue II of Ubulu-Ukwu had asserted that "It is well-known,...that, our people, and yours (the Bini), like most people in Nigeria, migrated from the Middle East (sic)". In the course of their migration, they allegedly settled in Ife, before setting off with the founders of the Eweka dynasty of Benin to settle in Benin. It was from Benin that they migrated to Ubulu-Ukwu in the aftermath of the disturbances that heralded Oba Ewuare's rise to power. To him, therefore, "we came from Benin" (Cited in Mordi, 1982: 6). Historians have dismissed the Middle Eastern or Asiatic origin claimed by many West African Negro groups, including the Igbo as untenable (Afigbo, 1980; Ikime, 2006). Similarly, Shaw (1980) admonishes that "Nigeria possesses her own glories and needs no borrowed light from other countries..." (36). About the claim of having settled in Ile Ife, it has been observed that "if peoples could plausibly claim to have resided in, or even just passed through Ife during their migrations to their present locations, they could thereby gain significant elevation of social and political status" (Stevens, cited in Mordi, 1982: 10).

The account generally accepted at Ubulu-Ukwu states that Ezemu and his brother Obodo left Afor, their "original home"(NAI Ben Prof. File No. 4/3/8, 21), in the present Ndokwa East Local Government Area of Delta State, to settle initially at Ubulu-Unor before Ezemu founded Ubulu-Ukwu. A later variant of this tradition adds Alibo, Aniga and Inwagwe, to the list of siblings who migrated, leaving behind their father Kwuye. The Obodo -led group under the mystical direction of Ezemu who was a hunter, herbalist and mystic had initially settled at Ubulu- Unor. From this landlocked settlement, without natural water resources, Ezemu explored further afield amidst a brewing crisis between him and Obodo over the ownership of the primary settlement. He, consequently, founded the more naturally endowed secondary settlement of Ubulu-Ukwu. Ezemu is said to have met earlier settlers at the present site of Ubulu-Ukwu who had lived in relative isolation. Among these could be mentioned Okpuzo, from Ikem in the present Anambra State and Eshene Enweiwe at Isho( or *Anisho*, land of anxiety, so named to reflect Ezemu's shock and escalated fear at finding Okpuzo, a palm wine tapper atop a palm tree), and Anugwe, a farmer, claimed to have migrated from Benin in the aftermath of a miscarried military expedition. The most prominent of the early settlers, however, was Ekei Agwu Aneshe, the Eze or king of Ani Ekei, who is believed to have been a blacksmith, probably from Awka or Agukwu Nri. He had established his kingdom at the present Udo Quarters, opposite the present Ubulu -Ukwu royal cemetery (*inyene Eze*), and a stone throw from the present royal palace, before Ezemu's arrival.

A variant of Ubulu-Ukwu traditions of origin maintains that Anugwe, who preceded Ezemu at Ubulu-Ukwu had migrated from Benin as part of the Oba's military contingent, in pursuit of a fleeing rebel group. The soldiers who could not subdue the rebels are said to have retreated and settled at the present site of Ubulu-Ukwu which they had found attractive due to the availability of abundant acres of cultivable land. They had subsequently intimated the Oba of their intention to retain the settlement, as a military outpost to safeguard the eastern limits of the empire. It is said that the Oba, who decorated Anugwe with a fish- eagle feather (*abuba ugo*) and a ram's

horn (*otulaka*), his staff of office had proposed to crown him as the head of the new settlement, and provide him with the instruments of office at a future date. Ezemu subsequently proposed to Ekei, Anugwe, Okpuzo and Eshene in turn that they should all visit the Oba to appoint one of them the king of the growing community which would incorporate their separate settlements. All had declined; Anugwe due to his commitment to yam cultivation and Ekei for the fear that games caught by his traps would decay before he returned from Benin. The latter two had declined due to their engagements with palm wine tapping and hunting, respectively.

Ezemu is said to have consequently undertaken a solo trip to the Benin royal palace, where an unnamed Oba invested him as the *eze* or king of Ubulu-Ukwu. The Oba invested him with the instruments of power and authority, namely the sword of state (*ada*) and the sceptre (*abani*) as his staff and paraphernalia of office. The Oba is said to have given him a cutlass, symbolizing the yam spirit, *Fejioku* to be handed to Anugwe on his return to Ubulu-Ukwu. He thereby conferred on Anugwe the title of *eze ji*, or chief yam farmer. The title would empower Anugwe to sacrifice to the yam cult, *Fejioku eshumeshu*. Ezemu is said to have been so scared of Ekei that he offered him his daughter Ozim in marriage, thereby laying the foundation of a successor dynasty (Mordi, 1982:20-33).

These traditions call for some scrutiny. First, Ezemu, either alone or with his band of later immigrants did not settle in or found a previously unoccupied territory. From the accounts, he was the last of the immigrants, but went the extra mile of negotiating to be accepted and integrated into an already well established agrarian community by its early settlers. Nor did he impose himself on the community by force of arms or threat of its use. Two, the community already had a kingship institution, in fact, was a kingdom with the seat of power at Ani Ekei, where the king resided. The details of the history of the early kingdom are lost to antiquity, given that the community was pre-literate. Echoes of the early kingdom of Ekei, however, reverberate at Abbi. The first son of Ekei (Okpala) named Ogwezi, is named among its early settlers. He had been banished by his father for a grievous infraction against the high moral code of the community. A variant of Abbi tradition records that Ogwezi, who Hubbard(1948) presents as the founder and first Obi of the kingdom of Aboh(75), had received initial shelter from the Obi of Aboh before falling out of favour over some disagreements. He had consequently migrated to Abbi, in the present Ndokwa West Local Government Area of Delta State. There, he settled among the initial settlers, namely Amacha from the Achalla subgroup of Igbo-Adegbe or the marshy lower Omambala river basin. The river basin is reputed to have served as a transit settlement of the Umunri of Akamkpisi-Nri in the Nri-Awka area (Nwaezeigwe 75), and Ewolokpo from Benin. Initial difficulties with Ewolokpo had forced him to relocate to Orogun where his people were exposed to much insecurity. He is said to have been reintegrated into Abbi, where he is regarded as “the father of the people of Okwelle” (Owetemu, 1995: 8-12), Abbi which had been founded later by his descendants.

It is thus reasonable to suggest, if the reference to the Obi of Aboh is anything to go by, that Ogwezi could not have left Aboh for Abbi before the 16th century when the kingdom of Aboh is believed to have been established. Given the elective nature of the Aboh monarchy, with its attendant succession crises, it is easy to understand how an immigrant with a royal background could fall out of favour if he found himself on the losing side of contestants for the throne. It is instructive that Umuogwezi (descendants of Ogwezi) is one of the four villages of Aboh, in which both members of the royal clan live side by side with their non-royal counterparts (Ijoma, 1983: 37). In effect, it is also reasonable to suggest that the Ekei dynasty at Ubulu-Ukwu which predated Ezemu was well established before, and continued to exercise some influence up to

the 16th century. Ohadike (1994) suggests that population movements of Igbo men and women across the Niger “to occupy some inviting sites on the west bank of the river” occurred in the 9th century A.D. (15).

Thus, by at least the 10th century A.D. the first monarchical experiment at Ubulu-Ukwu could have been instituted by Ekei as the king of Ani Ekei, or the Kingdom of Ekei. It follows that the Ogwezi of Ani Ekei whose descendants founded Okwelle was not the direct first son of Ekei. He was most probably the heir apparent of the Ekei dynasty. He would have been disqualified for the throne and banished for some capital offence, thereby generating political instability. Ezemu could have arrived at the present site of Ubulu-Ukwu during this period of crisis and transition and, through diplomatic intrigue, fused with the crumbling monarchical order to institute a new order from the old. What the Ubulu-Ukwu tradition remembers more easily is thus the advent of the newest and most recent immigrant Ezemu, who probably founded a new dynasty. The constitutional change is associated by tradition with the beginnings of Ubulu-Ukwu and its monarchical institution. Ryder (cited in Mordi, 1982), in his study of Benin, has also observed the tendency for much ink to be “squandered on the vexed question of the origins of peoples and their rulers, often enough without even making a clear distinction between the two” (5). It is, therefore, important to treat the claims of some Ubulu-Ukwu traditions to Benin ancestry for both the larger population and the monarchy with a pinch of salt. Obviously, a lot of such claims are mechanisms by which oral traditions frequently re-crystallize themselves to accommodate changing vicissitudes of community life experience and reflect new and current realities (Dike & Ajayi, cited in Mordi, 2002:126).

Ohadike (1994) suggests that Obodoigbo was “the original village” of Afor (26). Obodoigbo or Ogbedigbo is believed to have been founded as the oldest Afor settlement before the 13th century by Ezekpeshi who had migrated from Akamkpisi-Nri, one of the three major villages of Nri. Later Benin immigrants led by Esumei Ukwu, son of Oba Ozolua (c.1481-1504), are said to have founded towns, including Aboh and Afor (Ijoma, 1983: 36). Hubbard (1948), however, attributes the migration to the period of Oba Esigie (c.1504-1550), and specifically lists Obetim (199), a lineage of Afor as one of the communities founded by the Benin group. A source at Ubulu-Unor asserts that Etim Uku, reputed to be the founder of Obetim, had “married Iye, a woman from Ubulu-Ukwu”, and that the “off springs of this marriage are the descendants of the present people of Obetim, one of the major towns in Afo clan”, which has a “maternal relationship with Ubulu-Ukwu” (Emefiene, 2006: 28). These later immigrants in the 15th/16th century, probably precipitated the displacement of some earlier settled groups, thereby triggering the Ubulu movements which Onwuejeogwu (1987) dates to the 15th/16th century (31).

It is important to emphasize that Ubulu-Ukwu oral traditions unanimously agree that side by side with the conferment of the title of *eze* on Ezemu in Benin was the approval of the *eze ji* title for Anugwe. The latter title is said to have been symbolized with a cutlass, symbol of *ifejioku*, the yam spirit. This account, needless to stress, is suspect. Such a title could not have been conferred in Benin. In fact, it was only the Igbo who regarded yam, which occupied a preeminent place in their socio-economic life, as the king of crops. Some Igbo communities conferred the yam title, *eze ji* which commanded great prestige, on successful yam farmers, venerated the yam spirit, *ifejioku*, or *ife joku* or *aha njoku*, or *ahiajoku*, which was invoked during the rites associated with conferment of the *eze ji* title, and celebrated new yam festivals (Uchendu, 1965: 91, 98-99; Okpoko & Oguagha, 1993: 121; Onwuejeogwu, 1987: 91, 98-99). In particular, Onwuejeogwu (1972) is emphatic that it was the Nri who “transformed

instruments of naked force... into ritual objects”, including “cutlasses as objects of yam cult (ifejioku)”(50).Nri priests were also reputed to have exercised their ritual influence and prerogative in and beyond the Igbo culture area, crowning kings, making yam medicine, cleansing abominations, controlling the agricultural calendar, and above all their kings, as recorded in an intelligence report, “crowned the kings of Benin and generally presided over all the religious observances of surrounding peoples”(Afigbo, 1981b: 60).It might be necessary to caution too, as Nwaezeigwe emphasizes, that it was only the Akamkpisi-Nri and their Agukwu-Nri counterparts , including the Oraeri and Enugwu-Ukwu , not the Nri as a group ,that “acquired the business of cleansing abominations and related ritual activities”(91) .

### **Developments in the Monarchy at Ubulu-Ukwu: Evaluating the Benin Factor**

It suffices to note at this point that the Nri and, indeed, Igbo-speaking people emphasized and utilized some specific insignia of office (*ofa*), made from a branch of the *Detarium elastica* tree. It was usually in the custody of the *okpala* or *okpara*, who wielded it as the oldest male member of a lineage and a ritual figure as the compound (*ezi, obi*) or lineage head. His authority was recognized by members of the lineage for whom he offered sacrifice to the earth goddess (*Ala, Ana* or *Ani, Ali*) for their overall welfare and, in return, received their obedience(Uchendu, 1965: 39-41) . Of equal importance was the short wooden-grafted iron spear (*Otonsi*), which served as staff of peace, used for cleansing abominations and staff of political office exclusive to *Ozo* and related title holders (*Alo*). There was also the special iron spear (*Ngoagiliga*), which *Ozo* title holders used as their staff and one of their paraphernalia of office. The *Ozo* title enjoyed varied levels of status in the Igbo title system, depending on the community; it was the highest title in some and the lowest in others. The Isa-Ekwu was also in the *Ozo* title category, and tended to be more popular because it was more affordable and easily accessible in some parts of Igbo land(Nwaezeigwe,126-135,166), including Ubulu-Ukwu where it attracted much prestige and was known as *Ngwu Ekwu*. Among the west Niger Igbo titleholders olinzene/olinzele, the apex title was the *Eze (Nze)* as was the case at Nri, essentially a priest king, or *Obi*. The latter was diffuse in some communities but restricted to one person in his life time in only one, royal family at Ubulu-Ukwu, and a few other towns, where until recently he combined priestly with political authority.

It is the institution of *Obi*, the associated staff of office and accompanying titles conferred on selected individuals that are said to be foreign, of Benin provenance in the west Niger Igbo area. The evidence suggests, however, that the concept of kingship could not have been alien to Igbo land or of foreign provenance. Indeed, the existence of monarchy in Igbo land is primeval, given that every name and expression about the office is Igbo, such as *Eze, Obi*, for instance. So too are the insignia and paraphernalia of the king, such as the crown( *okpu eze*), ornate ceremonial hat(*okpu ntutu*), state sword (*abani eze*), ceremonial fan( *azuzu*), the royal throne (*oche* or *ukpo eze*), sceptre (*ogbanchi eze*), palace (*obi* or *iba eze, ogwa obi*), kingdom (*anieze*), to name but a few. In fact, in light of the Igbo Ukwu excavations dated to the ninth century A.D. it is reasonable to suggest that “the direction of flow of regal influence may have been the reverse :from Igbo Ukwu to Igala or Benin”, and that any influence from Benin must have been a later development, “ the result of... backlash in... migrations”(Ifemesia, 197:49-53). The royal beaded collar (*odigba*) may have been one such later development as well as the swords of state (*ada* and *abani*) *ada* and *eben* in Benin, the latter being merely modified. In fact, the Benin name for the royal throne *ekete* bears no resemblance to the Igbo *ukpo eze* ,while the *odigba* and *ezuzu* of Benin(Egharevba, 1968: 1), may have been an adaptation from Igbo

Ukwu or Nri. This is because assorted beads, a crown, a ceremonial fan, elephant tusks, all associated with the Nri priestly royalty were unearthed at Igbo Ukwu.

Indeed, there is no evidence that the monarchy at Ubulu-Ukwu was an imposition from Benin. Instead, all versions of Ubulu-Ukwu oral traditions are unanimous that the institution was indigenous in conception and personnel. Ezemu is said to have lacked a biological successor to the throne, his son Ijedimka having been killed in a foreign land, identified by tradition as Ozalla. He had subsequently withdrawn his daughter Ozimegwu Onoli, often shortened to Ozim, married to Ekei, from her matrimonial home. She was to be assisting him with domestic and state, essentially priestly duties in the annual end of year *Ine* and *Iwu* festivals. Ezemu was concerned about his successor and had thought that Ozim could fit into the role. But each time of the festive period when she was called upon to serve, her menstrual flow made it impossible, given that traditional observances and shrines forbade such ‘unclean’ presence. He had consequently fallen back on Ekei to assist. To facilitate this, Ezemu, bent with age, is said to have implored the *Eze* of Ani Ekei to release his first son to assist him with the performance of some state ceremony. However, Ozim had cautioned her husband against the release of their first son for fear that her father would find excuses for refusing to release him after the ceremony. As a compromise, Ojegbealu or *Alulubuikeji* (the power of the yam vine inheres in the supporting stake) the second son of Ozim who had been with his mother under Ezemu’s roof was released for the state function. After the ceremony, Ezemu declined the return of Alulu to his father on the grounds that having been robed in royal regalia he could no longer return to his old status (Mordi, 1982).

Ekei is said to have sheathed his sword when Ezemu sued for peace. The latter had presented drinks, kola nut, Fish-Eagle feather and a piece of cloth, to him for the formal investiture of Alulu. Thus was instituted a tradition whereby no coronation is consummated at Ubulu-Ukwu without the new king visiting Ani Ekei, where he genuflected to its surviving elder, who never bows to anybody in Ubulu-Ukwu, till date. Ojegbealu, a full-blooded son of Ubulu-Ukwu soil thus inaugurated a new dynasty and also instituted the tradition that excludes women from acceding to the throne of Ubulu-Ukwu. It is difficult to understand how Ezemu could be alive and crown his successor, except on grounds of old age and his frequent absence from home which could precipitate his overthrow. Thus the official king list has him as the first Obi of Ubulu-Ukwu and his daughter Ozimegwu Onoli as his successor, despite the fact that Ojegbealu is generally recognized by tradition as the first to accede to the Ubulu-Ukwu throne under its second dynasty, and does not accept that Ozim ever performed state duties.

There is a group in the community that styles itself as descendants of Ozim or Umuozim. This myth serves the purpose of legitimating and linking the monarchy directly to Ezemu, instead of Ekei, whose role and dynasty are thereby eclipsed. In fact, a dynastic change was effected without bloodshed or external interference. Indeed, the tradition which ascribes an alien origin to and simultaneously insists that the monarchy at Ubulu-Ukwu was home-grown, with a son of the soil Alulu, inaugurating a new dynasty is a phenomenon that characterizes the accounts of origins of kingdoms in Africa. In divided societies, rulers employ the myth of the outsider as the founder of the monarchy to paint a larger –than- life image of themselves in order to bamboozle the population and consolidate their power. At the same time, they arrest a possible local reaction to the feeling of an alien imposition by emphasizing a legend of an indigenous origin for the monarchy. Dike, who has noted this tendency among the Igala, deposes that “one has to think up a myth of a glorious origin from outside, and yet try to show it as indigenous” (1982:17).



Ezemu is further said to have safeguarded the new reign, by assigning roles to the children he had at Ubulu-Unor from his estranged wife, Amachi: Okpe, Osume and Esi were assigned leadership roles in the annual end of year *Iwu* festival. He thereby nipped in the bud a simmering discontent over succession to the throne, without seeking external assistance or intervention. A more popular version, however, insists that Ezemu actually withdrew Ozim from her matrimonial home but encouraged her to remain unmarried so as to raise children in the family's name. He thereby perpetuated the Ezemu lineage through a practice thus instituted at Ubulu-Ukwu, known as *idegbe*. Her children, while in her father's homestead, are identified in some accounts as Okpe, Alamuzo and Alo (Mordi, 1982). Okojie (1960) identifies a similar practice in Ishan which sheds more light on what may have transpired at Ubulu-Ukwu. A man's first daughter lived in her father's house where she exercised the liberty to choose any man as her lover, but the offspring of the association belonged to her father. She was an *Arebhoa* without any bride price paid on her. The practice could also be modified, whereby half of the stipulated bride price was paid to the girl's father, making the girl part-*Arebhoa*. She thus lived with her husband who shared the offspring with his father-in-law. The first child of the marriage "belonged to the father-in-law and if the marriage was blessed with many issues, a son and a daughter were returned" to him (88).

The point needs to be emphasized that the momentous dynastic change at Ubulu-Ukwu, was successfully consummated, without recourse to external assistance. Ezemu had ensured the security of Ojegbealu's reign through the banishment of Okpe, who was anxious to exercise royal power, from the palace. Okpe was not endowed with an enviable physical size as well as a reassuring mental faculty, but his father's secrets of herbal science and mysticism had been bequeathed to him. His presence on the throne or anywhere around it could be harmful to the royal family and the community. This feat of internally resolving succession crisis was re-enacted in the 18th century, after the reign of Obi Olise, when the heir-apparent, Ojukor could not succeed his father because he was physically challenged: his mouth was inclined. His half-brother Jeboma received Ojukor's blessings to accede to the throne in reward for his loyal services, thereby infuriating his brothers-German, who were implacable. Jeboma had fled to Issele Azagba where he enlisted in the hunters' club (*Otu Egbeni*) and earned the title of *Ogene* for his excellent marksmanship. He later returned to Ubulu-Ukwu to reign as Obi Ogene. The Ubulu-Ukwu king list with separate entries for Obi Jeboma and Obi Ogene, was given to Ijoma during his doctoral fieldwork at Ubulu-Ukwu in 1976 (NAI, Ben Prof 4/3/8, 21; Ijoma, 1983: 33, 39). Two other names on the list, Ubulugbeleme and Bagbeleme, are limited to the official king list.

Ubulu-Ukwu traditions do not emphasize Ezemu's role and personality as a monarch, who was preoccupied with the administration of the realm. Rather, he is celebrated as a great mystic, with prodigious knowledge of herbal science which placed him at a great vantage position to manipulate and control men, matter and space. He was thus a priest-king, always on the move, plying his great medicinal trade for which he was renowned beyond the confines of Ubulu-Ukwu. It was his fame in this connection that established him as a regular guest of the Oba of Benin, whose official physician he later became. Such was Benin's dependence on Ubulu-Ukwu's mystical know-how that the founding of Umunede is traced to Ede "who was sent from Benin by the Oba to obtain medicine from Ubulu-Uku" (Eweka, 1992: 186).

In fact, it was Ezemu's surpassing expertise in traditional medicine and divination that earned him the respect and, indeed, awe of the Benin royalty. Okpewho (1998) notes that in the Benin-Ishan area Ezemu, and, indeed, Ubulu-Ukwu monarchs were revered for their proficiency in

traditional medical practice which had enabled them to cure illnesses that had defied every known cure. A prevalent popular account of Ezemu's surpassing mystical prowess at Benin is that where other traditional medicine men of his day failed, he found a permanent solution to premature deaths of Benin monarchs shortly after their coronations. Such mystical prowess had been so associated with Ezemu's successors, *Ogiobolo* "famed sorcerer-king", who could make people "impervious to all dangers and powers...as well as weapons" that Obi Olise's encounter with Benin in the 1750s is presented as Ezemu's display of his mystical prowess which had brought Benin to its knees, leading to a peace settlement at Ugonoba, "with a firm injunction that the Bini should never again kill the Ubulu"(17-18). Thus, the idea and institution of the monarchy at Ubulu-Ukwu were indigenous, not an alien imposition.

Ezemu's medical and mystical services to the Benin royalty were continued by descendants of Okpe. Okpe had often accompanied Ezemu in his numerous trips to the Benin palace, a tradition which was continued by his descendants who constituted a sizeable population of Agbado area of Benin. It goes without saying that Ubulu-Ukwu gave out what it had in abundance. The community boasted of traditional fraternities and related associations into which the Obi was initiated and whose facilities and expert knowledge he could freely tap and direct as the need arose. The *Dibia* fraternity thus played prominent roles, as did deity priests (*ndishene*), notably *Nne Ubulu*, among them seers, who along with the Omu society helped to ward off danger which could threaten the Ubulu –Ukwu community both spiritually and mystically. The fact though is that Benin had attained such encompassing power and prestige on account of its militarism that professionals in many fields such as "experts in medicine, diviners, artists" and numerous others were encouraged "to add to this already surpassing glory" (Obayemi, cited in Mordi, 1982: 24).

Some initial titles in Ubulu-Ukwu are also attributed to Ezemu. For instance, Ojeani( the traveller), was conferred on Alibo who was a member of his immigrant party from Afor, and Ojiba(prosperity in travels) on Inwagwe, another member of the party from Afor. The title of Onishe, next in command to the Obi was instituted in later years and conferred on a man from Okpanam, after the failure of the initial experiment which had limited the position to Osume's descendants. The war title of Odogwu held by Umuonichaugbo of Idumu-Odogwu lineage, however, dates to the Ubulu –Ukwu / Benin war, when Mokpai the first Odogwu , relation of Obi Olise's wife from Onicha-Ugbo had featured gallantly. He had captured some Benin soldiers whose descendants form the Idumu-Idu lineage. The other war title of Iyase is held by the Umunshi(Umunri) from Ogwashi-Ukwu, while Ozoma, a title conferred on the Obi's immediate younger brother seems to date to the time of Olise(Mordi , 1982).

Indeed, it is not possible that Ezemu could have initiated and completed, within a lifetime, all the innovations ascribed to him by a tradition which dresses him in the toga of a god and also insists that he never died, but simply vanished. Given his greater attention to his itinerant priestly and medicinal undertakings, the tradition seems to have incorporated later borrowed ideas and practices from Benin which were legitimized by ascribing them to Ezemu. It is safe to infer that a lot of the titles were fairly recent adaptations and borrowings from Benin which have been indigenized. The references to Inwagwe and Alibo capture the sphere of Benin history influenced most by Ubulu-Ukwu. For instance, Inwagwe is a corruption of Unwague, the senior Benin Palace Chief whose duty it was to name the successor to the Benin throne. Also, as head of the Iwebo, he headed the palace organization in charge of the Oba's throne and state regalia, a position in which the Eribo(Alibo in Ubulu-Ukwu tradition) was next to him. This was distinct from Iweguae, charged with the Oba's person and private apartments,

providing the Oba's pages and sword bearers. He was connected to the Ewaise, who, as the Oba's diviners and doctors, "prepared and stored the medicines and magical paraphernalia used to protect the king and foster his vitality (Bradbury, 1967: 18-19, 30).

In light of the foregoing and, when obvious insertions are expunged, a tentative king list of Ubulu-Ukwu emerges (Mordi, 1982: 24), thus:

Ezemu

Alulu or Ojegbealu

Awali

Oshai

Sheze

Diagbo

Izagbo

Ogboli

Inali

Olise, c.1750

Diei, Dieieze

Jeboma/Ogene

Usifo

Ugbomo

Nwajei, 1877-1912

Obanua, 1912-1924

Ofulue I, 1924-1964

Edward Ofulue II, 1964-2006

Akaeze Ofulue III, 2006-2016

Chukwuka Akaeze I, 2016

Thus there is no doubting the antiquity of the Ubulu-Ukwu monarchy. The first recorded date for a reigning king of Ubulu-Ukwu is that provided by Egharevba who does not name the king whom he reported to have visited Benin on his accession to the throne about 1750. He is identified at Ubulu-Ukwu as Obi Olise. Obi Nwajei had succeeded his father, Obi Ugbomo in 1877. Five monarchs reigned during the period covering 127 years; five monarchs also reigned from Nwajei's accession in 1877 to 2016, when Obi Akaeze Ofulue III was assassinated by suspected Fulani marauders. This gives a period of 139 years and a total of 266 years for the ten monarchs or an average reign length of 26 years. It will follow that the nine

kings from Ezemu to Inali may have reigned for a total of 234 years. In sum, it is reasonable to assume that the current dynasty at Ubulu-Ukwu is at least 500 years old. Given the crisis that preceded Obi Ogene's accession to the throne which may not have been the first of its kind, a 15th century date could be assigned to the ruling dynasty at Ubulu-Ukwu.

### **Ubulu-Ukwu Relations with Benin**

The evidence shows that the kingdoms of Benin and Ubulu-Ukwu maintained mutually beneficial, cordial economic, socio-cultural and diplomatic relations up to the British conquest of the Benin Kingdom and the banishment of Oba Ovonramwen in 1897. The relationships were so cordial that the two monarchies remained in constant touch and happily relayed information about new coronations. The Crown Prince of Benin formally notified the Obi of Ubulu-Ukwu about his coronation through four of his emissaries who presented four pieces of white chalk to the Obi. Thereafter, Ubulu-Ukwu medicine men travelled to Benin through the four to eight days' journey to help in the coronation. It was after this process the Obi of Ubulu-Ukwu visited the new Oba to rejoice with him over his successful accession to the Benin throne. The newly crowned Oba also reciprocated the Obi's visit as was witnessed on 16 March 1982 when the Oba of Benin, Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Omo N' Oba Erediauwa visited Agbogidi Obi Edward Ofulue II of Ubulu-Ukwu (Mordi, 1982). Similarly, a newly crowned Obi of Ubulu-Ukwu paid a royal visit to the Oba in celebration of his successful coronation. This reciprocal practice soon ossified into a custom, and was misconstrued as evidence that Ubulu-Ukwu monarchs customarily travelled to Benin after their coronations to pay homage to the Oba, even when in exile in Calabar (Thomas, 1914: 3). It was an age-long exchange of diplomatic visits.

One such visit by Obi Olise to Benin, about 1750 after his coronation, is noted to have provided an occasion for the declaration of war on Ubulu-Ukwu by Benin. Benin sources claim that Obi Olise had, after his investiture in Benin about 1750, -a suggestion vehemently denied at Ubulu-Ukwu- returned to Ubulu-Ukwu (Ohadike, 1994: 24). Back home he used charms to bring Adesua, a daughter of the Ezomo of Uzebu betrothed to Oba Akengbuda, to marry him against her will. During Olise's visit to the Ezomo, Adesua had presented her father's kola nut to the Obi who expressed his interest to marry her. She subsequently attended the Eke market at Ubulu-Ukwu, ostensibly to recover her outstanding debt on goats she earlier sold. She ended in the palace (Egharevba 41), as she was seized or cajoled or simply voluntarily walked into the king's arms. Her failure to reconcile herself with her new status and its demands had ended in tragedy: she was executed on the orders of Obi Olise. By Ubulu-Ukwu tradition, as with Benin, no woman turns down the king's marriage advances.

The war was protracted, partly because the Obi strategically moved to neighbouring Issele – Ukwu. The distraught soldiers were forced to extend their campaign further up to Asaba, in search of him. The Benin, Ugo and Esan armies were led by Imaran Adiabon, Emokpaogbe the Agboghidi (Onogie) of Ugo, as well as Akhibi, the left-handed Onogie of Opoji, one of the Ishan Enijie recruited by Oba Akengbuda for his magical prowess needed to counter "Obolo-Uku's famous strength in magic" (Okojie, 1960: 177-178). The invading armies were defeated at Ubu (Afigbo, 1987: 166-69), and Oboshi (Ohadike, 1994: 49-50), two strategically located streams at the outskirts of Ogwashi –Ukwu and Igbuzor, respectively. This was perhaps the first coordinated west Niger Igbo resistance to a foreign power, before the famous Ekumeku movement (Igbafe, 1971). Disappointed Benin and allied soldiers, having been isolated in strategic pitches at Ubulu-Ukwu, became prisoners of war. Others were too scared to return to Benin to face a wrathful Oba Akengbuda for failing to capture Obi Olise. They opted to settle

among those they had failed to conquer. Their descendants constitute Idumu Idu, and Onije lineages of Ubulu-Ukwu. Ubulu-Ukwu people, some of them probably war captives along with earlier groups from Onicha Okpe who catered for the medical and mystical needs of Benin monarchs constitute part of the Agbado area of Benin City too.

It suffices to note that normal diplomatic ties were restored after the hostilities. Such was the cordial nature of the restored relationship that Ubulu-Ukwu people were among those who provided a communication link between the exiled Oba Ovonramwen in Calabar and his people in Benin, until his demise in 1914. In fact, in his address of welcome to the visiting Oba Erediauwa in 1982, Obi Ofulue II reminded him that four Ubulu –Ukwu people had accompanied exiled Oba Ovonramwen to Calabar in 1897; two of them had died on their return journey, contrary to Thomas’s claim that Obi Obanua of Ubulu-Ukwu on accession to the throne “sent messengers to Calabar and Benin-City to obtain the sanction of the Oba” (cited in Mordi, 1982: 38-40). The Oba had in return acknowledged that he was in Ubulu –Ukwu to appreciate the people’s contributions to the success of his coronation and in recognition of the historic ties which had existed between the two kingdoms. Okojie(1960) further records that Akhibi, while fighting, “took notice of all he saw in that land of beautiful singers and dancers” such that “all the drums for the various War Dances in Opoji today were copied from Obolo-Uku”(178).

The evidence does not suggest that the Ubulu-Ukwu monarchy was consequently weakened by the war with Benin. On the contrary, the reputation of the monarchy was enhanced. It built on its increased post- war stature to maintain and sustain an image and carriage that commanded the awe and admiration of subjects and outsiders alike. For instance, J. Spencer, the European missionary was conducted to the Ubulu royal palace at the end of February 1878. He has left the earliest known outsider’s impression of the royal palace and King of Ubulu-Ukwu, which I quote in *extenso*:

*The royal residence is a massive structure, built of mud, but so well-tempered that it could at first sight be taken for brick-work plastered over with mud. The whole building occupies a whole square. Its walls are supported by gigantic pillars of wood and mud, placed in regular succession, on the former of which are carved various grotesque figures. The front apartment is the council-hall, and a very commodious place; on both sides are raised mud seats for the members of council, and in front is the throne, raised to conspicuous height above the rest...I sat for about a quarter of an hour , waiting for the coming of the king, who at last made his appearance, attended by twelve eunuchs, stark naked, carrying the sceptre and other insignia of royalty; the greater part of the nobility and gentry also followed in his train. The king is a man of between thirty-five and forty... and of noble appearance. His head was adorned with three tremendous feathers jauntily stuck on the coronet that graced his brow. His neck, arms, hands and feet were covered with costly beads that glittered in the distance like diamonds...his eyes are bold and piercing, and his thin lips, when shut, show a resolve of will never to be overruled...His general carriage bears that careless confidence that marks the character of a monarch whose slightest nod is the law of the realm (cited in Isichei, 1977: 268).*

Nwajei, as must have become the new trend since the war with Benin, reorganized Ubulu-Ukwu’s defences with a high tone on the internal security of the kingdom and its teeming population. This became a notable feature of 19th century Ubulu-Ukwu. Spencer thus observed in 1878 that in Ubulu-Ukwu “There are constructed several porches at the corners of the principal streets, where royal guards, armed with swords and muskets, are kept during the day, to see that order is established in the town”(cited in Isichei, 1977:269). Indeed, the claim that

in Africa “the necessary minimum ‘rule of law’ which makes social life possible could be secured in a quite extensive population without the recognition of any formally constituted authority” (Mair, 1977:1), is a myth. It is a sweeping generalization that is not borne out by the evidence from Ubulu-Ukwu.

## CONCLUSION

Sweeping generalizations about the influence of mega states on mini states would be tempered if efforts were made to enquire into the process of evolution and development of centralized authority in the latter. I have attempted to illustrate this with Ubulu-Ukwu, a west Niger Igbo kingdom. The military and cultural accomplishments for which Benin was famous were not consummated without the contributions of smaller neighbours, as the alignment of forces in the prosecution and outcome of the Ubulu-Ukwu /Benin war illustrates. It is also not in doubt that the institution of monarchy at Ubulu-Ukwu as well as its peopling cannot be explained in terms of Benin’s overwhelming impositions, but should be understood in the context of initial population movements along with cultural influences from the Nri-Awka area.

Such cultural influences in terms of mystical, herbal, medicinal and magical expertise for which Ubulu-Ukwu and its monarchs were famous redounded to the benefit of the Benin monarchy. Both monarchies overtime developed mutual respect for one another, and rejoiced at each other’s successful coronations, with Ubulu-Ukwu playing crucial roles in the security of Benin coronations. Through exchange of visits which did not signify homage or subservience on the part of the mini state, relationships were strengthened. The emphasis of Benin on traditional medicine and its magical and mystical accompaniments, a sphere in which Ubulu-Ukwu’s expertise was acknowledged by the former helped to sustain the political and diplomatic relationships. The title system, originally founded on the Nri ritual order, was greatly modified by extensive borrowings from Benin , and indigenized to fit into the Ubulu-Ukwu cultural milieu. The monarchy remained rooted in the Ubulu –Ukwu socio-cultural and political system from which it originated, and ably managed its crises without recourse to external assistance or intervention, even though new emblems of authority were added from Benin.

### \*Note.

This paper is a revised version of a public lecture, Ubulu-Ukwu Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: Reflections on the History of a Traditional Society in Transition, delivered as part of the activities marking the coronation of HRM. Obi Chukwuka Noah Akaeze I, at the Ubulu-Ukwu Royal Palace, 5 September 2016.

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