

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The trajectory of kingship institution in Olomu of the Western Delta of Nigeria up to 1995

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Abstract: This study traces the development of the kingship institution in Olomu kingdom of the Urhobo people in the West Niger Delta of Nigeria, from pre-colonial times through 1995, examining how it adapted to changing political and social contexts over this period. It employed the narrative and descriptive historical methods of research based on primary and secondary sources. The narrative approach was used to chronologically recount key events and transitions in Olomu's kingship institution over time. The descriptive method allowed for detailed explanations of the structure, roles, and cultural significance of the kingship at different historical stages. These methods provided a comprehensive historical account of the institution's evolution. Data were collected from oral histories, interviews, and archival materials. The study delves into the processes of succession, the rituals associated with kingship, its role in mediating between the spiritual and temporal realms. It also considers the impact of colonialism and post-colonial policies on kingship, and challenges of modern governance. By 1995, the kingship institution in Olomu had adapted to new realities, preserving key traditional elements. This research contributes to understanding how traditional leadership structures like those in Olomu have navigated change, maintaining relevance and authority within the broader context of Nigerian statehood.

Keywords: kingship institution, Olomu kingdom, Urhobo, western Delta, Nigeria

1 Introduction

The institution of kingship in Nigeria and Africa has a rich and varied history, reflecting the continent's diverse cultures and historical experiences. In Nigeria, the kingship institution is deeply entrenched in the cultural and social fabric of various ethnic groups. Despite the common belief that some acephalous groups in the south, like the Igbo and the Urhobo, traditionally did not have kings, historical evidence suggests that certain Urhobo and Igbo communities, such as the Oru-Igbo and Olomu, had established systems of kingship since the pre-colonial era (Onumonu, 2016). These systems often involved a structured governance model with figures like the Obi or Eze Igwe at the helm.

In the Yoruba society, kingship is seen as a symbol of integrity and cultural heritage. The Yoruba people, primarily located in the southwestern part of Nigeria, have a long history of kingship that is intertwined with their religious and social values. The kingship institution is marked by a strong adherence to moral values, communal living, and respect for authority, which are considered the bedrock of their culture. The Benin Kingdom, another significant example, highlights the role of rituals and hierarchy in maintaining the social order. Kingship rituals in Benin are not just symbolic but are integral to the exercise of power and the reinforcement of cultural identity (Alagoa, 1971).

Across Africa, kingship has been a central institution in many societies, serving as a focal point for governance, religion, and culture. African kingship systems vary widely, from centralized monarchies to more decentralized systems where power is shared among local leaders. Historically, African kings were seen as both political and spiritual leaders, often believed to possess divine authority.

The nature of African kingship has been shaped by various factors, including the continent's interactions with European powers during the colonial era. This period saw the imposition of new governance structures that sometimes-undermined traditional systems. However, the resilience of African kingship is evident in the maintenance of traditional rulers as symbols of cultural continuity and identity in many communities. Overall, the kingship institution in

Nigeria and Africa is a testament to the continent's rich cultural heritage and its ability to adapt and preserve traditional governance systems amidst changing political landscapes.

The study of the kingship institution in the Olomu Kingdom within the West Niger Delta explores the evolution, structure, and significance of monarchical rule in this region. The research traces the origins of Olomu's kingship, rooted in Indigenous governance systems influenced by interactions with neighbouring kingdoms and European colonial powers. The kingdom's leadership, centred on the figure of the Ovie (king) known as the Ohworode, played a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion, economic stability, and cultural continuity. The study examines the processes of king-making, the roles and responsibilities of the Ohworode, and the kingdom's political organization, which balances traditional customs with modern governance demands. The impact of external influences, such as trade, missionary activities, and colonial rule, on the kingship institution is also analyzed. This paper contributes to the broader understanding of African monarchical systems by highlighting the adaptability and resilience of the Olomu kingship in the face of changing political and economic landscapes. It underscores the importance of indigenous governance structures in shaping regional identity and authority in the West Niger Delta.

The institution of kingship has been a significant part of the Olomu kingdom's history for centuries. The Olomu kingdom is one of the oldest kingdoms amongst the Urhobo ethnic nationalities with a splendid narrative of the historiography of kingship dating back to the pre-colonial period. It showcases a cultural heritage that is seasoned and thoroughly interwoven with its heterogeneous leadership and monarchical structure that exhibits the robust reigns of key monarchs, their roles, and power dynamics within and without the kingdom. The kingship institution has evolved from a traditional system of governance into a more modern one that incorporates elements of democracy and constitutionalism.

Olomu kingdom is one of the 24 clans in Urhobo land, located in the Central Senatorial District of Delta State, Nigeria. Oral traditions record that Olomu was founded by Alaka, who was a Benin Prince. Over the years, the Olomu kingdom has experienced changes in its socio-political system. One of which, is the adoption and practice of kingship institution, which has played a role in shaping the kingship structure of the kingdom.

Scholars such as Otite, Forae, Adjara, and Omokri, have studied the political institutions of some of the Urhobo groups. They identify gerontocracy, which revolved around the age-grade system and kingship emphasising single representation as the dominant political institution of the people (Forae, 2018; Adjara & Omokri, 1997; Otite, 2011). Rotation as against primogeniture remains the dominant succession arrangement in the Urhobo kingship system with a few exceptions (Adjara & Omokri, 1997). Olomu kingdom is one of the Urhobo kingdoms with a rotational succession arrangement. The kingship in the Olomu kingdom has undergone divergent transformations and transitions over the years. The office of the Ohworode is rotated among the three ruling houses in Olomu, the Uhurie, the Imoghoru, and the Eyavwien Ruling houses. At inception, the rotatory system was between two Ruling Houses; the Uhurie Ruling House and the Imoghoru Ruling House until 1988, when the most recent kingship tussle recorded in Olomu kingdom was witnessed, as the Uhurie Ruling House clamoured for a split into two, to create a third Ruling House, now called the Eyavwien Ruling House after the Imoghoru Ruling House conceded to their request in 1995 (Ogbon, 2015). According to Johnson "the Ohworode did not possess absolute power, but rather constitutional power with support and advice of the clan council" (Johnson, 193).

The kingship system in the Olomu kingdom remains an important aspect of its structure. Johnson further posits that the Ohworode position at inception was usually through an election, by the whole clan at a Clan council meeting. He states that generally, the people appoint a new Ohworode on the death of the former (Johnson, 1931). However, this idea soon became replaced by the rotatory system of succession among ruling houses.

Although the history of Olomu has attracted relative academic attention, as seen in the works of Nabofa, Layeguen, and Ekeh, which variously captured the issues of origin and the socio-political system of the people, the factors that defined the history of the kingship institution in Olomu kingdom have not received adequate academic attention. This is given the existence of claims and counter-claims in the history of the adoption and practice of the kingship institution among the people. Richard Ogbon posits that the history of the Olomu Kingdom dates back to the 15th Century. The first settlement at Otor-Olomu was established during this time (Ogbon, 2015).

The introduction of kingship institutions in most kingdoms has been a short struggle to gain

interview with Felix Ophori, Benin: 10/10/2023).

Although this priesthood system of rulership was short-lived, it had a very significant influence on the people. It was very conventional for the priests to form the leading class since they represented the gods in the different villages where they resided or came from. In this way, they form a centrifugal force to create a social dynamic humanism within their communities for communal stability and cohesion, social solidarity, and socio-cultural development that promotes peace and unity in their domain.

2.2 The town/village council

The town council is made up of the *Okpaku-Ore* (*Okarevworo*) meaning the most senior man in the village, the most senior man in each of the families and the *Ekpaku* (the age grade of old men from fifty and above). Before the kingship political institution, Olomu was administered by the town council of each of the sixteen villages that make up the kingdom. The oral interview has it that decisions therefore taken by the council were only binding on the members of that particular village (Oral interview with Pa Johnson, Olomu: 13/07/2023).

This group is responsible for the decision-making and organizing of each village. Decisions reached are related to the *Ewrawa* and *Eweya* for the smooth administration and running of the town's affairs therefore seeing to the smooth running of the political, judicial and general socio-cultural organization of the town.

All members of the town council were excluded from communal work in the village. The council was overseen by the *Okpaku-Orere* also known as Head *Okpaku* of the village (the most senior man in the village). This council made sure that all orders from the clan council which is Olomu's general council, were duly adhered to in the different villages that made up the Olomu kingdom.

2.3 The clan council

Executive matters relating to the whole kingdom were dealt with by the clan council, whose meeting point was the clan centre, Otorere-Olomu. The clan council comprises all the heads of the town councils (the *Okpaku-Orere*, *Ototas*, *Okpakus* and *Ahomorins*), thus, making the council consist of a large body of men which was headed by the most senior man in the whole clan (Oral interview with Chief Ifogbe, Olomu: 12/07/2023). The clan council served as the final court and court of appeal in all judicial matters that concerned the kingdom. Decisions and laws concluded at the clan council meetings were passed down to each village by each town or village council *Ototas*, who usually were representatives of the Head of the town council, the *Okpaku-Orere*.

However, when the kingship institution was adopted in Olomu, the clan council became directly under the leadership of the *Ohworode* and assisted by the clan *Otota*. The council then supported and advised the *Ohworode* on decision-making relating to the kingdom (Oral interview with Pa Macurly, Olomu: 07/10/2023).

2.4 The age grade system

The administration and economic life of the Olomu kingdom were mainly built on a very definite social scaffolding regarded as the 'Age Grade'. Jerome narrates that before the adoption of the kingship institution in Olomu, the men and women of the kingdom were treated apart and so were divided into age grades known as '*Otu*' plural '*Itu*' (Oral interview with Chief Jerome, Olomu: 12/07/2023).

2.5 The Ekpaku

The most senior age-grade in the Olomu kingdom was known as the *Okpaku Otu*, or grade of old men. This *Otu* was the age-grade group that formed the town and clan councils, not forgetting that the *Otota* of the village and clan councils were also elected from among this *Otu*.

2.6 The Evrawa

The *Evrawa* age group is made up of younger males who had just reached the age of puberty and also of youths or younger men who were not up to the *Okpaku* age grade. This *Otu* is regarded as the largest in the Olomu kingdom. Each village had its own *Evrawa Otu* and accordingly, this group was headed by their *Awotu* or *Otu* Head who also served as the middle point between the *Evrawa* and the village council in transferring information, complaints and

suggestions. He also made sure the duties assigned to the Evrawa were properly carried out (Johnson, 1931).

This *Otu*, naturally are more energetic so they also helped in developing the community economically as they were invited to council meetings to advise on ways to further develop the kingdom. The fact that the youths are more agile and fit than the *Okpaku-Otu*, the town crier of each town was usually selected from the Evrawa Otu (Oral interview with Chief Lucky, Olomu: 07/10/2023).

2.7 The Otu Emete

Just like the men *Otu*, the women *Otu* also played an important role in the clan affairs, as the Otus helped in properly distinguishing which duty or role was to be carried out by each particular *Otu* (Oral interview with Chief Lucky, Olomu: 07/10/2023). The *Otu* Emete was one of the female *Otu* (age-grades) in the Olomu kingdom before the adoption of the kingship institution.

This *Otu* was the age group of girls who were from the age of twelve years. Girls from the age of twelve belong to this *Otu* until they are circumcised and eventually led to their husbands' houses. Their roles in the village mostly included sweeping the village streets open yards, and so on.

2.8 The Otu Eweya

Credence is given to Johnson who asserts that the *Otu* Eweya consists of all women who were married in the village. They saw to it that every ceremony connected with maternity was properly done (Johnson, 1931). The majority of this *Otu* as a group, were women married into a particular village or another family. The *Otu* Eweya is also known as the Eghweya-in-Council with the head of the *Otu* being the most senior of all married women and not the oldest woman in the village (Oral interview with Ophori, Benin City: 10/10/2023).

The head of the *Otu* is usually referred to as the '*Okpaku-Eghweya*'. As with other *Itu*, each village had its own Eghweya-in-council and they were seen as the watchdogs of the activities of the other councils (Layeguen, 2018).

2.9 Council of Chiefs/Ohovworen society

This was one of the pre-kingship institutions in the Olomu kingdom, it was introduced by Igboze, one of the ancestors of Olomu, on his arrival to Otorere-Olomu. The Ohovworen society is one of the societies Igboze introduced to shift political power in Olomu from being given according to age, to the measures of wealth or affluence (Ikime, 1977). The society comprises men and women in the kingdom who had chieftaincy titles. They had their own well-established rules and regulations and punishments if these rules and regulations were not adhered to by its members (Oral interview with Chief Jerome, Olomu: 12/07/2023).

Even after the departure of Igboze from Otorere-Olomu to Benin, this society continued its functions in the clan Chadwick, (1931). The Ohovworen society soon became the central state council. Age did not determine seniority in this society, rather, seniority was based on one's length of membership (Oral interview with Chief Okuro, Olomu: 12/07/2023).

Taking a look at the pre-kingship institutions in the Olomu Kingdom, it is pertinent to note that these institutions and systems helped in shaping the socio-political and socio-economic aspects of Olomu, and even Olomu in general. The system also made way for the introduction of the Kingship institution in Olomu as the past in most cases paves the way for future happenings. There was also a time of religious practice when priesthood practice was dominant in the Olomu kingdom and the chief priest was regarded as the leader of the kingdom. Some of the pre-kingship institutions and practices in Olomu are no longer in existence due to the acceptance of civilization in Olomu thus, the transition of different epochs and different political structures and institutions. However, not all of these pre-kingship institutions and practices were dissolved at the adoption of a kingship institution in Olomu, the practice of some were only reduced.

3 Development and practice of the kingship institution in the Olomu Kingdom

Most kingship institutions in Urhobo land are believed to have been developed from gerontocratic or religious foundations of their society as there existed priest-kings amongst the people

(Otite, 2011). Kingship institutions in Olomu developed from both gerontocratic and religious foundations. Before the practice of kingship institution in the Olomu kingdom, oligarchy, and egalitarianism were also practised.

However, as time went by, a spatial movement occurred when people migrated from the centre, Otorere-Olomu to form different new settlements (towns). This was due to human developments and challenges. In the process of time, the need to have a central system of rulership began to emerge as the role of the age grade system, the council of chiefs, and so on began to wane and grow weaker because most of the council members were of great age. This created loopholes in governance that often generated arguments and confusion in arriving at binding decisions. Therefore, this necessitated the need for an arrowhead in the leadership. This inevitably prompted the quest for a monarchical system (Oral interview with Jerome Omoroh, Olomu: 22/06/2023).

Consequent upon this, the monarchical system of governance was adopted and the title of *Orovwolomu* which means “the owner of Olomu” was bestowed on the chosen head. However, this title of *Orovwolomu* was short-lived as some people clamoured for a change to *Ovie* which was prevalent in most Urhobo kingdoms. As mentioned earlier, the title *Orovwolomu* means ‘the owner of Olomu’. This seems not to have gone down well with members of the community who felt that it was a title that placed them as second-class citizens in their homes.

The title of *Ovie* was also rejected for almost similar reasons. The progenitor of the Olomu people known as Alaka, was a prince of the Benin kingdom. Therefore, adopting the title of *Ovie* would have automatically placed every son and daughter of Olomu as commoners thereby removing them from princehood (royals). The title of *Ohworode* was adopted as appropriate. Therefore, it is noteworthy that in the 16th century, the title of the king in the Olomu kingdom was changed from *Orovwolomu* of Olomu to *Ohworode* of Olomu (Oral interview with Chief J. Diadjomahor, Olomu: 24/04/23). *Ohworode*, which means “the big man” connotes the first amongst equals within and among the people of Olomu kingdom.

Contrary to the above views, it is observed that the title *Ohworode* came into being around 1924 when there was a conference at the Ibadan House of Chiefs. Late chief Okrogboro, late Marierie, and the pioneer *Ohworode* Olorogun Ovedje were part of the prominent people who represented the Urhobos at the conference. In the wisdom of the representatives, who got to Ibadan and discovered they needed a royal father present from amongst them, they chose Chief Ovedje who was a very prominent man from the Olomu kingdom to be their royal father in the conference at the House of Chiefs. They introduced him as their leader and when asked by the colonial masters of his title, they stated he was the *Ohworode* of the Olomu Kingdom. Knowing fully well that Ovedje was not fluent in English, the representatives decided to tell the colonial masters that it was a forbidden act for their *Ohworode* to interact with a non-native or white man speaking a foreign language. Therefore, they had to communicate to the *Ohworode* through the spokesmen, Owowo and Marierie who were also present at the conference (Oral interview with Chief Ewenede J. Akaruyen, Olomu: 9/12/2023). The fact that Ovedje was officially recognized as the *Ohworode* of the Olomu kingdom at the conference, led to a clash of interests between the *Ohworode* and the *Odjenigbovwun*. As stated earlier, the *Odjenigbovwun* at the time, was in charge of the affairs of the Olomu kingdom. However, to maintain the status quo, the two leaders were recognized in the Olomu kingdom. They worked together in governing the affairs of the kingdom.

The kingship institution in the Olomu kingdom remains an important aspect of its structure. The kingship in the Olomu kingdom has undergone a divergent process of transformation and transitions since its adoption. The Olomu kingdom was administered by a traditional leader known as the *Ohworode*. The position of the *Ohworode* at inception was given through election, which was usually done by the whole clan at a clan council meeting. Generally, the people appoint a new *Ohworode* on the death of the previous holder of the title (Johnson, 1931). Being the most rich and powerful man of a generation and having other attributes like the ability to be an administrator, impartial judge, orator and having a presence that commands respect, were the attributes considered as essential when the *Ohworode* of Olomu was elected. However, to have a more peaceful, structured and effective kingship system, this idea soon became replaced by the rotatory system of succession among ruling houses.

At inception, there was no definite process or ceremony involved in crowning an *Ohworode*, it was mostly done through a verbal pronouncement which was either made publicly or in the presence of a few personalities (Ogbon, 2015). In 1979, as directed by the military administrator of Bendel State of Nigeria, Brigadier Samuel Osaigbovo Ogbemudia, a memorandum stating the process of king making in the Olomu kingdom was created. This memorandum was created by Chief Richard Layeguen Ogbon, who is the former *Ohworode*, and his team of able officials.

The crowning of the Ohworode is performed by the most senior kingmaker (Otota) of his Ruling House (Ogbon, 2015).

Rotation as against primogeniture remains the dominant succession arrangement in the Urhobo kingship system with a few exceptions (Adjara & Omokri, 1997). In the Olomu kingdom, the kingship stool is passed on a rotatory basis. The kingship stool of the Ohworode of Olomu at the time, was rotated among the two Ruling Houses that existed at the time, the Imoghoru Ruling House and the Uhurie Ruling House. In 1995 however, a third ruling house known as the Eyavwien Ruling House was created.

One of the unique features of most kingdoms is the tussles that may have existed or that exist therein. Olomu kingdom is not left out in experiencing the tussle feature that comes with adopting a kingship system. In 1805, a tussle for the kingship stool was witnessed between Chief Ovedje and Chief Ikogo, after the demise of the seventh pre-colonial Ihworode, which led to an interregnum that lasted for eighteen years (Oral interview with Pa. Idolor, Olomu: 1/12/2022). The most recent tussle recorded in Olomu is between the Uhurie ruling house and the Imoghoru ruling house, as the Uhurie ruling house agitated to split into two. This agitation led to the creation of the third ruling house in Olomu, known as the Eyavwien ruling house. According to HRM Ovie Richard.L. Ogbon;

In September 1995, the Delta State government accented to the community's request to amend the 1979 instrument regulating succession to the title of Ohworodeship in Olomu Kingdom and promulgated in its place a supplementary gazette which gives recognition to three Ruling Houses in Olomu Kingdom known as Uhurie, Imoghoru and Eyavwien in compliance with the terms of the settlement reached by Chief T. G. Ogigbah's reconciliation committee. According to the edict, succession rotates among the three Ruling Houses, and females are barred. When an Ohworode title is held by one of the Ruling Houses, the Otota and the Akpolor or Akpile titles are held by the other two Ruling Houses respectively" (Ogbon, 2015).

This tussle also saw the creation of a new title which is the title of the Akpile of Olomu. It was however not until 2021 that the Akpile of Olomu was first installed. In 1954 when the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) and the Action Group (AG) were established. Igbeke and Mosheshe who belonged to different parties of politics were in a tussle for the kingship stool and as such, each political party assisted their candidate in the tussle (Oral interview with Chief Ewenede J. Akaruyen, Ovwor-Olomu: 9/12/2023). Mosheshe was however then recognized as the Ohworode of Olomu while Igbeke was recognized as the Oroworere of Olomu. They both attended the traditional council meetings in Benin as leaders of the Olomu kingdom. There was also a leadership tussle between HRH Ovie Richard Layeguen and the late Olorogun Milton Ohwovoriele, the then Akpile of Olomu Kingdom. It is a tradition in Olomu that whoever ascends the throne must be prepared to serve the ancestral fathers. This tradition howbeit was rejected by HRM Richard because he stated he was a Christian and couldn't serve the Ancestral fathers.

The kingship stool is now being rotated among the three ruling houses of the Olomu kingdom, the Uhurie ruling house, the Imoghoru ruling house and the Eyavwien ruling house. In a case when one ruling house is the Ohworode, the title of the Otota and the Eyavwien is produced from the remaining two ruling houses (Oral interview with Pa. Johnson, Olomu: 1/12/2022). The nature of the kingship practice in Olomu is termed relatively peaceful. This is shown in how the tussle between the Uhurie and the Imoghoru ruling houses was resolved. It is not farfetched when we say that the creation of the third ruling house was a compromise for a peaceful settlement over the Ohworodeship. It is noteworthy that the location of the palace of each Ohworode of the Olomu kingdom changes to the village of the Ohworode that ascends the kingship stool, with the present palace being located at Ovwor-Olomu. This is until a permanent palace is built at Otororere-Olomu, which is the centre of Olomu (Oral interview with Felix, Benin: 10/10/2023). The kingship stool has successfully been rotated among the ruling houses thirteen times since its adoption and practice in the Olomu kingdom. The stool was rotated seven (7) times during the pre-colonial era, twice in the colonial era and four (4) times in the post-colonial era.

It is imperative to note that the previous Ohworode of Olomu, HRH Richard Layeguen was the only Ohworode who was directly from the Oghoro lineage hence why he is called Ogoni Oghoro 1. Every other Ohworode was either from Alaka or Uhurie or from both combined (Oral interview with Chief Ewenede J. Akaruyen, Olomu: 9/12/2023).

HRH Macaulay P. Ovogbedia of the Uhurie ruling house is the current Ohworode on the

kingship stool in the Olomu Kingdom. He ascended the stool as the 13th Ohworode of the Olomu Kingdom on May 20th, 2023, after the demise of his predecessor, HRH Richard Layeguen of the Imoghoru ruling house, who was the oldest monarch in Delta State, Nigeria. Thereby enthroning Olorogun Albert Akpomudje (SAN) of the Eyavwien ruling house as the Otota of the Olomu kingdom. (Figure 2, 3, and 4)



Figure 2 Immediate Past Ohworode of the Olomu Kingdom, Ovie Richard Layeguen Ogbon (1988-2023)



Figure 3 The Ohworode of the Olomu kingdom, Ovie Macaulay P. Ovogbedia immediately after his coronation. (Source: Fieldwork)



Figure 4 The Ohworode of the Olomu Kingdom, Ovie Macaulay Ovogbedia and the Odjenigbovwan of the Olomu Kingdom, Olorogun Korobo Philip Atuduhor. (Source: Fieldwork)

4 Impact of colonial rule on the kingship institution

The latter quarter of the 19th century saw the gradual spread of British influence in Nigeria (Salubi, 2008). For the Olomu kingdom, their first encounter with British expansion was in

1886 when the Jekri area was proclaimed as part of the Lagos protectorate. Given the fact that Olomu was a part of the Jekri area, this proclamation automatically put the kingdom under British rule (Oral interview with J. Aluya, Warri: 22/06/23). The colonial era generally in the Niger Delta, brought in its dramatic changes to the affairs of the region (Salubi, 2008).

4.1 The native court system

The introduction of a native court into the kingdom in 1907 was an effective instrument for bringing Olomu under effective British administration. This court was established under the supervision of one Mr George Eyube, a Jekri political agent and trader from Gbogidi (Johnson, 1931). The introduction and activities of this court according to Pa. McCurley, did not aid the true local organisation of the kingdom anymore, as the local political organisation of the kingdom such as the clan council, the council of chiefs and others, began to lose their popularity. This resulted from their functions now being carried out by the new native court, although the village council continued to function in a very minor way (Oral interview with Pa. Macurly, Olomu: 07/10/2023).

The native courts became the intermediary between the district officer and the communities. Thus, the executive authority in the kingdom gradually passed down from the true leaders to members of the native courts who seized every opportunity to suppress any form of true native organisation.

4.2 Introduction of warrant chiefs

Oral tradition has it that the warrant chiefs were known initially as the Government Chiefs. In the Olomu kingdom, most of the members of the native courts who were known as Government Chiefs, were the Okpakus of the kingdom who were members of the clan council, village council and other political institutions that existed at the time (Oral interview with Felix, Benin: 10/10/2023). In a bid to throw off any native titles or offices they possessed, they (Government Chiefs) contented themselves as Warrant Chiefs. These set of chiefs made sure that clan and village council meetings were not held and in situations where they were held, they were hurried by these Warrant Chiefs.

The creation of a memorandum, stating the process of king-making in the Olomu kingdom done by Chief Richard Layeguen Ogbon, who is the former Ohworode, and his team of able officials, is a notable impact of the colonial era on the kingship institution in the Olomu kingdom (Ogbon, 2015).

As of 1960, Nigeria generally gained independence. Olomu kingdom therefore became a free town like many other kingdoms in Nigeria. Although the British had left, some of their developments in Olomu such as schools, continued to impact the lives of the people. Even after the departure of the British government, the education system became stronger. From 1975 when the Okpare Grammar School [the first secondary school in Olomu started, the development of schools in Olomu has become rapid. Modern education systems have increased. These schools however aided more social interactions amongst the people of Olomu and even with their neighbouring clans. Thus, it is imperative to note that under British rule, the Olomu kingdom opened up. Proper communication means were established, and European trading stations mission churches and schools were started.

The colonial rule generally impacted the political history of the Olomu kingdom in many ways. As stated earlier the traditional institutions lost their authority following the introduction of native courts and warrant chiefs especially. Kingship therefore remains significant in Africa's post-colonial development discourse. Despite some of the challenges faced by the kingship institution in the Olomu kingdom during the colonial era, the institution has continued till date to show its dynamic features through adaptations and continuities as change is constant and progress of the kingdom is imperative.

4.3 Continuity and changes in the kingship system

The period under review saw changes and continuities in the kingship institution of the Olomu kingdom and the socio-political and socio-economic system of the kingdom in general. Most remarkable changes in Olomu began in the 19th century, with the overrule of the British colonial government. At this time, the British colonial government had extended into Olomu and taken a better part of the kingdom for good.

The introduction of a native court into the kingdom was an effective instrument for bringing Olomu under effective British administration. This court was so established under the

supervision of one Mr George Eyube, a Jekri political agent and trader from Gbogidi (Johnson, 1931). The introduction and activities of this court thus did not aid true local organization of the kingdom anymore, as the local political organizations of the kingdom such as the clan council, the council of chiefs, etc began to lose its popularity. This was so as their functions/duties were being partly carried out by the new native court. The court at inception did not work out, the reason being that there were not enough personnel to work at the various courts. However, the development of different courts in the communities at Olomu gradually took over from the general native court.

The kingship stool has been successfully rotated among two principal ruling houses in Olomu namely; the Imoghoru and Uhurie Ruling Houses. Presently, a third Ruling House has been added, known as the Eyavwien Ruling House (Ogbon, 2015). Therefore, making the rotation of the Ohworode stool among three Ruling Houses in Olomu. The stool of the Ohworode has been rotated thirteen times among the Imoghoru and the Uhurie Ruling Houses.

The kingship titles changed as the eras changed. During the pre-colonial era, the title was "The Orovwolomu of Olomu". During the colonial through to the post-colonial era, it changed to "the Ohworode of Olomu". The stool was rotated seven times during the colonial era. After this, there was a five-year interregnum from 1918 to 1923. In the colonial era, the stool was rotated twice and in the post-colonial period, the stool of the Ohworode was rotated four times amongst the Uhurie and the Imoghoru Ruling Houses.

By 1995, the Olomu kingship had undergone significant changes but continued to serve as a vital symbol of cultural continuity and identity for the Urhobo people.

5 Summary and conclusion

This research discussed the trajectory of kingship institutions in Olomu of the Western Delta of Nigeria up to 1995. The research showed how the Olomu people administered themselves before the introduction and adoption of kingship institutions in the kingdom, through the pre-kingship institutions that existed at the time. The work also showed that not all of these pre-kingship institutions and practices were dissolved at the adoption of a kingship institution in Olomu, but some were only reduced. Given the dynamic nature of every society, the need to always evolve and most times move with the trends of each epoch becomes imperative. This research discovers that the 15th century marked the beginning of a centralized system of administration in the Olomu kingdom and, thus, the beginning of kingship institutions in the kingdom.

The research further discovered that the migration theories suggest that the Olomu people originated from Benin, Ijaw and Ibo, then finally migrated to settle in the present-day Olomu kingdom which has its headquarters at Otorere-Olomu.

The research also discussed the beginning, growth and development of the kingship institution in the Olomu kingdom. It saw how the Ohworode title was chosen and agreed on by the people as the title given to the king of the Olomu kingdom.

Discussing the practice of kingship in Olomu, the research brought to the fore that Olomu has a long history of kingship which at inception was rotated among the two ruling houses that existed in Olomu, the Uhurie ruling house and the Imoghoru ruling house. However, following the agitation for a split into two by the Uhurie ruling house, a third ruling house, the Eyavwien ruling house was created in 1995. Therefore, the kingship stool is now being rotated among three ruling houses. The work discussed tussle as a unique feature of kingship institutions in the Olomu kingdom. It howbeit mentioned the nature of the kingship institution in the Olomu kingdom to have been a relatively peaceful one since its adoption. Also, the work discovered that the location of the palace of the Ohworode of the Olomu kingdom changes to the village of the Ohworode that ascends the kingship stool.

Going further, the impact of colonial rule on the kingship institution in the Olomu kingdom was highlighted, revealing how the native court and warrant chiefs took over most activities of the true leaders of the kingdom, also mentioned that most of these warrants chiefs and native court officials were members of the village and elders' council of the kingdom. This, therefore, made the kingship institution weak in performing its roles in the kingdom.

The research also disclosed that there were positive impacts of the colonial rule as well as negative impacts, such as the construction of schools, better communication and hospital utilities. The research concluded that despite the challenges faced, the kingship institution has continued to show dynamism through adaptation and continuity as the kingship institution must be seen

by the government of today as a necessary and important factor of the nation-building process in Nigeria.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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