



# BRITISH COLONIALISM ON THE ODIONWERE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTION IN BENIN KINGDOM, NIGERIA

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*Abstract:* This study examines the profound impact of British colonialism on the Odionwere conflict management institution in Benin Kingdom, Nigeria. Before the colonial intervention, the Odionwere played a crucial role in resolving disputes and maintaining social harmony within the community. However, the advent of British colonial rule in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century significantly changed traditional governance structures. The imposition of indirect rule by the British colonial administrators altered the Benin Kingdom's power dynamics, marginalizing the Odionwere's authority. The establishment of colonial courts and the introduction of Western legal systems further undermined the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. This study explores how the Odionwere, once central to dispute resolution, experienced a decline in influence and autonomy as colonial policies reshaped the socio-political landscape. By meticulously analyzing archival documents, oral histories, and ethnographic data, this research contributes to understanding the intricate interplay between colonialism and Indigenous institutions, shedding light on the lasting repercussions of colonial policies on local governance structures and conflict resolution practices in the Benin Kingdom.

*Keywords:* colonialism, Odionwere, conflict management, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria.

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## INTRODUCTION

Colonialism disrupted the institution of Odionwere, a gerontocratic village leadership rooted in rites and rituals among Benin elders, as British policies brought non-initiates into Native Councils and Courts. The British colonial impact on Benin's socio-cultural fabric, marked by liberal policies, posed an existential threat to the Odionwere as a conflict resolution institution.

The gradual effacement of the functions and recognition of the Odionwere Council, traceable to the colonial hiatus in the contours of Benin's political history, has witnessed unprecedented social conflicts. While some scholars, including Omozusi (1997: 1-9) and Osadolor (2001: 564), contend that the Odionwere institutions are indigenous to Benin's socio-cultural evolution and created the underpinnings for later political developments, others have argued that the advent of its monarchy was an alien intervention. For example, Bondarenko and Roes (1999: 543) and Bondarenko (2006: 182) argued that Igodo, the first Ogiso (monarch), was a product of alien adventure. This view has been laid to rest by Bradbury and Lloyd (1970: 215) who averred that Igodo was a product of the Odionwere of Udo.

Nevertheless, the Ogiso era represents an early period in the history of the Benin Kingdom. Ogiso was a title given to the monarchs who ruled the kingdom before the establishment of the Oba dynasty. The Ogiso period is shrouded in myth and legend. Still, it is believed to have lasted for several centuries before the ascension of the first Oba, Eweka I, around the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The Ogiso were revered as semi-divine rulers, credited with laying the foundation for the kingdom's political and cultural institutions. While historical records from this era are limited, archaeological evidence and oral tradition suggest that the Ogiso played a crucial role in shaping the early development of the Benin Kingdom.

However, Omoregie (1997) contends that the origin of the Oba title lies in the ancient name of its first ruler, which translates to mean "high king". He supports the view that the Edion elders formed the bulk of the administration of the people and treated the early kings almost as *primus inter pares*.



Intrinsically, the colonial impact on the Odionwere institution remains overlooked in historical studies. This research addresses this gap by exploring the influence of colonial political economy and arbitral powers in Benin villages, a topic often neglected in scholarly works. Igbafe's perspective highlights the importance of examining what remained unrestored during the monarchy's reinstatement (1967). The study focuses on the effects of modernity on village administration in the Benin Division, spanning from the 1914 monarchy restoration to Nigeria's independence in 1960. The Odionwere institution, crucial for socio-political integration in rural Benin, changed with the establishment of modern political systems, impacting its informal status, roles, and functions. The study delves into the origins of the Odionwere and the transformations affecting its viability.

In this light, this paper examines the impact of colonialism on the Odionwere institution. This is important in understanding the transformation of the roles and functions of the Edion and its adaptation to change. It interrogates colonial reforms towards a diminution of traditional institutions including the Odionwere thereby threatening the social stability in Benin Kingdom. It answers questions about the impact of British colonialism on the Odionwere institution and its survival in Benin villages. It concludes that the government should establish an integral format that accommodates the Odionwere as a conflict management institution in the Benin Division.

The Odionwere is typically the eldest male in a community or village, chosen based on age, wisdom, and experience. He serves as the primary authority figure and leader of the community's elders, and his role encompasses various responsibilities, including: *a) Conflict resolution*: the Odionwere plays a crucial role in mediating disputes and maintaining harmony within the community. Their wisdom and impartiality are relied upon to settle conflicts peacefully; *b) Cultural preservation*: as custodian of tradition and customs, the Odionwere ensures the preservation of the community's cultural heritage. He oversees important rituals, ceremonies, and festivals, passing down knowledge to younger generations; *c) Community representation*: the Odionwere serves as the voice of the community, representing its interests and concerns to higher authorities, such as the Oba (king) and other governmental bodies; *d) Decision making*: the Odionwere participates in local decision-



making processes, offering insights and guidance based on his experience and understanding of traditional values; *e*) Social welfare: the Odionwere often takes on a role in ensuring the welfare of community members, providing support during times of need and fostering a sense of solidarity; *f*) Advisory role: leaders, including the Oba, often seek the counsel of the Odionwere on matters affecting the community, benefiting from their wisdom and perspective.

Fundamentally, the Odionwere institution in the Benin Kingdom represents the values of knowledge, communal harmony, and elderhood. It serves as a linchpin of governance and social organization, reflecting the deep-rooted traditions and values of the Edo people. The Odionwere played a pivotal role in Benin's socio-political evolution, transitioning from segmented gerontocracies to a centralized economy, modern structures have eroded its influence, particularly the compound family system established around 600 A.D.

Meanwhile, Edion refers to a group of senior initiates in the village elders' council who administered the villages in a gerontocratic system of family and lineage heads. However, with the advent of the monarchy, it also referred to palace chiefs or nobles who held significant administrative and ceremonial roles within the royal court as the earliest Edion to recognize the monarchy became the Uzama – sometimes referred to as “king-makers” –, also known as the Edion-Edo. Traditionally, these high-ranking officials assisted in the governance and management of the kingdom. The Edion-Edo serves as the Oba's advisors, counsellors, and enforcers of his decrees. They play a crucial role in the decision-making process; providing input on matters of state, diplomacy, and governance.

Status, knowledge of communal administration, court etiquette, and loyalty to the Oba distinguished the Edion-Edo. The Edion's responsibilities extend beyond mere governance; they also participate in important rituals, ceremonies, and festivals, reinforcing the kingdom's cultural and spiritual traditions. Overall, the Edion constitutes an essential component of the Benin Kingdom's hierarchical structure, serving as a key figure in the political administration and cultural preservation. It should be noted that the bulk of the Edion remains as village administrators under a gerontocratic system.



## METHODS AND FRAMEWORK

### *Methodology*

This study was conducted in Edo State, Nigeria, which is situated between longitudes 5° E and 6° 42' E and latitudes 5° 45' N and 35° N. The study was conducted in the Benin-speaking parts of Edo South which comprises seven local government administrative areas: Oredo, Egor, Ikpoba-Okha, Orhionmwon, Ovia-North East, Ovia-South West, and Uhumwode. Purposive sampling snowball techniques and in-depth interviews were used. The sample size comprised the Edion village councils from 21 villages, including approximately 210 villages with Odionwere Councils in the Benin Kingdom. In-depth interviews were conducted with the Esogban of Benin Kingdom, and five village Odionwere, one in each of the identified oldest village councils in the seven local government areas. Primary data were gathered through interviews and participant observation. Archival materials and intelligence reports were sourced from the National Archive (Ibadan) and the Palace Library (Oba's Palace, Benin City). Secondary data were derived from published books and articles like Omoregie's *Great Benin* series. Data content was analyzed using descriptive and narrative styles.

### *Operational definition of terms*

*a)* Colonialism: the establishment, maintenance, acquisition, and expansion of colonies in one territory by people from another. It involves unequal relationships between the colonial power and the colony, and typically entails economic exploitation, political domination, cultural assimilation, and sometimes violence or coercion; *b)* Odionwere institution: a system of gerontocracy in Benin villages as shown above; *c)* Benin Kingdom: the Benin-speaking part of Edo State, South-Central Nigeria.

### *Theoretical framework*

This study explores the theories of colonialism and imperialism. According to Horvath, colonialism is universally recognized as a form of domination or control by individuals or groups over the territory and behavior of other individuals or groups. Colonialism is also seen as a form of exploitation focusing on economic variables as in the Marxist-Leninist literature and as a culture-change process as in anthropology. Colonialism as a culture change process provides grounds for examining the infusion of colonial institutions and social ideals in the Benin Kingdom and its effect on the Odionwere. Horvath (1972: 47) notes that the distinguishing factor between colonialism and imperialism appears to be the presence or absence of significant numbers of permanent settlers in the colony from the colonizing power. He thus argues:

The domination of Latin America, North America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the Asia Part of the Soviet Union by European powers all involves the migration of permanent settlers from the European countries to the colonies. These places were colonized most of Africa and Asia on the other hand, were imperialized-dominated but not settled and the countries involved are noticeably different today, in part, because of the nature of the domination process.

While not negating the contention of colonialism as a system that thrives on domination and distinction of the self from the other, Cooper contends that colonialism is a catalyst for modernization and a forbearer for modernism. According to him, the most “ordinary meaning of modernism is that which is new, that which is distinguishable from the past” (2005: 19). This serves to examine the impact of the introduction of colonial institutions such as the Native Councils, the redirection of trade routes with the establishment of new roads and cheap European goods and Christianity. Within this context, this study elucidates colonial modernity as a policy aimed at furthering the subjugation, tractability, and exploitation of Benin.



## ODIONWERE BEFORE COLONIALISM

*Historical origins of the Odionwere institution*

In a historical examination of the Odionwere, it is important to re-examine the theories of the origin of the Benin Kingdom. Two distinct popular accounts are subsisted: its theory of migration and its creation mythology. The myth of creation presents the Benin Kingdom as the centre of the world –*Edo o re isi agbon* – and its founder as the youngest son of Osanobua (God). This myth smacks a sophisticated and established empire seeking to legitimize its claim to resource, power, and authority – factors essential for projecting its imperial power. Osadolor agrees that the myth is an insufficient attempt at a historical reconstruction of the origin of the Benin people. This Benin myth may also be the world view of the people as original inhabitants of their land (Osadolor 2001: 1). Omozusi contends that “this also gives precedence to the Oba (king) of Benin in matters of land with other rulers as they are said to be given land to keep their wealth as well as to settle by the Oba. The above means that Benin was the centre, from where people migrated all over the world” (1997: 3). This popular view reflects the Edo view of land and its rights over this economic resource. It is more convincing to examine these theories as the Benin view of power and authority directed at tracing to God (as its ultimate source) the right to the power of possession and authority to rule.

The Esogban of the Benin Kingdom confirmed that the Benin see God as the bestower of power and from whom power devolves (Edebiri 2014). The Benin mythology of creation supports this line of thought. It explains that God acknowledged and revered as the oldest Odionwere and ancestor, and delegated powers to His children who became earthly elders and lineage heads as well as founders of eponymous communities devolving from a common ancestor (Ovuede 2016: 83). The Benin mythology of creation recognizes other ancestors as leaders of their lineage; thus, emphasis is placed on seniority or old age as symbolizing closeness to God, the source of all power. This is accepted as the most im-



portant prerequisite for leadership with its idea of power revolving around age. It also presents its view of an agnate society with social functions and rights to rule given to the male population. However, it attempts to limit this right to a ruling lineage with celestial patrilineal descent. The Benin mythology is a peace mechanism that nullifies rivalry within the ruling elite and serves to offset internal insurgency against it, epitomized by the Oba whose descendants and those he confers with titles become the rightful rulers of existing peoples.

Benin Kingdom is believed, as postulated by Omoregie, on the theory of migration. The theory of migration encompasses various perspectives and models that seek to explain the causes, patterns, and consequences of human migration. Migration refers to the movement of people from one place to another, whether within a country (internal migration) or across international borders (international migration). Some key aspects of migration theory include: push and pull factors; neoclassical theory; dual labour market theory; world systems theory; structuralism and critical approaches. Overall, migration theory provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay of factors driving migration, including economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental dynamics, and their implications for individuals, communities, and societies.

According to Omoregie, the Benin Kingdom originated from 31 villages established by the descendants of Efa and Emehi, brothers who migrated from Uhe. These original 31 villages known as the Ubini Nowa villages are Alaka, Itebite, Oroghotodin, Ugbague, Efa, Iguisi, Okhorho, Adaha, Eyaenugie, Uhunmwidunmwu, Errie, Ugboha, Iboyanyan, Utantan, Irhuasa, Ikpokpan, Ugbo, Idunmwivbioto, Ugbekun, Ihinmwirin, Emehi, Ebuya, Isekherhe, Uzebu, Ihogbe, Irre, Urubi, Uselu, Ukhegie, Aragua and Ogba (Omoregie 1997b: 1). The supreme ruler of each village was the Odionwere, the oldest Owere (senior man) of the land (Omoregie 1997a: 1). It is interesting to note that before the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the Idu migrant party, forefathers of Efa and Emehi, believed to be settlers at its metropolitan city, had realized the importance of land and sought to lay claim to and authority over it. The Benin people evolved from an admixture of diverse peoples and the Benin language is classified under the Kwa linguistic sub-group.



Bondarenko and Roesse contend that the split into proto-Yorùbá, proto-Edo, and proto-Igbo languages occurred around 3-6.000 years ago with the penetration of the forests by the Southern Edo occurring around 2000 years ago (1999: 543).

The location of Benin Kingdom in the dense tropics of the rain forest supports the view of a dominant male population seeking to cultivate arable crops with the felling of large trees. The establishment of eponymous communities sustained by kinship was the political culture that emerged; one in which the family made up of a man and his wife or wives and children was its basic administrative unit. Bondarenko admits “In the social sphere this radical change was marked by the formation of the extended family community and its institutions of government” (Bondarenko, Roesse 1999: 547; Edebiri 2014). The dominance of the male population can be traced to its age grade system which is made up of seven grades: Emorhue (0-7), Eroghae (7-14), Igbama (14-25), Eghele (25-45), Edion (45-60), Owere (60-70). The Owere were the oldest among males, Okao-Eghele for instance, as head of Eghele age grade, and Odionwere or Okaevbo representing the collective ancestors of the community as the keeper of the Oguedion (elders’ shrine). The supreme ruler of each village was the Odionwere, the oldest of the Edion-Owere in his Village. The Edion-Owere were the elders of the village council and the Odionwere was chosen from their midst, as the oldest of them all was considered proximate to the ancestors and God (Edebiri 2014). This council made them seasoned village administrators and eliminated succession struggles as the next Odionwere was always known based on their age and seniority. Where age seniority was difficult to determine, the first to be called in among initiates into the Edion Council is considered senior to the next person; there lies the seniority basis (Adamasun 2014). This position supports the maxim that “*Odionwere gha somwan egbe ai bo yo*”, implying that when it is someone’s turn to become an Odionwere you do not have to consult an oracle to assist you in getting it (Omoregie 2014). The elimination of the succession dispute over the Odionwere stool accounts for its longevity, adaptability, and resilience, this political culture was premised on precedents.



*Pre-monarchical function of the Odionwere institution in Benin Kingdom*

The Odionwere institution served as a platform for the consultative resolution of communal disputes and family crises. It served as a foundation through which the elders took charge of security, and sanitation and supervised the activities of the Edion, the Oka-Eghele (captain of the youth), Igbama (adolescents) as well as the Oka-Iroghae (leader of the Iroghae). While communities that settled within others may have their councils subject to the older community, a new title of Oka-Idunmwun (the first settler in a quarter) emerged. The Oka-Idunmwun as the first male settler in a new frontier constitutes a level of influence over recent settlers and may call an assembly of family heads to find solutions to shared challenges. However, he was deprived of an Oguedion which subjects him to the host community. According to Omoregie (2014),

an Oka-Iduun can not have an Oguedion because the principal village has its existing elders and shrine. He cannot speak in place of the elders of the hoist community to which he is a recent settler. An Oka-Idunmwun can be a migrant from anywhere as his ancestors were not buried in the district where he was the first settler. His corpse may even be taken to his ancestral home for burial.

Consequently, each Odionwere had its own Iko-evbo (village council) that assisted his Iko-edionvbo (elders' council), made up of all village elders, lineage heads, and Oka-Idunmwun (Omoregie 2014). At these meetings, issues affecting families that could not be resolved at the Iko-wa (family council), and the Iko-Egbee (lineage council) were discussed. If a matter could not be resolved at the Iko-evbo it was referred to the Iko-Edionevbo. This council may consist of the Odionwere and the Edion nene (four most senior elders) or Edion nihiron (seven most senior elders), sometimes all the elders may be requested to attend an enlarged meeting. Furthermore, the Odionwere institution with its headman as the priest of the communal ancestral shrine conducted witchcraft and criminal trials, regulated the building of markets and trading activities with the establishment of four-day interval market



days as well and appointed the Iyeki (mother of the market) and appoints her as the Orueru ya eki (owner of the market), the Ighia-eki (market masters) and installed the Osuneki shrine (Omobude 2014).

Accordingly, Omoregie affirms that it was from the Odionwere institution that the Benin Kingdom developed its earliest political features. Under this system, political offices and functions and the right to make chiefs out of the people (Ekhaevben) and appoint market heads and market masters were done by deliberations of the village elders' council (Omoregie 2014). Undoubtedly, the Odionwere had begun to build a force of guards – Odibo –, the earliest form of military and policing formation in Benin. The Odionwere-in-council, serving as its highest administrative and religious authority, established social norms, condemned perceived wrongdoings, and conducted rituals to honour the ancestors and the Osuneki (market deity) on behalf of the community. The Odionwere of Ebuo-Ogida avers that the right to become the council's headman remained an open franchise to every freeborn male with no history of criminality and signs of senility; its only criteria was advancement in age and the performance of rites of passage (Adamasun 2014). According to him,

all that is needed as a man to become an Odionwere is to be an initiate of the Edion shrine with no record of abuse against an Edion, performing requisite rites and maintaining sound mental health at least to recall issues in the sequence of events as they unfold, this is important in resolving communal disputes.

Due to population growth, communities merged into Okpeevbo-towns. The villages within these towns became wards, making it challenging for a single Odionwere to handle disputes. To address this, a system of Okao-evbo emerged, designating the most senior among Edionwere (plural of Odionwere) inwards or villages as a super-Odionwere. This system, particularly evident in Urhonigbe town in the Iyekorhionmwon area, involves the Okao-evbo overseeing conflict resolution, especially regarding boundary disputes and resource use among forest communities (Umwani et al. 2014).



At a point in time, the various Edionwere were confronted with the need to find a mechanism for resolving matters of collective interest and to negate the isolated village system of independent communities. This paved the way for the emergence of a central committee of Edionwere known as Iko-Edionwere, headed by an Okao-Evbo, who can be called “Super Okao-evbo” for convenience. The Super Okao-Evbo had emerged with its council the Iko-Edionwere which was made up of all the Edionwere of the original 31 villages that made up the Benin metropolis. Essentially, it was the elders or Edion who attended these council meetings. However, Macrae Simpson noted that the family head could send his son who may be a junior Edion to represent him, such delegates are called “Edayi” (singular Odayi) (Macrae Simpson 1936: 17).

The title of Super Okao-Evbo rotated among coalescing villages, drawing representatives from distant Benin towns to the grand council. Omoregie attributes the emergence of kingship and political offices to this evolution. The shift marked Benin’s transformation into a complex, multi-dimensional society, departing from the linear-patriarchal order led by the Odionwere. With the advent of monarchy, the Odionwere became subordinate to the Enigie (dukes), Ehen (royal/communal deity priests), and central administration representatives, altering the structural dynamics of Benin society.

### *Functions of family and lineage councils*

Macrae Simpson rightly observes that the village council hears the petition of those who are to be elevated from a lower age grade to another (1936: 19) as well as confirms the headship of a family and ceremonially inducts him to his charge. Thus, the Okaegbee with his Iko-Egbee as his administrative stool and the elders as Erha (fathers) had their house councils made up of adult male sons, this council was called the Iko-owa. The Erha or father was the lawgiver in his home, priest, and administrative head of his family, and sat over disputes resolution between members of his household. It is believed that at the demise of an elder, he is co-opted into the council of elders in

heaven from where he is re-engaged in mediating for the well-being of his children (Edebiri 2014).

Certainly, the Erha's household authority aligns with the Okaegbee in the Iko-Egbee, overseeing lineage conflicts. The Okaegbee, managing ancestral land, represents the lineage at the Iko-Ebvu. When elders pass, their eldest sons traditionally inherit authority, symbolised by the Ukhure staff. The Okaegbee preserves the Ukhure as a sacred object, and the Ukhure of the founding family rests with the Oguedion under the Odionwere's care, symbolising the village's life, death, and authority in Benin tradition.

In most villages, a section of the Oguedion is set aside as the Arhuenikhao (ancestral presence) this holy of holy is the exclusive preserve of the Edion nene – four most senior elders– or Edion nihiron (seven most senior elders) where matters of grave importance are resolved. According to the Esogban of the Benin Kingdom, the staff of the founding elders of Benin is kept under his preserve at the Edion-Edo. He states, “Esogban is the custodian of the Edion-Edo which is the elders' shrine in Benin. This is part of my function as the Odionwere of Benin” (Edebiri 2014). In pre-monarchical Benin, three appellate authorities existed; one was the family council, the other was the lineage council and the third was the village council.

### *Roles and rites of age grades*

As the oldest Edion led by the Owere the Odionwere is initiated at the Oguedion shrine and installed as the Odionwere, meaning the oldest among the Owere (Amadasun 2014). However, this installation can only be performed after two lunar years (Ikpiha) or three native years of the demise of his predecessor when the Ukhure lies horizontally in the Oguedion; it is restored to its vertical position after this ceremony, expectedly, he performs the nii (thanksgiving ceremony) after two native years of his installation.

The Odionwere-in-council oversaw initiation rites for age grades, including Emorhue and Evbirrevbo for children. Pubescent boys entered Eroghae, serving as messengers, and the



Eghele grade, a militarized group, required an initiation ceremony (Iz'eki) symbolised by shedding the head-pad (Ukoki) to filter capable males for higher roles. This transition allowed them to join Otu groups and build houses. The system, which included learning the Benin language and participating in communal tasks, marked significant milestones in life.

The elevation to the Edion cadre involves a celebratory feast called Ugie-Edion, followed by the Akan-re-Odion confirmation. Induction at the Oguedion shrine, known as Irhi-Odion, is individualised. During an Odionwere installation, the leader can elevate two individuals to Edion. After an Edion's burial rites, his eldest son may seek promotion to represent the family in the elders' council. The chosen applicant, notified by the Odionwere-in-council, undergoes the Igbeken ceremony at the Oguedion, symbolising admission into the Edion Council. There are no rites of passage into the Owere group, which serves as policymakers, high judges, and Okaegbee. Owere holds a lifelong position, acting as Odionwere at the family level and assisting in village administration.

Undoubtedly, the age grade system in Benin is intricately woven into several Otu or age groups which are seven in number, namely Akina, Oya Ighiru Oba, Ehonsi, Oboighiromwen, Obokhae, Aiwani erhen ekpen, and Izamete (Aisien 2009: 114-115). Each group was divided into three sets of seniority: Ikao, Ikadese, and Ikiekie as the most junior. Understandably, with each recruiting for six years in sequential order, the Otu system integrated the entire society into a single town as the individual remains in the group for life. This system allows an Odion in any village to take his place among elders by identifying with his Otu.

### *The emergence and impact of the monarchy*

The Ogiso or sky kings were the first monarchs to rule Benin, the first of these kings was Igodo an ironsmith (Ileme), who accorded the position of an Okaiko and became known as the chief of the council (Omorie 1997a: 5). Subsequently, Igodo won recognition as Ogiso and the right of his children to assume



such role, the earliest four Edionwere to recognise the Ogiso became the Uzama nene – the Ogiso dynasty occasioned the change in the physical structure, social roles and name of the budding kingdom. Thus, the emergence of the political entity called Igo-domigodo “Town of towns” literally means the town of Igodo, before this Benin was called Ekolokolo (Benson 2015). The Ogiso dynasty initiated changes yielding to a process of centralisation. Omoregie agrees that worship of the sky god (Iso) was manipulated to establish a theocratic state. Igodo abolished the right of worship of Iso and Erinwindu deities by all Edionwere and Oka-Edionwere and subsequently abolished the Iko-Edionwere or Edionwere council (Omorie 1997a: 86). In its stead, appointed representatives were made the mouthpiece of their respective villages and accepted as chiefs (Uko).

A fundamental change was that the monarchy exercised the rights of the people to question a few of its actions. However, the Edionwere institution retained the right to excommunicate an abusive Ogiso, considered *primus inter pares*. This right was invoked in the reign of Ogiso Owodo (Edebiri 2014), the last of 31 sky kings. The aftermath of the demise of Owodo was that Benin became a republic (Erediauwa 2004: 206-209), as kingship was in its nascent stages when his son Ekaladerhan was banished. While the Uzama were dissatisfied with creating a new line of kings under the title of Ogamien, their quest to bring back Ekaladerhan led to the adventure of Oranmiyan (Omozusi 1997: 11). This political action was to re-unite the monarchy with the class of ruling nobles and secure their privilege rights.

Certainly, the Ewaka dynasty embraced the title of Oba, likely stemming from “Oba-Uwa”, signifying “provider of good things”. The pivotal shift occurred in 1255 A.D. when Oba Ewedo severed ties with the Uzama at Usama, altering the political landscape. Asserting independence, he no longer relied on Uzama’s recognition. Oba Ewedo disrupted their influence by appointing new chiefs, elevating them to Uzama Nibie. This move showcased his dominance over the Uzama and Edion. The Oba’s authority to create chiefs led to the emergence of various chieftaincy titles, notably Esogban and Iyase (Midwestern State of Nigeria Military Governor’s Office 1973: 39-40), reshaping the political structure with a nod to a mega village society.

Granting the monarch, the aura of autonomy, and the power to appoint chiefs established the Eghaevbo, comprising palace chiefs (Eghaevbo n'Ogbe) and town chiefs (Eghaevbo n'Ore), each with distinct roles. The Iyase led the town chiefs, and the joint council with the Uzama reinforced dominance. Additionally, the Oba designated provincial rulers, Egie-isi and Enigie, superseding the Odionwere through local representatives. Royal informants, Avbiogbe, monitored villages to prevent uprisings. The Oba's control extended to guilds and trade organisations, uniting them through palace associations like Iwebo, Iweguae, and Ibiwe, highlighting the monarch's paramount position in the kingdom (Bradbury 1973: 66).

Macrae Simpson agrees that royal tax (tribute) collectors and representatives known as Enotueyevbo (singular Onotueyevbo) only visited the villages once a year or in rare circumstances (Macrae Simpson 1935: 28). They were allotted several scattered villages considered royal prerogative to oversee, though they could not inherit them. This prevented the balkanisation of the kingdom with the Nobles declaring independence over a block of territory and forestalled an abuse of power by the Onotueyevbo who were to take appeals from the villagers to the Oba. This made the system dependent on the local authority of the Odionwere. Under Monarchical rule, a significant impact was that the Oba appointed Enogies, and the induction of an Odionwere required his approval to assume leadership effectively.

Three tiers of power and authority emerged: the Oba and his chiefs oversaw central administration, the district or dukedom was governed by the Enogie or Ogisi, and village administration, was dominated by the Odionwere-in-council. However, the Nobility built farming settlements or camps (Ago) out of existing communities such as Ogieriakhi-Uphill (established as a farm settlement by a steward of Queen Iheya). There was a tendency for these farming settlements to create independent Edionwere institutions.



## IMPACT OF BRITISH COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION

*The establishment of colonial rule*

The conquest of the Benin Kingdom subjected its socio-cultural institutions to British colonialism in 1897. A grand scheme of exploitation was initiated with Benin's political system modified as the exile of Oba Ovonranmwun offered an opportunity for recruiting colonial loyalists. With the deportation of the Oba, Native Councils were introduced. The Native Council, in conjunction with the British Residents, performed administrative and judicial functions (Igbafe 1979: 86). Its recruitment of willing chiefs to constitute the Native Council with no recourse to cultural practices and hierarchy violated tradition. This represented an extreme case of centralisation of power in circumstances under which the elders in Benin villages were eclipsed (Marshall 1939: 15). In 1902 it regulated the traditional tributes collected from the Villages by chiefs. This triggered the revolt of several villages and their Edionwere who found no authority in the characters that sat in the Native Councils and in the exercise of authority without legitimacy as typified by Chief Agho Obaseki a prominent native colonial agent.

The colonial situation was one of exclusion and it created a sense of greed and grievance among dissatisfied forces. In 1906, many dissatisfied elements acting as Aighuobasimmin's (Ovoranmwun's heir) agents mobilised the villagers for the displacement of Obaseki with the possible return of Ovonranmwun (Igbafe 1979: 121-125). This mobilization, coordinated with the Edionwere in the Sapoba (Sakponba)-Iyekorhiomwon axis, was initially a passive resistance. No carriers were sent to Benin City and no freeborn participated in public works. Yet, it was scotched by a detachment of British troops led by Colonel Moorhouse (Macrae Simpson 1936: 8). The application of brute force rather than dialogue was the colonial option for achieving compliance. In restoring colonial authority, the villages of Igbekhue Ugbokoniro, Idunmowina, Iyanomo, Ugo, Idumeka, Ohegi, and Ikpe were intimidated into submission (Igbafe 1991: 19). These villages were compelled to pay the backlog of withheld services and heavy fines



for the cost of British deployments. British colonialism also introduced paramountcy, in which important personalities were sieved and made paramount Chiefs over contiguous territories and consolidated villages. Paramountcy under British rule subjected several Edionwere institutions to chiefs who were made equivalents of feudal lords. Under these oppressive systems, the only available option in mediating the excesses of abusive paramount Chiefs was a revolt.

Amid colonial oppression, the Edionwere faced traditional challenges. Chiefs Igiehon, Imaran, and Iyamu, British agents, exploited their roles, engaging in illicit activities and enforcing slave labor. In 1906, 1909, and 1912, the Urhonigbe region witnessed a rebellion by the Okao-Evbo against Imaran and Iyamu, now paramount Chiefs. The economic influence of paramount Chiefs in Ekehuan, Sakponba, and Urhonigbe grew, overshadowing the Odionwere, especially in awarding contracts for police barracks and telegraphic lines. The murder of Mr. Crewe-Read in 1906 and the 1911-13 Urhonigbe uprising exposed colonial abuses, prompting reforms in 1914 due to widespread frustration among village headmen (Igbafe 1979: 133-137).

### *Impact of indirect rule in the Benin Division*

British-supervised indirect rule, a colonial administrative system, subordinated traditional institutions for maximum exploitation. In 1914, a central authority, led by the restored Oba, was established, assisted by a council of chiefs with judicial and executive powers. This council managed a share of revenue stored in the native treasury.

In 1915, the Benin Division was divided into four districts (Ibozo), later restructured in 1921 to create five districts. By 1933, the districts increased to nine, each with a Native Court, totalling 13 (see tab. 1).

Tab. 1. *Division of Benin Districts*

<i>District</i>	<i>Native Court Area</i>	<i>District Head</i>
Benin	Benin and Ebue	Osuma (Eghaevbo n'ore)
Ehor	Ehor	Ezomo (Uzama)
Udo	Udo and Usen	Ogie-Ego
Siluko	Siluko	Obazuaye (Eghaevbo n'Ibiwe)
Ekiadolor	Ekiadolor	Oloton (Uzama)
Ekehuan	Ekehuank and Obajere	Obaseki (Eghaevbo n'Iwegue)
Ugboko	Ugboko	Obabaefo (Eghaevbo n'Ore)
Urhonigbe	Urhonigbe	Aiyobahan (Eghaevbo n'Iwebo)
Oghada	Oghada and Igbanke	Ima (Eghaevbo n'Ore)

*Source:* Midwestern State of Nigeria Military Governor's Office 1973: 78.

From 1928 to 1933, the Central Council included the Oba, eight Judicial Council members, 10 Ward Heads, and nine District Heads. Village heads, Enigie or Edionwere, also acted as administrative and judicial heads under District Heads. Reforms, fueled by discontent and calls for modernization, led to the dismissal of the permanency of district heads. The Intelligence reports from the 1940s to 1955 highlight ongoing modernization in the Midwestern region.

In the 1950s, local government laws established a two-tier system in Benin - A Benin Divisional Native Authority-Ikogbakha (Central Council) and Six Districts, including Benin City Council-Ikeredo. The Central Council, led by the Oba, comprised 60 elected members and 19 titleholders, overseeing criminal and civil courts. The Oba, who presided over both courts, rotated the vice presidency monthly between representatives from the City Council and the District Council. The council, with the Oba-in-council, had jurisdiction over Ward and Joint Village Group Council cases, chief discipline, peace maintenance, public order, and public works supervision in Benin. Districts had Central Courts with a single permanent president and a rotating vice presidency.



The Central Council met quarterly and managed day-to-day affairs through the Iguobazero, a weekly executive committee with twenty-four permanent members. It included reps from Benin City Council, Ikeredo, and rotating district members, holding significant administrative sway. The Central Authority had six monthly committees influenced by Edionwere, reducing their control and eliminating the need for Eghele mobilization in public works. Direct taxation replaced corvée labour, fostering professional workmen, often migrant workers.

### *Benin City Council*

The Benin City Council, under the authority of the Oba and Central Council, managed city affairs and finances. An indirect rule introduced Ward Chiefs and District Heads. The Benin City Council, using W.R.L.N. 192 of 1955, divided the area into 43 wards, encompassing both urban and surrounding villages. The creation of Ward's Heads recognized the oldest house-builder as the Odionwere, leading to the proliferation of titles, fragmentation of villages, and the emergence of honorary "City Odionwere".

The Wards selected sub-committees' members with each Ward Council nominating two members to sit in the City Council. However, nomination into the City Council was based on tax payment and compliance with colonial acceptable behaviour. The council's establishment laws merged the Uzama villages into its sphere of influence. This colonial situation made prospective titleholders seek titles that hold a position in the native administration.

### *Benin District Councils*

In 1921 the number of districts and federations in Benin Kingdom increased from four to five with its District Heads becoming members of the Oba's Central Council but not judicial members. Moreover, the British recognized the necessity of reevaluating Benin's pre-colonial administration to enhance

their exploitation of the territory. At the bottom of the re-invented structure, the village heads that were either Enigie or Edionwere were to act (Igbafe 1979: 154). Under this arrangement, the Edionwere were enlisted as facilitators for tax remittance to the native treasury and organizers of villagers for public works - a third of the taxes were retained by the Edionwere, and the majority was sent to the native treasury.

The depravity of this scheme was that the villagers were not represented in the Central Council that controlled the disbursement of native funds. In reality, the council was simply a rubber stamp as the utilization and disbursement of funds were subject to the approval of the resident and district officers. If this colonial attempt was to right the wrongs of Paramountcy and the District Head system, it continued with its many ills. British colonialism continued by appointing ex-paramount Chiefs as District Heads, giving them authority over villages where they had no traditional administrative role. Igbafe admits that under British rule the District Heads were paid salaries and given powers over villages that would not traditionally have paid them voluntary tributes (Igbafe 1979: 154). Not only did the district headman-ship system inherit the actual personages of the paramount Chiefs era but also its very ills of federation as well as the exploitation and harassment of villagers save its appellation. In this attempt at rectifying its ills, it found new roles for the Odionwere institution that must be modernized to suit the colonial clime. Accordingly, based on the proposals of extensive intelligence reports conducted in the 1930s, the district heads system was abolished in 1935 and several changes were made to remedy the administrative system in the Benin Division in the 1940s (Marshall 1939: 32).

These reforms were gradualist attempts at democratizing the political space. Its principal focus was to increase popular participation; however, it compromised tradition and ridiculed the Odionwere institution. In the 1940s, Ward Councils and Courts were introduced as well as Village Group Councils and Courts, District Councils replaced the District Head system, and a Central Council was established. However, its membership was restricted to taxpayers living within the Wards with no criminal record and nomination was to be made by Ward mem-

bers. This created a changed value system on tax payment rather than initiation rites of adulthood and chieftaincy. These Wards and Districts had artificial boundaries just as their heads were alien, so were their administered territories; the powers arrogated to them were foreign to Benin custom (Macrae Simpson 1936: par 29).

For colonial administrative purposes in 1955, the Benin territory was split into two divisions: Benin West (Benin City, Iyekovia, and Iyekuselu Districts) with headquarters at Iguobazuwa and Ekiadolor, and Benin East Division (Akugbe, Iyekorhionmwon, and Uhunmwode Districts) with administrative seats at Eguacholor, Ugo-Niyeke-orhionmwon, and Ehor. Southern rural areas were organized into Iyekogba and Ikoewuare groups, each comprising multiple villages. The Iyekovia district, with 50 wards, included five village federations with over 114 villages. Akugbe District had 40 Wards and four village groups, while Iykeorhionmwon District, following W.R.L.N. 195 of 1955, had 40 Wards and five federating village groups. The Iyekovia District laws divided the Council area into 35 Wards with four federating subordinate Native Authorities, totalling 113 villages. While recognizing ethnic identities, the Colonial Regime structured Wards, and village federations for convenience.

The Districts had little historical basis and their boundaries were dictated by colonial administrative convenience and geographical factors, hence the names of three of them were prefixed by Iyeke meaning “at the back of” or “beyond” certain rivers, for example, Iyekovia, Iyeke-Uselu, and Iyek-Orhionmwon (Midwestern State of Nigeria Military Governor’s Office 1973: 10). These colonial inventions subordinated the Odionwere institution under an alien structure that ripped them of their judicial, political, and economic functions, compelling a naming process, federating several villages, and obliterating traditional boundaries. In reality, the district heads subordinated the Edionwere and utilized them as tools for tax collection from the villages perceived as tax farms.

*Village federations and joint village group councils/courts*

Under this scheme, the District Councils and Courts consisted of several Joint Village Groups of Enigie or Edionwere, elders, and family heads representing wards known as (Idunmwun). The colonial regime maladjusted the Joint Village Group Courts as they featured non-Benin and non-initiates as administrators of justice subject to the matters discussed or parties to disputes. A gleeful attempt at this was the infusion of the Amaokosuwe (senior Ijaw-village-headman), the Okosuwe (Ijaw-elder), and Okakwo (Ijaw-youth) in the Joint Village Courts in Ikpako-Ekehuan and Ughoton where the Agadagba (Egbesu ju-ju priest) of Ijaw settlements as well as the Onare or Oga of Yorùbá and Urhobo camps constituted judicial members respectively. The presidency of these courts was held in rotation among the Edionwere, however, where the district had a paramount head like the Iyase of Udo, he held the presidency of the Court while the vice-presidency was made rotational among the village group heads. In the Benin territories, several settled people in native camps were given status, perhaps, structures of independent villages such as Ekehuan – an Ijaw village – that was part of Ikpako (Ailagboze 2015), which is of Benin origin, Siluko, Tonjor, Salogun and Okomu which were Ijaw camps traditionally administered by the Iyase of Udo (Igbenidu 2015).

The villages were subdivided into wards, forming Village Councils amalgamated into District Councils. This federation resulted in the growth of a new town like Abudu, arising from 20<sup>th</sup>-century timber trading on the Ossiomo River. The town's renaming, from Erhinmwinoruwase to Wire and subsequently, Abudu, reflected the colonial influence and honored a prominent Akure timber merchant. Unusually, Okhunmwun attended the Joint Village Group Court at Oluku, and Udo visited the court at Siluko, enhancing the administrative prominence of these new towns. Despite age and custom, Edionwere did not forsake villages for representation at District Central Councils or Courts. This shift resulted in the rise of influential delegates, overshadowing the Odionwere institution. Edionwere's control over police diminished, with colonial police units and prisons created. Instances of colonial agents like "Obaseki

boys” intimidating and detaining villagers were not uncommon. Nonetheless, Edionwere retained authority in the day-to-day administration of outlying villages where age grades played a role in community policing and security.

In the administration of justice, the imposition of the Supreme Court system overshadowed the Native Courts. In this reconstruction, all traditional laws were screened through British spectacles, and those perceived as against British morality were jettisoned. The British Supreme Court had A-grade powers and unlimited powers in civil cases. The Native Courts were granted graduated powers, categorized as B, C, and D grades.

Noteworthy is that the traditional personages that administered justice were replaced with British political officers and their agents. The effect of this changed circumstance on the Odionwere institution was a feeling among villagers not to approach the Village Courts. They perceived the District and Supreme Courts as wielding real powers, boycotting the village courts. This judicial innovation provided a platform for cultivating an elite trained in common law; it was a deliberate effort to alter tradition through judicial interpretations. It must be emphasized that there was nothing common between British common law and Benin traditional laws.

However, efforts at modernizing judicial administration were compromised by attempts at conflating British laws with traditional laws interpreted in a colonial atmosphere. The Odionwere of Evbo-Ogida rightly observed that the evolution of customary courts out of Native Courts was a misnomer, as members were not screened for initiation into the Edion grade, which makes some of them unfit to adjudicate as elders. Furthermore, it was a flagrant violation of traditional practices for an alternate public court in villages save the Enogie and the Odionwere’s council (Adamasun 2014).

The Native Courts faced strong opposition due to unpopular decisions, forcing villagers to travel long distances to attend hearings or face colonial police arrests. Prolonged case adjournments imposed economic burdens, requiring costly legal services. People’s reluctance to align with ancestral values during court sessions eroded confidence in the judicial system, rendering it seemingly futile.





*Impact of colonial socio-economic reforms*

Colonialism was geared towards economic liberalization and export from the peripheral regions to the manufacturing centres in Britain. To accomplish this, numerous road networks were established to connect the coastal areas and integrate the villages into British trade routes. As a side effect, the construction of these new roads changed the existing settlement patterns. An instance was the forceful emigration of Okada village, located on the Oke Ada River, to its present site occasioned by the Benin-utese-Ondo road that diverted trade from its pristine abode (Ekhaton 2021: 14-16). Thus, instigating conflicts over scarce resources, the Edionwere in villages that harnessed profits from the sales of local foodstuff and gifts from migrant traders as viable points for new and affordable products along traditional trade routes lost such privileged status.

While a traditional trade route had run from Egor-Ova through Iguoshodi, Unuame (Ovia River)-Udo-Lagos through Gbelegbu, the construction of the Oluku-Iyowa-Evbonika-Aihuobabekun via Owo-Akure road to Lagos made these new towns prominent. While armed expeditions were sent to open up the kingdom effort was made to encourage and regulate rubber production with the introduction of rubber and gun licenses. This was followed by the Forestry Proclamation No. 28 of 1901 which made provisions for forest reserves and rubber and timber exploitation (Talbot 1969: 179). Admittedly, rubber merchandising created a sense of economic relief in the villages, however, it instituted social conflicts.

These forest reserves and plantations denied access to forest exploitation, jeopardized local food cropping and made the people dependent on imported food and medicines. Venal forest guards constituted themselves as de facto Odionwere receiving bribes from hunters. In Ekehuan, Iguobazuwa and Ogieriakhi-Uphill, the loss of village lands to forest reserves and plantations limited lands for farming (Ebuowan 2015) The shortage of farmland intensified intra and inter-communal conflicts in many villages. Colonial economic liberalism and its policy of plantation economy saw many migrant rubber merchants from different parts of Benin and Urhobo tappers enrolled as Edion in host communities. Attempts to maintain hierarchy by

this group in the age grade in their ancestral villages – among Benin migrants – yielded conflicts with those who had remained in the community marking time for advancement. This conflict now resolved with the payment of prescribed fees was evident in Evbo-Ogida where the current Odionwere, as a rubber merchant/migrant farmer, had enrolled as an Edion in Ugbogijobo where he plied his trade (Adamasun 2014).

Another act of colonial land grabbing was its policy of creating Government Reserved Areas (GRA). In creating European-exclusive areas, the British displaced the village of Ebuo-Evian along Boundary Road and Giwa Amu with no compensation. This explains the absence of an Odionwere in this area: “Ikpokpan village is now remembered as Ikpokpan road; Eguohon and Oko villages among others became encapsulated in the entrapment of a colonial city” (Amen-Igbevie 2015). These policies forced the emigration of internally displaced persons and made village girls susceptible to the vices of a modern city. Additionally, Christian missionary work enhanced by colonial rule imposed further restrictions on the participation of converts in ritual performance at the Oguedion, reducing by degree the number of initiates in the Odionwere institution. The colonial political and socio-economic reality placed some villages and their Odionwere institutions in jeopardy of extinction with limited applications for upgrades.

### *Impact of political party systems in Benin villages*

Political parties under colonialism were tailored in opposition to traditional institutions. The colonial situation created elitist identities such as the Benin Tax Payers Association which originated from the Benin Community Association as a pressure group. These groups armed with Western education had broader objectives of attaining independence for Nigeria rather than administering village settlements.

British modernity fashioned regional party politics with the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) and the Action Group (AG) identified with the dominant ethnic nationalities in Eastern, Northern

and Western regions respectively. While Benin was administratively grouped in Western Nigeria, it was polarized between the Ogboni cult and the Otu-edo with the tendency to associate Ogboni members with the AG resented its policy on taxing women and perceived scaly programs for internal colonialism. This initiated an era of hooliganism that displaced villagers with attendant disruptions of village councils. The realization that elected members were to become government representatives accentuated this conflict. The temporary deposition of the Olokunmwun (Odionwere) of Okhunmwun by Otu-edo/NCNC members betrays the excesses of this period (Osarobo 2015). In many villages, houses belonging to political rivals were burnt, women were sexually assaulted and farmlands were destroyed (Edebiri 2005: 7).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the impact of British colonialism on the Odionwere conflict management institution in the Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, is a multifaceted narrative of profound transformation and resilience. The imposition of indirect rule marked a pivotal moment, as traditional structures faced subjugation to the newly introduced colonial apparatus. The Odionwere, once a linchpin in local conflict resolution, experienced a perceptible decline in authority as colonial administrators wielded power through appointed chiefs and formalized legal systems.

The enduring legacy of British colonialism is evident in the tension between traditional and Westernized approaches to conflict resolution. This study underscores the imperative of recognizing the nuanced and dynamic interactions between colonial forces and local institutions, urging a nuanced understanding of the historical processes that shape contemporary socio-political landscapes. The legacy of British colonialism on the Odionwere conflict management institution is a testament to the complex interplay of historical forces, providing valuable insights into the ongoing negotiations between tradition and modernity in the Benin Kingdom.

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