



Benin-Urhobo Relations Under Colonial Rule: Genesis of Conflicts over Land Resources and Use

PAUL O. OPONE
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract. This study focuses on Benin-Urhobo relations under colonial rule. Both groups have had long periods of contact with mutual benefits. However, British colonial rule adversely altered that cordial relationship and incorporated them into the world market over which they had no control. This paper aims to show how the Binis and Urhobos responded to the opportunities and crises generated by internal development challenges and by external political and economic forces, stimulated by British colonial rule in the general area. The paper depended on primary and secondary sources. It deploys the historical method of descriptive analysis to address the subject. The findings indicate that the struggle over access to and control of forest and water resources, and their use, engendered conflict in Benin-Urhobo relations during the colonial dispensation and was followed by steps taken by the colonial government to reduce the power and influence of the Benin Oba over the Urhobo group. Underneath this was the British determination to ensure free trade between the Urhobo and the European trading firms. It concludes that the struggle over land resources occasioned by the colonial policy had far-reaching implications on their relationship under colonial rule and beyond.

Keywords: Benin-Urhobo, Inter-Group Relations; Colonial Dispensation, Resources Use, Free Trade, The Genesis of Crisis.

1. Introduction

One of the areas in which European imperialism in Africa had a far-reaching impact was the local economies of the character territories. The first step in this direction was evident in the deliberate characterized and reorientation of the

traditional economic systems of various character African societies towards serving the interests and profit needs of European capitalist enterprises. To sustain these developments, European capitalists constantly pressured local people, gradually altering the nature of traditional social relations.

As Nwauwa (2000, pp. 15-30) has observed, it manifested in their attitudes towards resources and people. In this case, the Europeans placed much greater value on resources and their use than the character peoples, who were merely used to exploit them. The changes resulting from European imperialism in Africa not only affected social relations within various Nigerian groups and elsewhere but also led to the development of a new consciousness, which created struggles among groups (Opone, 2013, pp. 154-168). That further led to ethnic conflict, which continued even in the post-colonial period (Folami, 2017)). That development has made the task of nation-building and national integration in Nigeria difficult. The Bini and Urhobo ethnic nationalities were victims of this development, as this paper will show in due course, beginning from 1897 when the British imperial forces conquered the Benin kingdom to 1953, with significant implications on Benin's traditional political power over its neighbours, including the Urhobo, which was characterized by changing relationship patterns between the Benin kingdom and the Urhobo group. The Bini and Urhobo peoples struggled to maintain their African identities within British international economic politics (Abumere, 2022). As with some other groups, these changes were a direct product of the ambitious European imperial project in Africa.

1.1 Land and the people

Benin and Urhobo ethnic nationalities are part of the larger Edo-speaking community in the Western Niger Delta of Nigeria. East of the Benin River, west of the Niger River, and north of Warri are the territories of the Binis and Urhobo, commonly known as Issobos or Sobos. The Niger Delta in Nigeria is recognised as one of the areas in the world with the largest crude oil reserve, and the Urhobo people live in the southern portion of the Benin lowlands. The Urhobo region is distinguished by its evergreen forests and profusion of palm trees. The produce, which requires specialised technology for harvesting, is the foundation of their economy. During British colonial rule, Urhobo's unique technology for using palm trees to produce oil and kernels for local consumption and coastal trade with Europeans fostered interactions between the two groups. Benin and Urhobo are the two main ethnic groups in the administrative regions of Edo and Delta States, respectively, and they share a common boundary.

The Binis established a great kingdom and later an empire that covered their neighbours, including the Urhobo. As a result, the Benin kingdom exerted heavy influence over the Urhobo. The Binis and Urhobos are heterogeneous peoples and claim a common origin. Their socio-political organisations are based on cultural units. A report from the Intelligence Division of the British War Office in England (Darwin, 1890) described the Urhobo as a shy and timid race, given to agriculture rather than trade and being more or less under the suzerainty of the king of Benin. Moloney (1890: pp. 596 - 614) further described them as industrious agricultural and oil manufacturers, and their language as having a strong affinity with the Benin language in many ways. That suggests how closely the Bini and the Urhobo have been culturally from the beginning.

Results

Apart from the examined intelligence and annual reports, the data from field respondents consistently indicate that colonial rule played a significant role in transforming traditional interactions between Benin and the Urhobo people. That helped the Urhobo people undermine the power that the Benin monarchy had previously used to rule over them. The British colonial authority wanted total control over domestic and international trade. Therefore, it took this action. The following

debate demonstrates how the Benin kingdom never fully recovered from it.

1.2 Relations before colonial rule

The relationship between Benin and the Urhobo was cordial, at least until the eve of the British conquest of Benin in 1897. That period was characterised by constant cross-migration between the two peoples, with occasional conflict with some Urhobo clans over political sovereignty and increasing economic interdependence for mutual benefits. Such relationships were also beneficial, as Benin and the Urhobo had much to trade for each other. Apart from trade and social contacts, such as inter-group marriages, cultural transfer via exchanged products promoted their relationships. One such was pepper soup, known in Benin as *Ehien-Urhobo*, meaning Urhobo soup. This soup was popular among the Binis.

Besides, the Benin Oba (king) was a trendy figure among the Urhobo before the coming of the Europeans. Benin was an empire based on military might, subjugating many neighbouring groups, including the Urhobo, through military or cultural means. At any rate, the Benin kingdom and later empire were famous, much of the fame deriving from its kings' political sagacity and military prowess. The Urhobo group developed origin stories linking their dynasties to the Benin Kingdom to avoid conquest and align with its prestige. For example, Salubi (1958, pp. 67-85; 2008, p. 248) noted that the Urhobo had always known and spoken of two *Akpor*. The first and only recognised by them before the advent of colonial rule was *Akpo r' Oba*, meaning the era of Oba (referring to the regime of Oba of Benin). The second, distinct from the first and which ousted the first was *Akpo r'' Oyinbo*, meaning the era of white men, thus making the era of Oba sovereignty an epochal magnitude of the world view of the Urhobo. In the Urhobo-dominated settlements along the Benin borders, later known as Jesse district following the colonial administrative reorganisation, the people even invited Benin chiefs to settle disputes.

Some Urhobo chiefs held Benin titles such as Ezomo, Iyase, and others, purchased from the Benin, and their installations were usually approved by the Oba of Benin (Oseghe, 2012, p. 16). All these indicate Benin's control over the Urhobo people. It is important to emphasise that before the advent of British colonial rule in Nigeria and particularly the fall of Benin to

British imperial forces, "the entire Urhobo land was under Benin rule" (Edebiri, 2017, Personal communication). Some of them came under Benin's influence through military conquest, and others willingly accepted Benin's political dominance because of the prestige and security it offered.

One way to show their loyalty to the Oba of Benin was that all Urhobo chiefdoms and kingdoms paid annual tributes to recognise his authority. They made these tribute payments to maintain their connection with the Oba. Moreover, it is mentioned that upon the death of an Urhobo Ovie (Urhobo ruler), their crown was sent to the Oba of Benin, indicating its origin. During the installation of a new Ovie, the heir apparent (as a custom) was made to identify the skull of his ancestor before the Oba in Benin (Eweka, 1992, 46). This practice lasted until the colonial period. Historical evidence indicates that the Oba of Benin had been receiving the head of the deceased Ovie, leader of Uvwie (Effurun), up to 1934 (Ikime, 1977, p. 35). Furthermore, it is mentioned that before the Oba of Benin confirmed his title, the Oharisi, also known as the Ovie of Ughelli, used to visit Benin for a certain period (Idapho, 2021, personal communication). In 1953, the Orogie of Okpe (Okpe Urhobo in Urhobo Western Division) obtained a traditional ceremonial sword from the Oba of Benin in just the same way as the Ovie of Oghara did during the same period.

However, imperial sources indicate that Europeans on the coast or elsewhere knew little about the Urhobo until the colonial period. For instance, Moloney (1890, pp.596-614), then as Governor of Lagos, told a London audience what at best was hearsay that in addition to the Binis, Jakrymen (referring to the Itsekiris), and Ijohs, much was heard in these parts of the Issobos who were described as people tributary (they have been so for generations) to Benin. However, all these gradually changed with the advent of colonial rule. British military and political officials made a concerted effort to weaken the Benin Oba despite their awareness of the Oba's significance. The intention was to loosen his political grip on the Urhobo to create free trade to the advantage of the British colonial government. By so doing, as will be revealed subsequently in this paper, they altered the pattern of Benin-Urhobo pre-colonial relations.

1.3 Urhobo Migrations into the Benin Land during the Colonial Period

The British imperial forces' invasion of Benin in 1897 resulted in its conquest and colonisation. The deposition of the Benin monarch, Oba Ovoramwen, followed this. The subsequent exile of Oba Ovoramwen to Calabar was primarily motivated by British fear of the Oba's ideological influence, which was believed capable of undermining colonial administration across the whole area, including Urhobo land (Aviomor, 2023, personal communication). As a strategy to reduce the influence of the Oba and Benin on the Urhobo, the British went to the ridiculous extent of taking Oba Ovoramwen in chains to Sapele and invited Urhobos to view him (Granville, Roth & Roth, 1899). The criminal-like exposition of the Oba of Benin to the Urhobo by the colonial political officers was a slap in the face of the hitherto respected and highly revered monarch and the kingdom.

It will be recalled that before the fall of the Benin kingdom to the British in 1897, the Oba of Benin was sacred and highly revered not only by the Binis but also by all the subject peoples, vassal kingdoms, and chiefdoms, including the Urhobo (Idjakpor, 2023, Personal communication). To some extent, many subject peoples saw the Oba as a mystery because of his enormous political and ritual powers. Therefore, the last ridiculous act by the British against the Oba of Benin was to demystify what they (the Urhobo) considered as his *juju* (supernatural) power and made them realise that, after all, the so much dreaded Oba was a human being like they (Urhobo) are and powerless in the face of colonial rule. As a result, the Urhobo became more assertive, and over time, they developed a new consciousness of independence and a struggle with the Binis over land. That was to be achieved through migrations to Benin to tap available resources and trade directly with Europeans, without the usual fear, tributes, and control by the Oba.

To the British political officers in Benin, the exiling of the Oba Ovoramwen and the earlier deposition of Nana Olomu of Itsekiri finally removed the last obstacles to the free flow of European trade with the Urhobo people, who had been brought under British rule without difficulty. It also freed some of them (Europeans and the Urhobos) from tributary obligations and payment of rents to the Oba. Since the British were more concerned with expanding trade, they encouraged people outside Benin to move in, settle, trade, and

exploit the area's natural resources for British interests. In some instances, they invited groups like the Itsekiri, who were already in control of trade in the area, to move in and settle along the inland rivers, such as the Siluko, to trade. In particular, the British initially encouraged the Urhobo migrants to collect oil palm products, for which they were specialists, and later to farm on a taungya basis on Benin land (National Archives, 1905).

The Urhobos and Itsekiris exploited their mastery of the waterways to establish a monopoly over waterborne trade and palm oil production in the Benin Division, much to the detriment of the Benin intermediaries and the kingdom. That is attested to by the annual report of the Benin Division for the year ending 31/12/1921. According to it, "in Benin division, trade is almost entirely in the hands of Jekris (Itsekiri) and Sobos (Urhobos) who live alongside the waterways (National Archives, 1921). This monopoly against Benin's interest continued into the 1930s and 1940s when the worldwide depression made the business less profitable, and produce from the plantations began competing with the Urhobos' wild palm production.

The monopoly of the Urhobos and Itsekiris was mainly due to the catastrophic effect of the British conquest of Benin, from which the Benin people did not recover quickly and easily. The results were still evident in the mid-1920s when a colonial official observed that Benin City was still "...slowly recovering from the paralysis which followed British conquest in 1897" (National Archives, 1925). That can be explained by the extensive destruction of Benin City during the British military expedition. That event was not helped by the subsequent pursuit of the Oba and his chiefs, and by the continued resistance of some Benin chiefs, who found it challenging to accept British colonial authority over Benin territory and its people at the time. It was not until 1899 that they finally succumbed to the reality of colonisation. All these resulted from British brutality and violence in Benin, especially in the rural areas, and compelled more people to take flight into the heart of the Benin kingdom forest for safety.

Coupled with the above were the demands and extractions of the colonial authority and its agents for labour and tributes from the local people. Such requests in the new dispensation further drove many people away from their communities, leading them to seek refuge in the forest. The evidence indicated that some of these communities, particularly "in Benin City District...", were gradually settled by migrants

from other places, predominantly Urhobo (National Archives, 1897). The Ijaws and Itsekiris, however, concentrated more around the Benin River, intent on continuing their role as middlemen. The Urhobo population gradually grew in the Benin Kingdom's forest. That later led to conflict between the Binis and the Urhobos over ownership of the forest, not because of the colonial government's attitude toward it.

Initially, Benin chiefs protested against the unrestrained movements of Urhobo migrants into the Benin forest and demanded their expulsion between 1897 and 1898 (National Archives, 1913a). However, the colonial administration saw nothing wrong with the continued movements. It was more interested in the extraction of forest products by the migrants and the revenue derived from them than in the complaints of the Benin chiefs. In response to the Urhobo group's increased migration into Benin land and the need to make exploitation sustainable and generate more revenue from forest resources, the colonial administration imposed various fees on migrants for exploiting the forest. The action of the colonial administration only helped to legalise Urhobo migrants' exploitation activities in the forest and, by so doing, encouraged them to increase production for the British.

On the realisation that their earlier request to British political officers in Benin to officially put a stop to the continued migration of the Urhobo group into Benin land was not granted, the chiefs seized the opportunity presented by the visit of and meeting with Hon. F.S. James, the Lieutenant Governor of Southern Nigeria in 1913, to present their case to him directly. At that meeting, the Benin chiefs again stated their opposition to the influx of the Urhobo migrants into the Benin forest. They requested its immediate stoppage to prevent a conflict in the near future (National Archives, 1913b). They argued that such unrestrained movements of the Urhobos into Benin land and the indiscriminate exploitation of its natural resources without control by the Benin traditional authority had gradually and deliberately stripped them of ownership of the land in favour of the Urhobo strangers.

Arguing further, they reminded the visiting Lieutenant Governor that the Urhobos had been their subjects and should remain under their control, even in the new dispensation, if the colonial government was to enjoy peace and cooperation from the Bini people. Despite this second request by the Benin chiefs, the colonial

administration still did not take the necessary action to stop the continued movement of the Urhobo migrants into Benin land, which had easy access to available resources, because it was mainly beneficial to British economic interests. As a result of colonial policy, communities in Benin gradually lost control over forest land. Reports from 1913 indicate that Urhobo migrants, along with a small number of settlers from Kwale and Itsekiri countries, were taking over the land. They were said to have been forced to leave their places, having exhausted their virgin land and cut down their palm trees, their principal means of economic survival. Indeed, the Urhobos are known for their expertise in palm fruit cutting, collection, and the production of palm oil. Following the widespread destruction of palm trees across various Urhobo settlements, particularly those near Benin territory, Benin inevitably became a destination with abundant palm trees. For instance, the Forestry Annual Department Report of 1913 stated that:

...Sobos have farmed their virgin land, cut down their palm trees, and are now on the lookout for both in other districts...These settlers' farms increased rapidly...the chiefs owning the land did not visit these places, and when they heard of them, they charged rent yearly or periodically; they would not cooperate with the forestry department in restricting farming (National Archives, 1913b).

On the other hand, the colonial administration was more interested in restricting the Oba's authority and influence over the Benin people and opposed the restoration of the old empire characterised by multi-ethnic vassals, including the Urhobo. The indirect rule system introduced by Fredrick Lord Lugard, which facilitated the restoration of the Benin monarchy, operated on tribalism in close connection with the chiefs and customary laws (Lugard, 1920). Hugh Clifford, the governor of Nigeria from 1919 to 1925 and Lord Lugard's successor, emphasised that the "tribes" should not be subservient to one another in native administration, further solidifying this strategy. Benin implemented a stringent system of enforcing tribe-based administration. As demonstrated by Igbafe (1978, pp. 148–50), the government rejected attempts by non-Benin groups to honour the Oba, as was customary in pre-colonial times. As a result of this policy of maintaining tribalism, the political officers considered how best to control Urhobo migrants, especially along the provincial border, to prevent them from paying rent to the Oba of Benin.

2. Struggle Over Land Resources

The struggle between the Urhobo migrants and the Benin people over land resources had far-reaching implications on their relations. The aspiration of the Oghara (one of the Urhobo communities closest to Benin geographically) was more in line with colonial policy. It did not share the vision and ideas of Oba Eweka II of the Benin kingdom. Having become accustomed to not paying tributes and exploiting Benin land without hindrance since the colonial administrative reorganisation placed them in Warri Province in 1897, the Oghara-Urhobo migrants sought to achieve this through land colonisation in the Benin forest at the expense of neighbouring Idjerhe, settled by both Binis and Urhobo in Benin Province. That resulted in a land dispute with Mosogar, which was settled in the Warri Appeal Court in 1917 (National Archives, 1936a). This development was intended to sow the seeds of discord and future conflict, continuing to determine relations along the Benin-Oghara-Urhobo border area.

Except for the Mosogar-Jesse land dispute, until the 1920s, Urhobo migrants in the Benin border area maintained cordial relations with the Benin people. The evidence shows that both groups intermarried, and some Urhobo migrants even integrated into their host communities in Benin. Such was the case that an Urhobo policeman was reportedly seduced and eloped with a Bini woman named Iyare, who happened to be one of the wives of Oba Eweka II in 1923/4. Before this incident was known, the Oba was accused of using her (Iyare) for human sacrifice until the woman was found with her new lover in Effurun, Warri province (National Archives, 1923). That occurrence demonstrates how close the Urhobos were to the Benin people and the Benin royal dynasty, even though it would have been criticised at the time due to its unusualness.

It also makes abundantly evident that regular Beninese citizens and Urhobos had intermarried; the pinnacle of the relationship was that of an Urhobo man and a Bini woman of that calibre. Until the early 1920s, the area known as the Jesse district was of mixed origins, comprised a few old Benin villages and many new migrants' settlements of Benin, Itsekiri, Kwale and Urhobo. Some of the Idjerhe and Mosogar-Urhobo settlements in districts such as Boborokun, Shoko, and Ekuobodo had Benin people as their village heads (Oseghe, 2012, p. 43). The colonial administration adopted the Urhobo name, Jesse, for the district

when it was created in 1921, possibly to foster a sense of belonging among the Urhobos and to help them claim ownership of the area with the backing of the colonial government. In the entire region, originally Benin land, the Urhobos established their farms without seeking permission from the Benin kingdom authority. That development brought the Urhobos into conflict with the host Benin communities, who saw no reason to alienate them from their land.

The situation was not helped by the worldwide economic depression of 1929, when the prices of oil palm products crashed again and increased land hunger, owing to the large expanse of land required for palm produce extraction in Warri Province. Some Urhobo groups, mainly the Oghara migrants who had obtained their first farming permit in the Sakpomba forest reserve in 1932, were reported to have violated their farming permit and forestry regulations. They started making false claims to the farms and gradually refused to pay dues. These developments brought the Urhobos into conflict with the forestry and political departments when they took action against them (Urhobos). That was because the Benin Timber Industry was a primary revenue earner for the Benin Division, accounting for four-fifths of Nigeria's timber exports and contributing to Nigeria's annual revenue.

In Jesse, the political department, through the native administration, reacted to this situation by restricting Urhobo farming activities to fifty yards behind their houses (National Archives, 1913c). This restriction came at a time when the Urhobo economy had seriously worsened. That was so bad that the Urhobos refused to collect oil palm produce despite a 50% reduction in permit fees offered by the colonial government. The goal was to compel the colonial administration to hold talks with them. The Urhobos were aware that the more trading activities were disrupted against the interests of the European trading businesses, the longer the crisis persisted. The restriction on the Urhobos' farming activities in Jesse was not well received, and they renewed their agitation for transfer to Warri Province. They also witnessed anti-tax uproar in Warri, part of Benin and the eastern province. All these were quelled by the colonial administration by subtle force and negotiations. By 1914, Prince Aiguobasimwe had installed the Oba (Akenzue II) of Benin with the assistance of the British colonial officers after a severe contest with Chief Agho, the Obaseki of Benin. The colonial administration persuaded the newly installed

Oba Akenzue II to allow the transfer of 103 sq miles of land occupied by the Jesse district to Warri Province, on an annual rent of €50, in 1957/8 (National Archives, 1936b). At least, the Oba of Benin granted this request to show appreciation for the British colonial government's support that saw him regain his father's throne.

In implementing this policy, they sacrificed the feelings of some Benin and Urhobo settlements that chose to remain in Benin Province, and transferred them, along with the agitators, to Warri Province (National Archives, 1936c). Although the British colonial officers contrived this policy at the time to save their necks, it has proven, over time, not just a tenant-landlord agreement but the beginning of a legal stamp on Benin kingdom's perpetual loss of parts of its ancestral inheritance. By 1940, as expected, the representative of the Warri division in the legislative council demanded that the Oba of Benin pay rents to the Urhobos for the land. As if that was not enough, the representative also asked that the Urhobo be recognised as a guarantor of the land. This would have broken the agreement to transfer the land area to Warri Province (National Archives, 1936d). The same territory was identified as belonging to Benin under the previous deal, and before it was moved to Warri Province, the Oba's consent was obtained in exchange for an annual lease rate. That meant the British colonial officers had to accept the status quo, if only temporarily.

The consequence of this land transfer was the encouragement of the Oghara and Jesse-Urhobo to continually seize more land from Benin. This development influenced the Oghara-Urhobo to start laying false claims to Benin forest reserve lands, which Benin had granted them to farm on a permit and taungya basis in 1932. The Oghara and Jesse-Urhobo groups continued to indulge in forestry violations to the extent that by 1941, they had illegally removed reserve boundary beacons to justify ownership. In addition, the Oghara chiefs went so far as to lay claim to some of the lands in the Sakpomba forest reserve in the Benin division (National Archives, 1914, 1915). That was the beginning of land disputes and the resultant unease that characterised relations between the Binis and the Urhobo along the provincial border areas. Another consequence was that the Native Administration became disinclined to grant free land for farming to Urhobo migrants in its border areas of the division. This was to avoid the Urhobo claiming Benin land after they had been permitted to farm, which could escalate into direct conflict between the Urhobo

migrants and their Benin hosts. But this was only for a time before the colonial authority fell under Urhobo pressure, against the interests of the Benin kingdom.

Apart from struggling to expand their land resources at the expense of the Benin kingdom in an attempt to solve their economic problems, the Urhobos in Benin also joined their relatives in other provinces in collective resistance to European firms' control over the palm produce trade. During the depression of the 1920s and 1930s, the Urhobo palm produce collectors organised themselves as producers and refused to make and sell oil palm products to European trading firms and their middlemen agents. This collective action was not new to some Urhobos, as they had employed similar tactics in the past, and they had worked for them. For instance, they used it to cripple Nana Olomu's Governorship of Benin River in the late 19th century (Ekeh, 2012, p.24). This was because the Urhobo did not only see Nana Olomu as an Itsekiri (a non-Urhobo) but also worked for the interest of the Europeans at the time.

This time, however, it was spread throughout the four provinces of Benin, Ondo, Ijebu, and Warri, where they had a monopoly on the extraction of palm produce. The goal of this action was to harm European imperialist companies that had banded together to set low prices for African goods, endangering the survival of Urhobo producers who were unable to recoup their wage costs. Thus, the Urhobos holding back supplies of palm produce (oil and kernel) for some time to create artificial scarcity was the only means of forcing the European firms to negotiate prices. The produce hold-up persisted for several months and had a damaging effect on the respective interests of the export firms and the colonial state, by crippling the export business and hindering tax collection (Olukoju, 2000, p. 5). At the same

time, government officials were to give freedom to those who wished to trade (National Archives, 1934-1935).

But despite all government requests and even a slight price increase, the Urhobo producers maintained the hold-up, encouraged by the conviction that their strike had induced a slight improvement in the prices of goods. They held out until the price rose to at least € 7.10 per ton (National Archives, 1938). Available sources are silent on the circumstances surrounding the break-up of the produce hold-up. However, it was not because the producers secured the price level (€7:10 per ton) they had demanded. The prices were probably set to facilitate bargaining. By the end of 1934, when the strike was over, the cost of palm oil was in the range of € 5:15 and that of palm kernel in the region of € 4 to €4:5 (Olukoju, 2000, pp.5-13). There were, however, fears that this was merely a truce; rumours persisted that the resumption of trade was only temporary and had been arranged to produce enough money for tax payment.

By 1938, the Urhobo palm oil producers rejected the prices offered to them, resulting in the boycott. It began in May and was reportedly fairly solid within a fortnight. Throughout the Benin and Warri provinces, the Urhobo and Isoko producers participated in the boycott to press home their demands. During the boycott period, trade was affected as European trading firms could not purchase palm produce. This strategy continued well into the late 1940s and early 1950s, leading to fluctuations in the volume of trade in palm products such as palm kernel and palm oil shown in the Urhobo and Benin areas as shown below: This strategy continued well into the late 1940s and early 1950s leading to fluctuation in the volume of trade in palm products as shown in Urhobo area below.

Table 1: 1948 Returns of Palm Kernel and Palm Oil for October and November

Station	Palm kernel		Palm oil		
	Bags	Tons	Casks	Drums	Tons
Warri	9,676	774	313	1	196
Okpari	3,360	268	10	105	51
Otedo	448	36	-	-	-
Umolo	385	31	-	-	-
Ganagana	2,991	239	40	10	24
Frukama	3,384	271	26	-	17
Sapele	10,802	864	422	-	264
Koko	1,378	110	131	-	82
Ajagbodudu	1,147	92	-	803	335
Sanubi	947	76	-	25	10
Asagba	1,806	145	26	-	17
Kokori	254	101	2	156	68
Obiaruku	1,340	107	4	-	1
Okpara	2,180	175	-	-	2

Source: National Archives War. Prof. 1 File 547 Vol. 2, 1948.

Table 2: 1949 Returns of Palm Kernel and Palm Oil for October and November Record

Station	Palm kernel		Palm oil		
	Bags	Tons	Casks	Drums	Tons
Warri	72,294	5,803	6,284	90	3,840
Okpari	29,520	2,377	292	4,451	2,098
Otedo	1,787	1,441	22	59	-
Umolo	2,153	167	42	-	42
Ganagana	25,457	2,035	1,087	61	685
Frukama	19,027	1,523	461	-	332
Sapele	76,235	6,099	4,373	6	2,560
Koko	9,215	738	1,706	-	1,066
Ajagbodudu	11,135	890	-	8,440	3,407
Sanubi	7,750	616	194	1,677	847
Asagba	3,532	284	131	28	92
Kokori	8,219	706	102	1,976	942
Okpara	14,818	1,183	63	-	40
Igbuku	4,936	396	-	345	139
Patani	26,449	2,122	-	2,406	912

Source: National Archives War. Prof. 1 File 547 Vol. 1, 1949.

The tables above for the records of the 1948 and 1949 trade show a significant increase in the production and supply of oil products by the Urhobos. Comparatively, palm kernel supply was the most improved in many stations, with Warri and Ukpai having the highest in the Warri Province in 1949.

The 1950 record in Table 3 shows some fluctuation in the volume of palm products traded in the Warri Province, as shown below for the Urhobo area.

Table 3: 1950 Returns of palm kernel and palm oil

Station	Palm kernel		Palm oil		
	Bags	Tons	Casks	Drums	Tons
Warri	72,877	5,830	4,877	311	2,190
Okpari	19,684	1,504	298	4,784	2,261
Umolo	2,664	213	-	12	-
Ganagana	26,763	2,126	2,775	138	578
Frukama	19,646	1,572	708	25	663
Otedo	-	-	-	-	-
Sapele	88,128	6,354	2,996	369	1,895
Ajagbodudu	8,149	653	-	4,392	2,262
Koko	7,547	605	2,342	1	1,456
Sanubi	1,012	501	266	1,488	796
Kokori	6,994	579	129	1,918	929
Okpara	12,546	1,071	129	69	52
Asagba	3,081	268	163	-	102

Source: National Archives War. Prof. 1 File 547 Vol. 2, 1950

However, Warri, Umolo, Ganagana, Frukama, and Sapale stations recorded a slight increase in palm kernel and oil supplies. The record indicates no supply at all at Otedo station in 1950. An investigation into the non-supply of palm produce in Otedo in 1950 revealed that attention shifted to cocoa production, which enjoyed relative price stability (National Archives, 1949, 1950). Tables 4 and 5 below show fluctuations in the volume of palm kernel supplied in the Benin area between 1949 and 1950, but a significant improvement in the importance of palm oil in 1950 (Eghagha, 2023, Personal communication).

Table 4: 1949 Returns of Palm Kernel and Palm Oil in the Benin Area

Station	Palm kernel		Palm oil		
	Bags	Tons	Casks	Drums	Tons
Benin	66,354	5,491	59	2,243	-
Ekiador	3,115	247	-	-	-
Akologbo	9,239	661	328	605	-
Siluko	11,807	945	154	838	-
Ogbesse					

Source: National Archives War. Prof. 1 File No. 547 Vol. 1, 1949.

Figure 5: 1950 Returns of palm Kernel and Palm Oil in Benin area

Station	Palm kernel		Palm oil		
	Bags	Tons	Casks	Drums	Tons
Benin	62,048	4,960	38	2,102	
Ekiadolor	3,475	416	-	-	-
Akologbo	8,407	672	171	863	
Siluko	9,065	739	292	957	
Ogbesse					

Source: National Archives War. Prof. 1 File 547 Vol. 2, 1950.

This may not be unconnected with improvement in prices. This was possible because of the effectiveness of the Urhobo organisers and their sanctions on erring individuals.

The tables show that trade was relatively stable from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. Although the trade crisis of the early 1920s to early 1930s affected all Urhobos involved in palm produce collection monoculture, the conflicts and intolerance amongst the Urhobos along the Benin-Warri provincial border were not replicated in other parts of the division, where the Urhobos also had camps, owing largely to security reasons. In a confrontation with the Binis, the Urhobos could not easily be prevented from escaping to their homeland as before along the borderlines. They were primarily outnumbered and encircled by the Binis elsewhere. With this in mind, the Urhobo people had to find a more peaceful way to resolve their problems with the Binis.

Some Urhobo people gradually integrated into the neighbouring Benin village communities and negotiated land for farming on a rent basis. As members of the communities, the Urhobos actively participated in the affairs of these villages and even held titles in them. They also ventured into "illicit" food processing for gin distilleries, mainly starch and garri. This set of Urhobos has maintained its tenancy and done everything to avoid conflicts with its Benin landlords. That was possible at the time of the departure of British colonial rule in Nigeria. For instance, it is interesting that up to 1923, the Urhobo settlers in Jesse were paying land rent to the Benin Native Authority. The Government reforms of 1938 led to the transfer of Jesse from the Benin Area to the general administration of the Urhobo area under Warri Province (Eweka, 1992, p. 46). That was how the Benin kingdom permanently lost some of its lands, initially allowing the Urhobo migrants to settle on a tenement basis, as in Idjere. To give an Urhobo identity, the colonial officials changed the name from Idjere (the original Bini name of the settlement) to Jesse (Ikpesu, 2023, personal communication).

In addition, the colonial political officers did everything to free the Urhobos from the grip of the Benin Empire, and what remained after 1953 was a loose political relationship between Benin and the Urhobo country. The Urhobo kingdoms became more assertive, and their *Ovie* refused to pay the usual annual tribute to the Benin Oba. Apart from the *Ovie* of Oghara (closest to Benin), other *Ivies* (plural of *Ovie*), such as those of Uvwie and Abraka, stopped paying yearly homage to the Benin Oba (National Archives, 1949, 1950). That was mainly due to the colonial administrative arrangement, which further prevented the Urhobo land from falling under Benin's dominance. Evidence suggests that, upon his death, sending an Urhobo *Ovie's* head to Benin was discontinued, and the Oba no longer installed the *Ivie* in Benin (Iyasere, 2023, Personal communication). The new practice was for the Oba to send representatives to observe the coronation of Urhobo *Ovie* and report back to the Oba. Thus, the usual annual tributes to the Oba of Benin by the Urhobo *Ivie* are no longer compulsory. The Oba can hardly enforce them; he could not punish a defaulting *Ovie*. Those who continued to observe the yearly tribute to the Oba of Benin did so of their own volition and based on a personal relationship with the Oba.

3. Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that access to land and water resources increasingly shaped Benin-Urhobo relations in the 19th century and thereafter. The struggle started in the wake of the fall of Benin to the British colonising forces in 1897 and was followed by steps taken by the colonial government to reduce the powers of the Benin Oba on the Urhobo group. As the paper has shown, all these were self-serving; the British colonial political officers carried out the policy to cut off the Benin kingdom's power and influence over the Urhobos, to ensure a direct and free flow of trade between the Urhobos and the European trading firms in both the Benin and, later, the Warri Provinces. By so doing, the British altered the pattern of the pre-colonial relationship. That action encouraged the

Urhobos to continually tug at the Benin kingdom for access to forest and water resources.

Consequently, the once peaceful relationship between the Benin kingdom and the Urhobos was significantly altered by the British colonial government to the extent that conflict came to dictate the tone, much to the discomfort of the Binis, whose territory was the centre of the competition. The damage done to the Benin kingdom, especially the loss of some of its ancestral inheritance, such as Idjere (now Jesse), to the Urhobo tenants, continues to be a talking point about British colonial policy in the general area. Following this, Benin's relations with the Urhobos during this period became loosely knit as the Urhobos became assertive and have remained so in post-colonial Nigeria, even though Benin has left an indelible imprint on the socio-political life of the Urhobo people. On the whole, and despite considerable difficulties, the Binis and Urhobos responded to the opportunities and crises generated by both the challenges of internal development and the external political and economic forces stimulated by British colonial rule in the general area.

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