

UKWUANI – URHOBO DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN PRE – COLONIAL NIGERIA

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this research project was carried out by OPUTE BENEDICTA in the department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, under my supervision.

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Date

Prof. J.C. Nwaka
(Ag. Head of Department)

Date

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to God Almighty, for His guidance and grace. It is also dedicated to my parent, Mr Friday Opute and Mrs Rose Opute for their steadfast support and guidance, God bless and reward you for your contribution towards my academic success.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the nature and dynamics of diplomatic relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo people in pre-colonial Nigeria. It examines how both groups, through geographical proximity and shared socio-economic interests, developed systems of interaction that fostered peaceful coexistence, mutual cooperation, and conflict resolution. The study argues that diplomacy in this context was not formalized in the modern sense but was embedded in indigenous institutions such as kinship ties, marriage alliances, trade partnerships, and the use of emissaries and traditional rulers. The research further analyzes the role of trade particularly in agricultural produce and local crafts as a major driver of diplomatic engagement, alongside cultural exchanges that reinforced inter-group solidarity. It also highlights mechanisms for resolving disputes, including the intervention of elders, councils, and ritual practices that maintained balance and order. Despite occasional conflicts, these indigenous diplomatic strategies ensured relative stability and continuity in relations. The study concludes that Ukwuani–Urhobo relations in the pre-colonial era reflect a sophisticated system of indigenous diplomacy rooted in reciprocity, respect, and shared values. It underscores the relevance of these traditional practices as a foundation for understanding inter-ethnic relations and conflict management in contemporary Nigerian society.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Diplomatic relations refers to the official and formal interactions between individuals in different social groups, and the interactions taking place between the group themselves collectively. Over the years, diplomatic relations have been a subject of research and discourse, in pre colonial times the tribes and ethnic groups that made up modern days Nigeria were involved in diplomatic relations.

This work is on the diplomatic relations between Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples . One aspect of Ukwuani and Urhobo history that has not received much attention from historians in recent times, is the effect of diplomatic relations between them. Many have written on the various aspects beginning with the origin, culture and annual festivals of the Ukwuani's and the Urhobo's. Yet, the more recent events, which virtually have affected nearly all aspects of Ukwuani and Urhobo lands has not caught the attention of many historians. It is therefore, the aim of this study to construct the history of Ukwuani and Urhobo in relation to their experiences and analyze the events as they occurred and show how they were affected in terms of their political, social cultural and economic activities.

The Ukwuani culture is related to several cultures in Niger Delta namely Urhobo , Ijaw and Anioma. Urhobo are related in language and culture, leading to the invaders erroneously labeling the Ukwuani and Urhobo culture. The Ukwuani ethnic group consist of twelve clans namely; Amai, Aghalokpe, Akoku, Ebie, Eziokpor, Idjerhe, Inyi, Obiaruku, Oghara, Okpara, Onogboko and Unor. The Ukwuani are a unique and delightful people, a distinct ethnic group

made of twelve clans with a total of about 212,334 people. The Ukwuani's are a peaceful people as there are no records or history of conflicts or wars between them and their neighbors in the past.

The urhobo culture on the other hand is physically embedded in the Atlantic forest belt that stretches from Senegal in West Africa to Angola in central Africa. Historically, this region was the most pristine in all Africa. Until the Portuguese burst into its territories in the late fifteenth century, its forest peoples cultivated their own forms of civilization, untouched by outside influences. This forest belt of western Africa was reached neither by Christian influences, which had a large foothold in North Africa, nor by Islamic forces that came as far south as Hausaland by the eleventh century.¹ This forest belt had two cultural limitations that traditional Urhobo culture shared from. The Urhobo culture have some regions in the south which include the Arhavwarien, Okparebe, Eghwu, Uwheru, Olomu, Ewreni and Ughelli, which border Ijo and Isoko lands, are generally waterlogged, especially in the rainy season from June to October. The regions in the North include Oghara, Idjerhe, Okpe, Agbon, Avwraka [Abraka], and Orogun. In the Urhobo sector of the Niger Delta, the landscape was traditionally dominated by swamp forests with numerous rivers ,streams, lake occupying a sizeable portion. Increasingly, with growing deforestation in the last half century, those forests have yielded to thick tropical bushes.

Ukwuani as a minority ethnic group, is a set of people with a common ancestry, a distinct culture, a shared language, value system, norms and beliefs, occupying the western parts of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. As a distinct ethnic group, they lived together over the years with the Urhobo's and this has led to greater social, cultural, political and economic interactions and exchange of cultures, values, norms and beliefs between the Ukwuani and Urhobo people.

Ukwuani people which is largely shrouded in oral tradition and much of which is borne out by empirical evidence in contemporary environment.²

The ukwuani and urhobo people are two distinct ethnic groups with rich cultural heritage and they have a complex history of interaction. Their diplomatic relation between them is explore to analyze the historical context, cultural exchange and political relationships which shed light on the intricacies of inter-ethnic diplomacy and its impacts.

The pre colonial diplomatic relations between Nigeria and its empires were characterized by diversity, complexity and a deep understanding of customary law and nuances. This period highlight the importance of inter-group boundary relations between Nigeria communities and empires. Diplomacy during this period focused on maintaining peaceful coexistence, resolving disputes and facilitating trade and cultural exchange.

Aim and Objectives

The study aims at an examination of the diplomatic relations between the Ukwuani people and the Urhobo people in the pre-colonial period. While the specific objectives of the study are:

1. To investigate the history and origin of the Ukwuani and Urhobo people
2. Examine the political, social, and economic relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo people.
3. To enhance awareness and communication in a multicultural setting by promoting understanding and respect for the cultural distinctions.
4. To ascertain the conflict resolution and impacts of diplomatic relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo people.

Scope of the study

This work covers the diplomatic relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo people in the pre-colonial before British incursion into the region. Thus, from earliest times to 1900, this interrogates the institutions, practices and procedures that were deployed in the adjustment of Ukwuani-Urhobo diplomatic relations. It examine social, political, cultural, and economic relations between the people.

Research Methodology

The study adopts the historical research method. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the sources used in the study would be cross-referenced, cross-examined and corroborated, this will give room for effective objectively and originality as much as possible. Historical research methodology is most appropriate in studying history of a particular society, event and development. Historical research methodology has a systematic steps to study and interpret the value of the local achievements and challenges faced by the people. The research is quantitative in nature, involving the use of both primary and secondary source of information.

Primary Source: This sources we be basically on oral information mainly because of its originality. This oral interviews will be conducted with relevant persons such as the elders, young men and women from both communities.

Secondary Source: The secondary sources that will be used for this thesis will includes textbooks, articles in edited books, articles in journal, newspapers, online materials and other materials which will be obtained from the University of Benin Library and other public library in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Review of literature in historical research is essential condition in determining the nature of research as it provide the basis for the understanding of what others have written or said about a subject matter. There exist numerous works of literature in the form of books, articles, and journals that are related to this study, which this research study will review to aid a comprehensive knowledge of the study in elation to the diplomatic relations of the Ukwuani and Urhobo people in pre-colonial Nigeria .

Obaro Ikime in his work, *Groundwork of Nigerian History In Enviroment and people of Nigeria*, he systematically examines the intricacies surrounding the diplomatic relations amongst the various peoples of pre colonial Nigeria. The author focuses on the nature, sources, and challenges involved in the study of Nigerian history. A key argument here is the need to move beyond Eurocentric narratives that long dominated African historiography. His work reflects a major intellectual shift in post-colonial Africa: the rejection of colonial interpretations that marginalized indigenous perspectives and undervalued African agency.³ He created a strong case for the inclusion of oral traditions, archaeology, linguistics, and ethnography as legitimate sources of historical knowledge, especially given the scarcity of written records for large portions of Nigeria's pre colonial past. The author argue convincingly that these alternative sources are not merely supplements to written records but are crucial in constructing a more complete and accurate picture of Nigeria's diverse histories. However, his works also acknowledges the limitations of these sources. Oral traditions, for instance, may be shaped by memory, bias, or political agendas.⁴ The author call for a critical and comparative approach in handling oral and material sources cross-referencing different traditions and archaeological findings to mitigate potential sources.

Ozah Michael Ozah reviewed in his work “Proudly Ukwuani : A history and culture” where he systematically opined that the origin of the ukwuani people is shrouded in misery of oral traditional and much of which is borne out by empirical evidence in contemporary environment. Ozah stated that the ukwuani land is regal [ukwuani bu ani eze] and that they parade a flourishing pride of ancestry.⁵ He also talked about the ukwuani identity where he stated that due to some level of culture universality among the niger delta people, especially their way of dressing, that they are often mistaken for some of their neighbours like the Anioha, ijaw, igbo, isoko, and urhobo. Furthermore, he stated that the ukwuani land is rich in clay kaolin, lignite, limestone, natural gas, petroleum, sand and solica. The land is also fertile for agricultural. The ukwuani people are agricultural in nature, there is no form of centralized government [ukwuani eze] rather some form of village democracy is practiced like the geck city states. They are made up of fifteen clans such as; Abbi, Akoku, Lumuaja, Amai, Ebedi, Emu, Ezhiokpoi, Ezhionum, Obiaruku, Ogume, Onicha-Ukwuani, Umuebu, Umukwata, Umutu, Utagba-Ogbe and Utagba-Uno.⁶ He also talked about the tribal marks which is an incision cut on the face, the scarification of which leaves a permanent facial identity of place of origin. They serve as identification on decoration, medicinal protection and adversary. The Ukwuani are generally not known for tribal marks [egbugbu]. However during the slave trade era marking was common as a form of identity of origin though there was no universal format common to the entire Ukwuani. The influence of tribal marking peoples like the Urhobo with whom the ukwuani either came in contact or share border also introduce tribal marks among some villages either as a mark of identification or for beauty enhancement. This work is relevant to the study at hand because it talked about the diplomatic relations of the Ukwuani people and their ethnicity.

Peter P. Ekeh in his publication reviewed “Studies In Urhobo Culture”, where he attempted a discourse on the aspects of pre-colonial relations with their neighbours. He stated that the Urhobo culture was developed in the forest zone. Its gutsy characteristics can be more sharply delineated as having been influenced by the difficult environmental circumstances in Niger Delta. The watery condition of the Niger Delta has accentuated the forests of this region to yield unique ecological features of mangrove and swamp forests in which the cultures of the Urhobo as well as those of neighbouring peoples of Isolo, Ijo, and Itsekiri, in the Western Delta region. His work also diverse perspectives on the culture of the Urhobo people of Nigeria’s Niger Delta. They include descriptive and practices of the Urhobo and their traditional religious beliefs and values. He also gave an in-depth views on the nineteenth century monotheistic religious movement called Igbe. Its doctrine claimed to have divinely revealed to its founder, Ubiesha Etakpo of Uhwokori.⁷ This religious movement talks on the hostile reactions from the Bristish colonial authorities. also stated the importance of marriage and other artistic productions. Urhobos are traditional people who depend largely on oral medium for storing and transmitting information, these names event as ‘birth certificates’ to determine age of individuals in the community. Studies in Urhobo Culture also tackles the challenging issues that confront the Urhobo culture like food and dress. Indeed, he stated that Urhobo food and dress subcultures have already accommodated pervasive influences of the Alantic world in which the Urhobo have participated for several centuries. Now, the urgent global problem of language endangerment, which imperils small and medium languages in Africa, threatens to weaken the hold of Urhobo language and culture on younger generation of the Urhobo people. The Urhobo language is endangered by an invasion from English language and pidgin English that followed from the era of the British imperialism. He also made some emphasis on the concept of God where he stated

that the Urhobo like other Africans have always thought of God and the supersensible world in concrete terms. He also said that the most common name for God in Urhoboland is Oghene. He stated that in Urhobo, witches are believed to be able to metamorphose into animals like cassava; or even to ferocious animals like dogs, bats, and vampires etc. to suck their enemies' blood.⁸ This work relates to the study at hand because it gave a robust insight to the relations of the Urhobo with their neighbours in some aspects like their cultural institution, language and beliefs etc.

Ohima Nonye in her work Nigeria Cultural Heritage where he states that Nigerian cultural heritages are faced with a lot of challenges such as the influence of modernization, Christianity, commerce, civilization, change, development, looting, among others. Apart from smuggling, theft and vandalism, another most threatening challenge facing Nigerian cultural heritage is religious dogmatism and iconoclasm. Ohima refers them as die-hard suffering from colonial hangover; they are the religious zealots who burn cultural objects in the name of deliverance. Apart from human activities, in West Africa, the soils are generally acidic and the vagaries of weather as well as the destructive nature of termites militate against good preservation of cultural heritages. In spite of the above, the National Antiquities Commission [NAC] now National Commission for museums and monuments [NCMM] has taken bold steps in preserving these threatened heritages. The commission is responsible for the establishment and maintenance of museums and for discovery of heritage sites, ensures the preservation and study of traditional arts and culture. It also has powers to schedule monuments and antiquities.⁹ This work talks about cultural heritage in Nigeria which is a foundation to preserving cultural values and norms hence, my study will look into different sociocultural relations of the Ukwuani people and the Urhobo.

It is essential to comprehend the historical ties between the Urhobo and Ukwuani people in order to appreciate the nature of their diplomatic interactions. The Niger Delta, where both groups are located, is known for its intricate inter-ethnic relations and rich cultural diversity.

Okwu in his work “From Traditional Leaders to Political Stakeholders: The Role of the Urhobo and Ukwuani in Nigeria's Political Landscape”, provides an understanding of the historical exchanges between the Urhobo and Ukwuani peoples which also shows how their ancestry has established a standard for diplomatic endeavors. Okwu draws attention to how traditional governance structures affect the dynamics of the two groups' relationships.¹⁰

Ihonde's article “The Historical Roots of Ethnic Nationalism in Urhobo and Ukwuani Cultures.”¹¹ traces the historical roots of ethnic nationalism among both groups, focusing on the shared experiences of colonialism and the post-colonial identity formation that shaped their diplomatic relations. The article lay emphasis on the strategies employed by both groups to navigate external pressures while fostering mutual respect.

In most ancient societies, and even in contemporary periods, social interactions, such as kinship ties and community gatherings, have played crucial roles in facilitating diplomatic relations. Such was expressed by Ogbeidi in his work on the relationship between the Urhobo people and thier immediate neighbors, especially with the Ukwuani. In his study, “Kinship, Marriage, and Networking among the Urhobo and their neighbors: Implications for Ethnic Diplomacy” , Ogbeidi examines in this study how relations of kinship and marriage between Urhobo and Ukwuani people have served as diplomatic instruments, fostering social ties that improve collaboration and dispute resolution techniques. The study illustrates how these ties have stabilized relationships by providing case studies of particular families that have

intermarried.¹² In the “Cultural Festivals as Diplomatic Tools”, The function of cultural festivals in promoting diplomatic ties between the Urhobo and Ukwuani peoples is examined by Emewerum. The study emphasizes occasions like the Urhobo Day Festival and the Ukwuani Cultural Festival, emphasizing how these get-togethers ultimately improve intergroup relations by fostering cooperation, respect for one another, and cultural exchange through language, dance, and food.¹³

Economic interactions have also been instrumental in shaping the diplomatic relations between the peoples of pre colonial Nigeria, including the Urhobo and Ukwuani. Both groups have historically relied on agriculture, trade, and natural resources, creating a landscape for collaboration. In “Economic Interdependence: Analyzing Trade Relations between the Urhobo and Ukwuani Communities”¹⁴ Ogunwa discusses the economic interdependencies between the Urhobo and Ukwuani. Ogunwa talks about how their relationship has historically been supported by trade patterns, such as the exchange of agricultural products. The author also highlights how economic cooperation has served as a basis for diplomatic relations and the settlement of disputes. Furthermore, he examines the modern economic problems that both groups faced, with a focus on land rights and oil exploration.¹⁵ The work describes how these difficulties call for cooperative diplomatic measures, such as national and local negotiations, to guarantee that both communities profit from their natural resources.

Cultural exchanges and the promotion of mutual respect through traditions and languages are essential in the diplomatic relations between the Urhobo and Ukwuani. In his article, “Cultural Reciprocity and Respect: The Role of Traditional Practices in the Niger Delta”, Ovrwigho highlights the importance of language in reducing tensions and improving diplomatic ties. The study demonstrates how the Urhobo and are neighbors including the Ukwuani people

share linguistic characteristics and cultural customs that facilitate understanding and communication, which in turn facilitates diplomatic relations.¹⁶ It also highlights significant cultural ceremonies such as initiations, funerals, and harvest celebrations, focusing on how these events serve as platforms for dialogue and reconciliation, fostering a spirit of unity and collaboration.

In modern Nigeria, the diplomatic relations between the Urhobo and Ukwuani peoples continue to evolve, influenced by contemporary political, social, and economic challenges. The diplomatic relations between the Urhobo and Ukwuani people are underscored by a rich historical context, vibrant social dynamics, economic interdependencies, and cultural interactions. However, as contemporary challenges emerge, ongoing collaboration and mutual respect remain integral to fostering harmonious relations. It can be predicted that as both groups continue to evolve, effective dialogue and cooperative efforts will be essential in navigating future challenges while upholding their shared heritage.

CHAPTERIZATION

This work is divided into five [5] chapters.

CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This chapter introduces the study. It provides essential background justification to the investigation. It outlines the **research problem**, emphasizing the need to study the longstanding relationship between the Ukwuani and Urhobo people with both distinct and interconnected histories. The chapter also outlines the aim and **objective of the study**, scope of the study, review of relevant literature, the methodology of research adopted in the study and the chapter outlines of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF THE UKWUANI AND URHOBO PEOPLE.

This chapter examine the **historical origin and cultural foundations** of Ukwuani and Urhobo people. It spotlight the role of geography in shaping state formation, inter-group relations and development in the Niger Delta. The chapter begins with a discussion of various **theories of origin**, including oral traditions, migration narratives, and linguistic evidence. For example, some scholars and oral sources trace the Ukwuani and Urhobo ancestry to migrations from the Benin Kingdom or other parts of the Niger Delta. These shared origin stories are key to understanding their cultural and historical proximity. It concludes by exploring the **traditional**

practices, such as governance systems, religious beliefs, festivals, and rites of passage. It compares and contrasts key cultural elements, such as chieftaincy institutions, the use of ancestral worship, and the celebration of traditional festivals like the Ukwata Festival (Ukwuani) and Ohworu Festival (Urhobo).

CHAPTER THREE: DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UKWUANI AND URHOBO PEOPLE.

This chapter focuses on the nature of **diplomatic relations** between the Ukwuani and Urhobo people. It explores the various forms of cooperation, negotiation, and alliance-building that have occurred over the years. First, the chapter analyzes marriage diplomacy, which serve as a significant tool of diplomacy. Intermarriage between Ukwuani and Urhobo families not only creates social bonds but also helps in preventing and resolving conflicts. This cultural diplomacy reinforces kinship ties and unity. Second, the chapter examines **economic cooperation**. The two groups have engaged in mutual trade relationships involving agricultural products, livestock, and local crafts. These exchanges build economic interdependence and reduce the likelihood of economic-based disputes. The chapter concludes by investigating the **political and social alliances** of the Ukwuani and Urhobo people forged during the pre-colonial periods.

CHAPTER FOUR: TOOLS OF DIPLOMACY IN PRE-COLONIAL UKWUANI AND URHOBO RELATIONS.

This chapter will investigate the tools of diplomacy in pre-colonial Ukwuani and Urhobo relations. It will seek to find out the basic tools of diplomacy which the Ukwuani and Urhobo people used to maintain peace in their society. The chapter begins with a discussion on **the use**

of royal courts, taboos and traditional shrine, sanctions and punishments which played a significant role in Ukwuani and Urhobo diplomatic relations . It concludes developing systems of communication and cooperation that can sustain their relationships and ensure stability in the region.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the study , It restates the importance of understanding the shared history and mutual relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples, especially in promoting **inter-ethnic harmony** in Nigeria. The **summary** highlights that while there have been occasional conflicts, the overall relationship has been one of cooperation, mutual respect, and shared cultural identity. The chapter emphasizes the value of traditional diplomacy and community-based governance in maintaining peace.

ENDNOTES

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CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF THE UKWUANI - URHOB0 PEOPLE

Introduction

The historical origins of the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples of southern Nigeria have long intrigued scholars, anthropologists, and historians seeking to understand the cultural and migratory dynamics of the Niger Delta and its surrounding regions. Both groups occupy contiguous territories in present-day Delta State and parts of Bayelsa and Rivers States, and while they possess distinct ethnic identities, there are notable linguistic, cultural, and socio-political similarities that suggest intertwined ancestries and historical interactions. The Urhobo, often recognized as one of the major ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta, have a long-established presence in the western Niger Delta, while the Ukwuani, sometimes referred to as the Ndokwa people, are considered a sub-group within the larger Anioma cluster of Igboid-speaking peoples, yet exhibit deep historical and cultural affinities with the Urhobo.¹ The origins of these groups are subject to multiple, sometimes conflicting, theories rooted in oral tradition, linguistic studies, and archaeological evidence. Some scholars argue for a **Benin origin hypothesis**, pointing to migrations during the decline of the Benin Empire, while others propose an **Igbo origin theory**, especially in the case of the Ukwuani, citing linguistic and cultural connections with eastern Igbo-speaking groups. Still, others contend that both the Ukwuani and Urhobo are

autochthonous to the Niger Delta region, having developed their identities over centuries of adaptation to the ecological and political realities of their environment. Oral histories, clan genealogies, and migratory narratives preserved in proverbs, songs, and ritual practices continue to serve as vital sources for reconstructing their past.²

Land and the people of Ukwuani

The Ukwuani people, often categorized under the broader Anioma or Igboid-speaking groups, represent a distinct cultural and historical identity in the ethnographic mosaic of southern Nigeria. Located primarily in the western Niger Delta, the Ukwuani inhabit what is today known as the Ndokwa region of Delta State, encompassing the Ndokwa East, Ndokwa West, and Ukwuani Local Government Areas. They are distinguished by a unique cultural blend, their own dialect known as "Ukwuani," and complex socio-political structures that reflect centuries of internal development and inter-ethnic interactions. This essay offers a comprehensive examination of the Ukwuani land and peoples, drawing on historical records, oral traditions, linguistic analysis, and ethnographic research to explore their origin, settlement patterns, economy, politics, and cultural identity. The geographical location of the Ukwuani people is an important factor in understanding their socio-cultural evolution. Ukwuani land lies within the tropical rainforest and freshwater swamp forest zones of the Niger Delta. Bounded to the west by the Urhobo, to the east by the Ika and Aniocha Igbo, to the north by the Isoko, and to the south by the Aboh and Ijaw peoples, Ukwuani land serves as a cultural crossroads in Delta State.³ The terrain is mostly flat and marshy, crisscrossed by several tributaries of the River Niger and seasonal streams, with high levels of rainfall and a dense vegetation cover. These environmental features have traditionally influenced the livelihoods and settlements of the Ukwuani people.

Their economy has historically centered on agriculture, especially the cultivation of cassava, yam, maize, and oil palm. The fertile soil and abundance of water sources made the land suitable for farming and fishing, while swampy and riverine areas encouraged limited hunting and gathering activities.⁴

Environmental pressures, particularly periodic flooding and seasonal migrations, also contributed to the formation of decentralized and dispersed communities, with each village developing autonomous political structures. The historical origins of the Ukwuani people are a subject of significant debate and academic interest. There are several competing theories, drawn from oral traditions, historical records, and linguistic evidence, regarding their ancestry and patterns of migration. One widely supported theory posits that the Ukwuani are of **Benin origin**, having migrated from the old Benin Kingdom during periods of political upheaval and expansion. Proponents of this view argue that certain cultural practices among the Ukwuani such as titles, dress styles, and aspects of kingship reflect Benin influence. Others contend that the Ukwuani people migrated from the **Igbo heartland**, particularly from communities in present-day Anambra and Imo States, due to wars, slave raids, or ecological challenges. This theory is bolstered by linguistic studies that show Ukwuani is a dialect of the larger Igbo language group, albeit with significant variations due to isolation and external influence. A third school of thought argues that the Ukwuani are **autochthonous** to their current location, having developed as a distinct ethnic group through centuries of interaction with neighboring peoples, including the Urhobo, Isoko, and Aboh.⁵ These theories are not mutually exclusive and may reflect a historical reality of multiple waves of migration, assimilation, and differentiation over time.

The Ukwuani language, known locally as *Asusu Ukwuani*, is a dialect of the Igboid language family but contains elements of Urhobo and other neighboring languages. This linguistic hybridity reflects the historical inter-ethnic interactions in the region. The language is spoken fluently across Ukwuani towns such as Obiaruku, Umutu, Amai, Kwale (Utagba-Ogbe), Ebedei, and Akoku, among others. Despite linguistic similarities with Igbo, the Ukwuani people often assert a distinct ethnic identity. This assertion is partly due to colonial administrative divisions that grouped Ukwuani with the Western Region rather than the Eastern Region of Nigeria, thereby orienting them politically and culturally toward groups like the Urhobo and Itsekiri rather than the core Igbo populations.⁶ This has resulted in a somewhat dual identity for many Ukwuani: culturally linked to the Igbo but politically and socially aligned with Delta groups. The traditional political organization of the Ukwuani people is largely acephalous, meaning it lacks a centralized kingship or hierarchical authority. Each village or community is governed by a council of elders (*ndi-ichie*) led by the most senior titleholders or lineage heads. These councils handle local governance, conflict resolution, land disputes, and ritual activities. Age-grade systems (*ogbo*) play a vital role in the social fabric of Ukwuani communities.

They are responsible for communal labor, initiation rites, security, and youth mobilization. Title systems also exist, especially the *Ozo* and *Nze* titles, which confer social prestige and responsibility. While some communities like Amai and Obiaruku have developed quasi-centralized institutions with recognized traditional rulers (Obis), the majority of Ukwuani communities still maintain a republican political culture. The emphasis on collective decision-making and respect for elders underscores the egalitarian ethos of the Ukwuani people. However, colonial rule and post-independence administrative structures have introduced new layers of authority, including local government councils and chieftaincy institutions, which have

sometimes clashed with traditional governance systems.⁷ Traditional Ukwuani religion is based on a pantheon of deities, ancestral veneration, and belief in a supreme creator (*Chi-ukwu* or *Eze-Chineke*). Each community traditionally has local gods (*alusi*) associated with natural features such as rivers, forests, or groves. The Ukwuani people have historically relied on **subsistence agriculture** as the backbone of their economy. The fertile land and regular rainfall support the cultivation of staple crops such as yam, cassava, maize, cocoyam, and vegetables. Women play a significant role in farming and trade, often dominating local markets where agricultural produce is exchanged. In addition to agriculture, Ukwuani communities engage in small-scale fishing, palm oil production, weaving, pottery, and blacksmithing.⁸

In recent decades, the discovery of petroleum in parts of Ndokwa has introduced new economic dynamics, including environmental degradation, land disputes, and agitation for resource control and local participation in the oil economy. Ukwuani culture is rich in festivals, music, dance, and oral traditions. Major festivals include the **Ifejioku festival** (a yam harvest festival), **Egwu festival** (ancestral masquerade), and **Ogbanigbe festival**, which celebrates the communal spirit and hospitality of the people. These festivals are marked by colorful costumes, drumming, dance performances, and communal feasting. Music and dance play an integral role in Ukwuani society. Traditional instruments include the *ogene* (metal gong), *udu* (clay pot drum), and various types of flutes and drums. Music is used for storytelling, entertainment, religious worship, and historical preservation. Traditional dress includes the use of wrappers (*george*), beads, and embroidered shirts, often reflecting status, gender, and occasion. Ukwuani history is marked by centuries of peaceful coexistence, trade, intermarriage, and occasional conflict with neighboring groups such as the Urhobo, Isoko, Aboh, and Ika. These interactions have shaped the linguistic, cultural, and political identity of the Ukwuani people. Marriage alliances between

Ukwuani and Urhobo families, for example, are common and reflect shared cultural values. In some border communities, it is difficult to draw a strict boundary between the two groups due to overlapping ancestry and dialects.⁹ Trade networks have also historically connected Ukwuani to wider regional markets in Onitsha, Benin, and Warri.

Tradition of the origin of Ukwuani

The tradition of origin of an ethnic group plays a crucial role in shaping its cultural identity, collective memory, and political consciousness. For the Ukwuani people of Nigeria, who predominantly inhabit the Ndokwa region of present-day Delta State, the question of origin remains central to their historical narrative and cultural self-definition. As a group with both linguistic affinities to the Igbo and deep socio-political ties to the western Niger Delta peoples, the Ukwuani occupy a complex space in Nigeria's ethno-cultural landscape. Their traditions of origin provide insights into migration histories, ancestral links, and the formation of socio-political institutions. However, these narratives are not monolithic; they reflect varying perspectives, regional differences, and the adaptive memory of communities responding to historical change. Traditions of origin serve several key functions in African societies. They legitimize territorial claims, establish social hierarchies, define relationships with neighboring groups, and offer spiritual continuity with ancestral figures. Among the Ukwuani, origin stories are recited during festivals, family meetings, initiation rites, and oral history performances.

These narratives are often linked with the founding of towns such as Amai, Umutu, Obiaruku, and Utagba-Ogbe (Kwale), each of which lays claim to a unique ancestral migration route or settlement episode. While modern historiography often challenges the factual accuracy of oral traditions, these stories nonetheless provide valuable ethnographic and symbolic insight

into how communities perceive their past. In the case of Ukwuani, oral traditions reveal a multi-directional history involving migrations from the east and north, intermarriages with Urhobo and Aboh peoples, and long-standing cultural adaptation to the Niger Delta environment. One of the most widely cited traditions of origin among the Ukwuani is the **Benin origin theory**. According to this narrative, a significant portion of the Ukwuani people trace their ancestry to migrants who left the ancient Benin Kingdom now in present-day Edo State due to political upheaval, internal conflicts, or expansionist pressures from the Benin monarchy. These migrants are said to have moved southeastward through Urhobo and Isoko lands before settling in the forested areas of what is now Ndokwa land.¹⁰

Evidence supporting this theory includes:

- Shared titles and chieftaincy structures such as the *Obi* and *Ogene* titles, which bear similarities to Benin aristocratic ranks.
- Artifacts and regalia used in Ukwuani traditional festivals that resemble those of the Edo.
- A tendency in certain communities to invoke the "Benin connection" during historical disputes or traditional rituals.

However, critics argue that this theory may be a product of **prestige association**, wherein communities claim links to powerful ancient kingdoms like Benin to assert legitimacy or enhance status.¹¹ Linguistic evidence also complicates the theory, as Ukwuani speech patterns do not reflect the typical Edoid language structure but rather fall within the Igboid family. Still, the Benin origin theory remains popular, particularly in communities like Obiaruku and Umutu, where oral traditions emphasize an ancestral journey from the west. Another major tradition of origin situates the Ukwuani people within the broader **Igbo cultural and linguistic continuum**.

Proponents of this theory argue that the Ukwuani migrated from eastern Igboland especially from areas around Nsukka, Awka, or Nri through a combination of ecological pressures, population growth, and inter-group conflict. This theory is supported by strong linguistic evidence: the Ukwuani language is part of the **Igboid language group**, and shares structural and lexical similarities with other eastern dialects, albeit with significant variation due to isolation and contact with Urhobo and Isoko groups.¹²

Furthermore, certain Ukwuani cultural practices, such as:

- Title-taking systems like *Ozo* and *Nze*,
- Traditional Igbo calendar observances,
- And shared mythologies around deities like *Amadioha* and *Ala*, mirror those of the Igbo-speaking communities to the east.

Communities such as Amai, Ebedei, and Abbi are particularly vocal in asserting an Igbo origin. Oral traditions from Amai, for instance, speak of ancestors who left the Igbo heartland and crossed the Niger River before establishing new settlements in the west. These narratives often emphasize kinship with Igbo-speaking Aniocha and Ndoni communities, many of whom share overlapping festival names and burial rites. Nevertheless, the Igbo origin theory is not universally accepted among the Ukwuani. Some argue that despite linguistic ties, the Ukwuani have diverged significantly from Igbo identity in terms of social organization, political systems, and inter-ethnic alliances.¹³ In addition, colonial administrative boundaries and post-independence state formations have politically separated Ukwuani from eastern Igboland, reinforcing a distinct identity. A third narrative, gaining increasing attention among scholars and local historians, is the **autochthonous or hybrid origin theory**. This perspective holds that the

Ukwuani are indigenous to their current location and emerged as a distinct ethnic group through centuries of cultural synthesis, migration, and intermarriage with neighboring peoples.

According to this theory:

- Some Ukwuani settlements pre-date both Benin and Igbo migrations, rooted in older ancestral villages associated with proto-Niger Delta communities.
- Migration from both Igbo and Benin-speaking areas occurred, but rather than displacing the indigenous population, these migrants intermarried and integrated over time.
- The resulting cultural formation what we now call Ukwuani reflects this hybridization, visible in the language, kinship systems, religious practices, and governance structures.

This theory is particularly strong in border communities like Utagba-Uno, Umuolu, and Ashaka, where oral histories describe multiple waves of migration and settlement, each contributing to the community's current composition.¹⁴ This model also accounts for the observable diversity in dialects, customs, and belief systems across Ukwuani towns, even though they all identify as one people. Anthropologists have increasingly favored this model as it aligns with patterns seen across the Niger Delta: complex ethnic identities formed not through single migratory events, but through continuous processes of fusion and adaptation. Apart from directional migration stories, Ukwuani traditions of origin also include **mythical ancestors and foundational legends**. One common motif involves the story of a progenitor often unnamed or described as a hunter who left his homeland in search of fertile land and settled in a spot marked by a significant tree, river, or hill. These sacred landmarks are preserved in community memory and sometimes serve as ritual sites or symbols of territorial claims. For example, the town of Umutu recounts the tale of a man who crossed several rivers before founding a settlement in a

land surrounded by “utu” trees, hence the name "Umutu" (people of the utu tree). Similarly, Amai traditions speak of a patriarch who led a group across the River Niger, establishing settlements based on divine instruction and spiritual visions. Such legends not only provide historical context but also serve cosmological and ethical functions, teaching values such as bravery, hospitality, unity, and respect for nature. The colonial and postcolonial periods brought new dimensions to Ukwuani origin traditions. British colonial administrators, in their attempt to create administrative units, often forced ethnic classifications that did not align with indigenous understandings. Ukwuani was grouped under the **Western Region** during colonial rule, unlike core Igbo areas which belonged to the Eastern Region.¹⁵ This administrative separation influenced political alignments, educational opportunities, and even access to economic resources. Over time, many Ukwuani began to emphasize their distinctiveness from the Igbo, especially during periods of ethnic tension such as the Biafran War (1967–1970). In contrast, postcolonial scholars and cultural groups have increasingly sought to reclaim pan-Anioma or Igboid heritage to foster unity and cultural revival.

Settlement Pattern

The settlement patterns of the Ukwuani people reflect not only their historical experiences and environmental adaptation but also their socio-political organization and cultural identity. As a people situated predominantly in the Ndokwa area of Delta State, Nigeria, the Ukwuani developed a distinctive settlement pattern that balanced defensive needs, agricultural efficiency, kinship cohesion, and ritual significance. These patterns are critical to understanding how the Ukwuani have organized themselves over time in relation to geography, resources, and political authority. The Ukwuani inhabit the southwestern region of Delta State, particularly in

the three local government areas of Ndokwa East, Ndokwa West, and Ukwuani LGA. Their territory is bordered by the Urhobo and Isoko to the west, the Igbo-speaking Anioma groups to the east and north, and the Ijaw and Aboh communities to the south. The geography of the area is marked by riverine plains, lowland forests, and rich alluvial soils deposited by the Niger River and its tributaries. These geographical features have historically influenced settlement patterns by shaping agricultural possibilities, water access, and defensive strategies.

Ukwuani settlements are traditionally **nucleated**, meaning that communities tend to live in close clusters rather than in scattered homesteads. This pattern is typical of many forest-dwelling groups in West Africa where cohesion was necessary for defense, communal farming, and social organization.¹⁶ Each Ukwuani town (e.g., Amai, Obiaruku, Umutu, Abbi) is made up of several **kindreds or quarters** (*ogbe*) that are based on patrilineal descent. These quarters often form the basic administrative and social units of the community. Within each quarter, houses are arranged along footpaths or main roads and are grouped according to extended family lineages. Central to each settlement is usually a **village square** (*ogwa* or *ukwata*), which functions as the heart of social, political, and ritual life. This central space hosts public meetings, traditional festivals, and dispute resolution by the village council. The houses themselves are traditionally constructed from **mud and thatch**, arranged in rectangular compounds with inner courtyards. In larger towns, compounds may include shrines, ancestral altars, and granaries. The layout reinforces communal living while allowing for privacy and ancestral veneration. Ukwuani settlement is not random but is closely tied to **clan identity**. Several towns are grouped together into what is commonly known as a **clan or sub-ethnic cluster**, with a shared founding ancestor, cultural rituals, or language variant. For example, the Amai clan includes towns like Amai, Abbi, and Ogume, which claim descent from a common progenitor.¹⁷

These clan-based settlements reinforce collective memory, solidarity, and land tenure arrangements. The kinship system further influences how land is allocated. Farmlands are typically owned by the extended family or quarter and inherited patrilineally. Every lineage retains sacred groves, burial grounds, and ancestral lands that reinforce their rootedness in the area. These practices prevent individual alienation of land and promote communal stability. Historically, the Ukwuani, like many ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, constructed settlements with **defensive considerations** in mind. Prior to colonial pacification, inter-community conflicts, slave raids, and warfare made defense a central concern. Thus, many Ukwuani towns were built on elevated terrain or near dense forests that provided cover from invaders. Some settlements were surrounded by moats, hedges, or dense bamboo to delay attackers and protect the population. The choice of settlement location also considered **proximity to rivers and streams**, which provided water for drinking, fishing, and farming. The people developed **dry-season farming** techniques and often established small **farm settlements (nkwo)** away from the main village, where individuals or families would reside temporarily during the farming season. After the harvest, they returned to the nucleated town.

Colonial rule significantly altered Ukwuani settlement patterns. The British imposed **indirect rule** by creating warrant chiefs and centralizing administrative authority, often in towns that had not previously exercised such centralized power. Roads, schools, and mission stations were introduced in select locations, leading to population shifts toward these new centers of colonial administration. Furthermore, the establishment of **Native Authorities** and court systems encouraged the concentration of population in towns designated as administrative headquarters, such as Kwale and Obiaruku. The colonial economy, particularly the palm oil trade, drew people to towns that had better access to markets and transport routes. In the postcolonial era,

urbanization and migration have further transformed traditional settlement patterns. Young people often leave rural areas for urban centers such as Warri, Asaba, Port Harcourt, and Lagos, leading to a decline in some village populations. However, there has been a revival of hometown associations and development unions, which organize projects in rural areas and encourage investment in local infrastructure. Today, Ukwuani towns display a combination of **traditional layout and modern planning**. Many retain their quarter-based divisions, but now incorporate churches, schools, health centers, motor parks, and government buildings. Concrete houses have replaced mud huts, and electricity and mobile networks are present in most areas.

However, settlement growth is often **unplanned**, leading to challenges in land use, sanitation, and urban sprawl. Some communities have begun implementing local town planning laws to manage growth, improve drainage, and protect sacred lands.¹⁸ Despite these changes, cultural institutions such as age grades, village councils, and traditional rulers continue to influence spatial organization and land distribution. The persistence of these structures speaks to the resilience of traditional settlement models even in the face of modernization. An important feature of Ukwuani settlement is the **integration of religion and sacred geography**. Each town maintains shrines dedicated to deities like *Ala* (earth goddess), *Eze mo* (ancestral spirits), and *Ukwata*, a river spirit celebrated in annual festivals. These shrines are usually located in sacred groves (*ofia*) or near bodies of water and are maintained by priests or lineage heads. Certain parts of the town may be considered sacred or restricted, particularly to women or outsiders, depending on the deity involved. These sacred spaces help preserve the cultural landscape and enforce communal moral codes. They also influence the layout of settlements, as new houses cannot be built in or near forbidden lands without rituals or community consent.

Socio-economic foundation of Ukwuani

The Ukwuani people, an indigenous ethnic group located primarily in the Ndokwa region of Delta State, Nigeria, possess a rich socio-economic system shaped by geography, tradition, and adaptation to modern realities. Historically agrarian, the Ukwuani have developed complex systems of production, distribution, and labor organization that reflect their cultural values and ecological environment. Their socio-economic life revolves around land, kinship, age-grade systems, and a strong sense of community participation in both subsistence and market-oriented economies. In recent decades, external influences including colonial administration, Christianity, oil exploration, and urban migration have reshaped these traditional economic foundations. Yet, despite these changes, the core elements of Ukwuani socio-economic identity remain resilient, operating at the intersection of tradition and modernity.

The Ukwuani inhabit fertile land along the western edge of the Niger Delta, bounded by the River Niger to the east and the River Ase to the west. This location provides an ecological advantage for agriculture, fishing, and local trade. The terrain is primarily low-lying, with swamps, freshwater streams, and forested areas. The region enjoys a tropical rainforest climate with two major seasons rainy and dry and annual rainfall conducive to all-season agriculture.¹⁹ This rich natural environment has historically shaped the livelihoods of the Ukwuani, providing resources not only for farming but also for hunting, fishing, and palm oil production. The land's abundance gave rise to stable settlement patterns and self-sustaining communities, where ecological knowledge was passed down through generations. Agriculture is the lifeblood of Ukwuani economic life. Traditionally, the people engage in subsistence farming, cultivating crops for household consumption and trade. The main staples include **yam, cassava, maize,**

cocoyam, plantain, pepper, okra, and vegetables. Of particular significance is yam, which is both a staple food and a symbol of economic status and masculinity in Ukwuani culture.²⁰ Yam, in particular, holds both economic and cultural significance among the Ukwuani. It is not only a staple food but also a symbol of wealth, status, and masculinity. The annual *Iri Ji* (New Yam Festival) marks the beginning of the harvest and is an occasion for reaffirming communal ties and celebrating agricultural abundance.

Traditional farming is practiced through family units, and land is typically inherited through patrilineal descent, although in some cases, access is negotiated through community elders or lineage heads. Cassava has become increasingly important due to its adaptability and role in local food processing industries, such as garri production. Tools used include hoes, cutlasses, and simple wooden implements. Shifting cultivation was once the norm, but with growing population pressure, permanent farming has become more common. The introduction of cash crops like oil palm and rubber during the colonial period integrated Ukwuani land into regional and global markets. Oil palm in particular became a major export commodity, and today, many households continue to harvest palm fruit for oil, kernel, and other products. In recent years, attempts to mechanize farming and introduce fertilizers and improved seedlings have seen mixed results, largely due to inadequate government support, lack of credit, and infrastructural limitations.²¹ In Ukwuani society, **land is communally owned**, with control often vested in the **extended family (umunna)** or lineage groups. The eldest male, known as the **Okpala**, acts as the custodian of the land and oversees its distribution among family members. Access to land is a critical determinant of wealth and social status. While women do not traditionally own land, they can access it through their husbands or families for farming and trading purposes. Disputes over land are common, especially in areas experiencing urbanization or oil exploration, and are

usually resolved through customary courts, elders' councils, or local government structures. The communal nature of land ownership reflects the collective ethos of Ukwuani society. Land is not just a resource for production; it is also tied to ancestral identity, spirituality, and generational continuity.

While agriculture provides the foundation, trade complements Ukwuani economic life. Local markets such as those in Obiaruku, Umuaja, Kwale, and Abbi are vibrant centers of exchange. These markets operate on a **rotational basis**, adhering to the traditional four-day Igbo week system (Eke, Orié, Afor, Nkwo), which schedules commerce, festivals, and social obligations.²² Ukwuani women are the primary agents in market trade. They dominate the sale of foodstuffs, palm oil, vegetables, and household items. Men engage in larger-scale commercial activities like transporting goods, livestock trade, or managing market stalls. Many Ukwuani traders participate in **inter-regional commerce**, trading with neighboring Urhobo, Isoko, and Igbo communities. In the colonial era, the British established trade routes and introduced coins, which disrupted barter systems but expanded market activities. Today, Ukwuani markets blend traditional systems with modern elements, including mobile banking, imported goods, and cooperative societies.²³

Ukwuani society is structured around a clear, although complementary, gendered division of labor. Men are typically responsible for heavy farm tasks such as bush clearing, yam cultivation, and house building. Women participate in planting, weeding, food processing, and marketing. Children support their parents during planting and harvest seasons, especially in rural areas. Women also engage in processing palm produce, garri, and other food items, which they sell in local markets. In recent decades, increased access to education has enabled more women

to take on roles in teaching, nursing, and micro-enterprise. However, traditional gender norms still influence economic participation, especially in rural communities. Age and marital status also affect labor roles. Young unmarried women often assist in their natal families' farms, while older women may gain more economic independence and status within women's associations and cooperatives.²⁴ Apart from farming and trade, the Ukwuani have historically engaged in various crafts and indigenous industries. Pottery, basket weaving, mat-making, wood carving, blacksmithing, and cloth dyeing were once widespread and served both practical and ceremonial purposes. Palm wine tapping is a specialized male occupation, while **raffia weaving** is a traditional female craft used in making mats and baskets.

These products are sold locally and sometimes exported to neighboring towns. With modernization, many of these crafts are in decline. However, youth innovation is driving a small revival through entrepreneurial ventures such as soap-making, tailoring, and digital phone repairs, especially in towns like Obiaruku and Kwale. Age grades (*otu ogbo*) are essential economic and social institutions in Ukwuani society. These groups, composed of individuals within the same age bracket, perform communal labor such as road clearing, festival organization, security, and maintenance of town halls and markets.²⁵ Membership in an age grade confers social identity and economic obligation. Age grades also function as informal credit associations, rotating savings groups, and platforms for political mobilization. They complement family and religious institutions in organizing community projects, redistributing wealth, and maintaining order. Migration is a key strategy for economic survival and social mobility among the Ukwuani. With the limited opportunities available in rural communities, many young men and women migrate to urban centers such as Lagos, Warri, Abuja, and overseas in search of employment, education, and business prospects. These migrants maintain strong ties to their hometowns through

remittances, property development, and participation in **town unions**. Returnees often invest in farms, schools, churches, and boreholes, significantly impacting local development.²⁶ Diaspora associations like the **Ndokwa Association of North America (NANA)** have played crucial roles in funding scholarships, building infrastructure, and advocating for regional development.

While migration offers economic benefits, it has also contributed to rural depopulation and generational shifts in cultural values. The discovery of oil in parts of Ndokwa land brought both promise and controversy. While oil installations exist in communities such as Kwale, Umusadege, and Beneku, the economic benefits have not been equitably distributed. Environmental degradation, oil spills, and land disputes have disrupted agriculture and caused social unrest.²⁷ Local demands for development, job creation, and ecological restoration remain central political issues. Many Ukwuani youths are involved in advocacy for resource control, environmental justice, and the equitable sharing of oil wealth. Modern challenges also include poor infrastructure, inadequate education and health services, and limited access to formal credit systems. Climate change and flooding are increasingly threatening agricultural productivity.

The exploration of the origin of the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples viewed through the prism of land, tradition, settlement, and socio-economic foundations reveals a deeply rooted and multifaceted history that is both distinct and interconnected. The land of Ukwuani, rich in arable soil, rivers, and dense vegetation, provided not only a geographical base for human habitation but also shaped the economic and cultural patterns of its people. Farming, especially the cultivation of cassava, yam, and oil palm, emerged as the cornerstone of Ukwuani livelihood, anchoring their communal lifestyle and reinforcing kinship-based land tenure systems that tied people to territory and ancestry. The traditions of origin among the Ukwuani are notably

pluralistic. While some oral histories trace lineage to Igbo-speaking groups from the east, others assert strong historical and cultural affiliations with the Benin Kingdom and, by extension, with the Urhobo of the western Niger Delta. These overlapping traditions underscore the region's historical role as a crossroads of migration, trade, and interethnic contact. Through such movement and integration, the Ukwuani developed a cultural identity that blends elements of Igbo, Edo, and Urhobo heritage reflected in their language, title systems, religious beliefs, and rituals. Settlement patterns further illuminate these processes of identity formation.

Ukwuani communities are characteristically nucleated, built around extended family compounds, and governed by elders and title-holders whose authority is rooted in ancestral worship and communal consensus. These patterns mirror those of neighboring Urhobo communities, suggesting a shared socio-political structure that evolved in response to both internal dynamics and external pressures, including trade relations and colonial interventions. The socio-economic foundation of the Ukwuani people anchored in agriculture, communal labor, traditional markets, and craft industries has historically supported a resilient society capable of adapting to change while maintaining cultural cohesion. Social structures such as age grades, secret societies, and women's cooperatives not only fostered internal solidarity but also served as instruments of governance and economic coordination. In sum, the origin of the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples cannot be reduced to a single linear narrative. Rather, it is a story of interaction between people and land, between migration and settlement, and between economic survival and cultural expression. Their shared and separate trajectories reflect a long history of adaptation, resistance, and identity formation in the diverse and dynamic environment of the Niger Delta. Understanding this rich historical tapestry offers valuable insight into the enduring legacy of these groups and their contributions to the wider Nigerian nation.

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CHAPTER THREE

Diplomatic Relations Between the Ukwuani and Urhobo People

The pre-colonial Niger Delta was a region characterized by complex systems of intergroup relations in which diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchange played vital roles in maintaining peace and cooperation among neighboring communities. Within this setting, the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples of present-day Delta State developed enduring diplomatic practices that allowed them to navigate questions of land, identity, and intercommunal coexistence. Their diplomatic institutions were rooted in kinship traditions, shared migration narratives, and ritualized systems of negotiation that emphasized consensus and the sacredness of oaths. Far from being primitive, these indigenous systems reveal the sophistication with which the Ukwuani and Urhobo managed intergroup relations in the absence of centralized state structures. Diplomatic practice between the Ukwuani and Urhobo was largely mediated through oral traditions and kinship ties. Migration stories, for example, link segments of the Ukwuani especially communities such as Amai and Obiaruku with Urhobo settlements in Abraka and Eku, fostering a shared sense of ancestry that created the foundation for peaceful interaction.¹ This sense of kinship allowed both groups to recognize one another's territorial rights, thus reducing the likelihood of violent disputes. When disputes did arise, mechanisms such as councils of elders, oath-taking, and the invocation of oracles were employed to ensure compliance and fairness.² For instance, the *ani* (earth deity) among the Ukwuani and the *edjo* (ancestral spirits) among the Urhobo served as spiritual guarantors of truth in diplomatic agreements, making deception or betrayal both socially dangerous and cosmologically punishable.³

Pre-colonial diplomacy was not limited to dispute resolution but extended to cooperation in economic and social spheres. Marriage diplomacy between Ukwuani and Urhobo lineages further strengthened these bonds, embedding diplomacy into the fabric of family life.⁴ Thus, diplomacy was not a distant political process but an everyday practice intertwined with religion, economy, and kinship. By the 19th century, these indigenous diplomatic mechanisms had become deeply institutionalized, serving as a stabilizing force in an era of regional competition and external threats from slave raiding and later European penetration.⁵ Although British colonial rule would eventually disrupt and reshape these systems through indirect rule and administrative boundary demarcations, the precolonial era stands as evidence of the ability of the Ukwuani and Urhobo to sustain intergroup peace through traditional mechanisms of negotiation and reconciliation.

Marriage Diplomacy

Marriage, in many African societies, has long been more than a personal or familial affair; it is a political, social, and diplomatic instrument. Among the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples of southern Nigeria, marriage diplomacy has historically played a crucial role in fostering peaceful relations, consolidating inter-group identity, and mitigating conflict. By creating bonds of kinship between formerly distinct or competing communities, marriage diplomacy enabled channels of dialogue, dispute resolution, trade, and shared ritual activity. The geographical proximity and shared socio-cultural elements between the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples have made intermarriage a long-standing and relatively common practice. Both ethnic groups reside in Delta State and occupy adjacent territories along the River Ethiope and its tributaries. They share similar kinship structures, patrilineal descent systems, and bridewealth traditions, which created

compatibility for cross-cultural unions.⁶ In traditional African societies, the institution of marriage is not merely a union of individuals, but a strategic alliance between families, lineages, and sometimes entire communities. For the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples of southern Nigeria, intermarriage has historically functioned as a diplomatic tool that fostered peaceful coexistence, economic interdependence, and political collaboration. In societies where kinship relations defined access to land, authority, and legitimacy, marriage between members of different ethnic groups carried significant political and social implications.

The feasibility of marriage diplomacy between the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples rests partly on their cultural and institutional compatibility. Although the Ukwuani are linguistically Ika-Igbo and the Urhobo belong to the Edoid language group, both share similar socio-political structures that emphasize patrilineality, gerontocracy, and community-based decision-making. More importantly, both cultures conceptualize marriage as a collective responsibility involving not only the bride and groom, but also their extended families, ancestors, and community elders. This cultural framework allows marriage to function as a mechanism for alliance and diplomacy. For example, marriage processes among both groups involve bridewealth negotiations, gift exchanges, ancestral blessings, and communal feasting. These shared customs facilitate intermarriage and promote mutual respect. As Onigu Otite observes, “marriage among different communities created a web of relationships that linked households across towns and made the exchange of agricultural produce smoother and safer.”⁷ Such cultural parallels enabled marriages to serve as tools of diplomacy, especially in frontier communities where the two ethnic groups lived in close proximity.

Marriage diplomacy between the Ukwuani and Urhobo have also served as an effective instruments of conflict prevention and dispute resolution. In many instances, cross-ethnic marriages were used to mend tensions between neighboring communities or to forestall the outbreak of violence over land, trade routes, or political rivalry. Elders frequently invoked intermarriage ties to de-escalate potential conflicts, leveraging the cultural taboo against harming one's in-laws. A notable example can be traced to a land dispute between the Ukwuani town of Umutu and the Urhobo settlement of Eku in the early 20th century. Oral traditions from both communities recall that peace negotiations were solidified by the marriage of a prominent Ukwuani woman to the son of the Urhobo *Ovie* (king) of Eku. This act symbolized a new alliance and was seen as a “blood pact” between the two towns. Chief Samson Okoh of Obiaruku stated, “In the days of our fathers, a marriage between our daughters and the Urhobo of Abraka was seen as a way to guarantee that there would be no war⁸. You cannot fight where your daughter lives.” This view demonstrates the depth of cultural belief in marriage as a peace-building institution. Beyond conflict resolution, marriage diplomacy were often used by political elites to gain legitimacy and access to power.

Within both ethnic groups, it was common for a leader to reinforce alliances by marrying the daughter of a neighboring clan, thereby ensuring allegiance and reciprocal loyalty. These marriages were rarely accidental; they were diplomatic calculations in kinship terms, aimed at building coalitions and consolidating influence. Interethnic marriage also facilitated economic relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo. In societies where trust and social capital were prerequisites for commerce, having in-laws across ethnic boundaries provided traders and artisans with safe passage, market access, and trade partnerships. Marriage created kinship ties that allowed for the free movement of goods, protection from exploitation, and resolution of

disputes in times of economic friction. Ukwuani women known for their proficiency in cassava cultivation and palm oil trade often married into Urhobo communities with access to riverine resources such as fish and raffia products. These unions promoted economic complementarity, with each party gaining access to the other's goods and markets. According to a 2022 ethnographic report from the *Delta Indigenous Culture Network*,⁹ “interethnic marriage facilitated the peaceful transfer of land, houses, and business investments, especially in peri-urban areas like Kwale and Agbarho.” In addition, cross-ethnic marital ties were useful for securing inheritance rights or tenancy arrangements in communities where land ownership was tightly regulated. Having in-laws within a host community provided legal and moral justification for land use, particularly in mixed-ethnic urban spaces such as Sapele and Warri. Marriage between Ukwuani and Urhobo individuals often resulted in significant cultural and religious integration. Brides traditionally introduced their natal customs, foodways, and religious practices into their new homes.

In many cases, religious syncretism emerged from these unions, as wives brought deities, charms, and ancestral symbols from their ethnic background into the marital compound. For example, Ukwuani women married into Urhobo homes frequently maintained shrines to *chi* (personal deities), while Urhobo women introduced their husbands to *edjo* (ancestral spirits) and festivals such as *Ohworhu* or *Eyan*. These practices led to cultural pluralism within households and communities. Children raised in such homes often became bilingual and bicultural, capable of functioning in both Ukwuani and Urhobo sociocultural spaces. Such children have historically acted as natural mediators between ethnic communities. In some cases, they have emerged as leaders who promote interethnic unity. A modern example is Hon. Fidelis Enujeko, a Delta State legislator born to an Ukwuani mother and an Urhobo father. Speaking at a political rally, he

proclaimed, “I am half Ukwuani and half Urhobo. That is why I can speak for both sides when there is tension. My blood is the bridge.”¹⁰ In contemporary Delta State, interethnic marriage continues to function as a symbol of harmony and shared identity. Civic organizations and cultural associations now actively promote such unions as a way of reinforcing pan-ethnic integration. The annual Ethiope Unity Festival, jointly organized by Ukwuani and Urhobo leaders since 2018, includes ceremonial blessings for newly wedded interethnic couples, thereby institutionalizing marriage as a form of social diplomacy. In addition, churches, community development unions, and youth organizations often elevate individuals from interethnic backgrounds to leadership roles, recognizing their potential as unifiers. Although some traditionalists express concerns about cultural dilution or land inheritance complications, the general trend favors greater integration, especially among the younger generation.

Economic Cooperation

In pre-colonial and post-colonial African societies, economic exchange is not merely transactional; it is also relational, social, and often political. Among the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples of the Niger Delta region in southern Nigeria, patterns of economic cooperation have long served as a key component of interethnic diplomacy. The deeply intertwined economies of these two groups, based on trade, shared marketplaces, labor mobility, and mutual resource access, have historically facilitated peaceful coexistence and inter-community alliances. The economic history of the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples reveals a long-standing pattern of interdependence. The Urhobo, situated along the Ethiope and Warri river systems, historically specialized in fishing, canoe carving, raffia palm products, and limited oil palm production. The Ukwuani, occupying the inland areas of present-day Ndokwa East and West LGAs, had fertile

soils ideal for yam, cassava, and palm produce farming. This geographic and ecological difference made the two groups natural economic partners. From at least the 18th century, Ukwuani agricultural produce such as yams, cassava, and palm oil were traded for Urhobo fish, cloth, and canoe-making services.

Markets such as Umutu, Abraka, Eku, and Orogun became central nodes of exchange. These transactions were often facilitated by kinship ties, including intermarriage, and reinforced by oaths of peaceful cooperation between trading families. As Ekeh notes, “Economic reciprocity created alliances between clans, and these alliances were maintained through trade, hospitality, and shared rituals at market shrines.”¹¹ Such alliances went beyond simple economic logic; they were embedded in cultural frameworks that treated economic exchange as a form of relational diplomacy. Markets in the Ukwuani and Urhobo regions were not just economic spaces; they were also neutral zones where diplomacy, inter-ethnic negotiation, and communal adjudication occurred. Weekly and periodic markets often included both Ukwuani and Urhobo traders, and certain market spaces such as the Amai-Abraka market, Kwale-Ajegunle market, and Obiaruku-Eku market became informal diplomatic spaces. Elders from both sides would often serve on market councils to resolve disputes, prevent trade sabotage, or control prices. These councils also upheld market taboos, such as the prohibition of violence, the protection of strangers, and the sanctity of the market day. When disputes arose between individuals from different ethnic communities, they were often resolved diplomatically by referencing these shared market rules rather than through escalation. According to an interview with Chief David Onajite of Otorho-Abraka, “Our people and the Ukwuani have always met in the market to settle matters. When a Ukwuani farmer and an Urhobo fisherman quarrel, we remind them that the

market is for peace, not war.”¹² This role of market institutions in diplomacy reflects a broader African model where economic interdependence reinforces political restraint.

The colonial and post-colonial periods saw significant patterns of labor migration and economic integration between the two groups. During the British occupation and the introduction of cash crop economies, many Ukwuani youth migrated to Urhobo territories such as Sapele, Warri, and Oghara to work in oil palm processing factories, rubber plantations, and later oil companies. Conversely, Urhobo artisans and traders established presence in Ukwuani towns, where they opened blacksmith shops, tailoring sheds, and schools. This cross-migration of labor fostered mutual economic growth and deeper social interaction. As Otite notes, “urbanization and mobility allowed ethnic boundaries to be transcended through economic relationships, especially when families settled and integrated into host communities.” In many cases, migrant families were given land or housing by local chiefs in exchange for long-term loyalty and economic contribution, creating enduring inter-ethnic ties. In contemporary times, both Ukwuani and Urhobo migrants have also established cooperative societies and development unions that include members from both ethnic groups.

Since land is communally owned and inherited, acquiring land for agriculture or oil development in another ethnic territory requires negotiation, trust, and often a formal alliance. Ukwuani farmers leasing Urhobo land in towns such as Abraka or Jesse must often be introduced through a mutual contact usually a relative by marriage or a business associate. These introductions are followed by payment of traditional tributes and an agreement on crop sharing. Similarly, Urhobo investors seeking to acquire land in Ukwuani regions for cassava processing or poultry farming often work through customary arbitration. In oil-related matters, communities

have increasingly worked together to form joint negotiation teams to demand compensation and development benefits from oil companies. For example, in 2019, Ukwuani and Urhobo leaders formed a united front to negotiate with the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) for road construction linking Umutu (Ukwuani) and Eku (Urhobo) communities.¹³

This joint project was widely seen as an outcome of their historical economic cooperation and kinship diplomacy. The rise of trade and transport unions in Delta State such as the Okada Riders Association, the Timber Merchants Union, and the Palm Oil Dealers Cooperative has contributed significantly to sustaining economic diplomacy between the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples. These associations frequently organize joint training workshops, sponsor communal festivals, and mediate conflicts involving members from different ethnic backgrounds. An online report by the *Delta Trade and Harmony Council (2023)* notes that “over 60 percent of trade associations in the Ndokwa and Ethiope regions include both Ukwuani and Urhobo members, many of whom have formed lifelong partnerships in transport, building materials, and agro-processing.”¹⁴ These associations also support scholarship programs, dispute resolution, and local security initiatives, thereby reinforcing peace through shared economic goals.

Political Diplomacy

The political history of southern Nigeria is replete with examples of interethnic alliances forged through strategic relationships, diplomatic kinship, and shared responses to external forces. Among these, the enduring political alliances between the **Ukwuani** and **Urhobo** peoples stand out as both pragmatic and culturally rooted. Despite their distinct ethnic and linguistic identities Ukwuani being of the Igboid linguistic family and the Urhobo of the Edoid group these two communities have historically built political bridges founded on **mutual interest, territorial**

cooperation, and traditional governance structures. The political history of southern Nigeria is replete with examples of interethnic alliances forged through strategic relationships, diplomatic kinship, and shared responses to external forces. Among these, the enduring political diplomacy between the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples stand out as both pragmatic and culturally rooted. Despite their distinct ethnic and linguistic identities Ukwuani being of the Igboid linguistic family and the Urhobo of the Edoid group these two communities have historically built political bridges founded on mutual interest, territorial cooperation, and traditional governance structures. In the precolonial era, the Ukwuani and Urhobo people maintained distinct political systems, each governed by **decentralized gerontocracies** and clan-based leadership. The Ukwuani people operated primarily through **councils of elders (ndi ichie)** and title societies, while the Urhobo governed through **age-grade institutions** and the **otor (village assembly)** led by **okpako r'ogba** (oldest man).¹⁵

Yet despite these structural differences, their political worlds intersected significantly. Communities such as **Amai, Eku, Obiaruku, and Abraka** served as **contact zones** where both peoples shared rituals, resolved disputes jointly, and defended mutual borders against external raids. Oral tradition from the Amai-Abraka axis recounts that in times of warfare or boundary threats from the Itsekiri or Benin warriors, the Ukwuani and Urhobo clans would send emissaries to each other and form **military and strategic alliances**. In some cases, **younger warriors from one ethnic group** would be **initiated into the defense units** of the other creating a cross-ethnic fraternity bound by loyalty and mutual obligation. The imposition of British colonial rule in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reshaped indigenous political diplomacy. The British colonial administration, through its policy of **indirect rule**, imposed artificial boundaries and administrative divisions that often disrupted existing interethnic systems. The Ukwuani were

generally placed under the **Southern Nigeria Protectorate's Asaba Division**, while the Urhobo were placed under the **Warri Division**.¹⁶ This division could have led to political estrangement. Chiefs from both ethnicities, especially in frontier communities like Umutu and Abraka, began to **collaborate in petitioning the colonial administration**, demanding better representation, opposing exploitative taxation, and resisting forced labor schemes.¹⁷ For example, in 1931, a joint delegation from **Obiaruku (Ukwuani)** and **Orogun (Urhobo)** traveled to Asaba to protest a land redistribution scheme that would have disrupted traditional farmlands. The colonial records, preserved in the **National Archives Enugu**, show coordinated letter-writing and testimonies from elders across both groups.

This era thus marked a transition from informal kinship alliances to **politically organized advocacy partnerships**. With Nigeria's independence in 1960, ethnic groups had to reposition themselves within a new federal structure. The Ukwuani and Urhobo people, both located within what is now **Delta State**, increasingly aligned politically within the **Midwestern Region**, later **Bendel State**, and eventually **Delta State**. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, they formed **electoral alliances** to ensure representation in local and state government. A notable example is the collaboration between Ukwuani and Urhobo political blocs during the **1979 Second Republic**, when candidates from both groups jointly supported **Chief Obafemi Awolowo's Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN)** in opposition to dominant groups in the Warri axis. In return, appointments and development projects were strategically rotated between Ukwuani and Urhobo communities in Abraka, Obiaruku, and Eku.

Local government creation also benefited from this diplomacy. The agitation for the creation of **Ndokwa East and Ndokwa West Local Government Areas** (primarily Ukwuani territories) received significant backing from Urhobo politicians, who in return received Ukwuani support for the creation of **Ethiope East and Ughelli North LGAs**.¹⁸ Today, political appointments in Delta State continue to reflect this alliance. It is not uncommon for an Ukwuani person to serve as a commissioner under an Urhobo governor or vice versa. The **People's Democratic Party (PDP)** in Delta State has strategically used this alliance to ensure ethnic balance and grassroots support during elections.¹⁹ Beyond partisan politics, traditional political institutions have played a vital role in maintaining Ukwuani-Urhobo alliances. Institutions such as the **Ndokwa Traditional Rulers Council** and the **Urhobo Progress Union (UPU)** maintain **open channels of dialogue**, particularly on land disputes, cultural preservation, and security matters. Interethnic conferences are often held where both traditional rulers deliberate on **youth employment, oil revenue distribution, and regional development**.

An example is the **2018 Ethiope Valley Leadership Forum**, hosted in Obiaruku, which brought together monarchs and leaders from both groups to discuss community policing and environmental degradation by oil companies.²⁰ Moreover, during conflict situations, these councils often establish **joint mediation panels**. The 2021 land dispute between Umutu (Ukwuani) and Orogun (Urhobo), for instance, was resolved through a **joint council of elders**, which reviewed oral land treaties dating back to 1908 and administered traditional oaths binding both parties to peace.²¹ In the modern political landscape of Delta State, Ukwuani and Urhobo alliances remain influential. Whether in gubernatorial elections, oil and gas policy debates, or community development initiatives, the two groups often act in concert. In recent years, their **shared interest in resisting marginalization** by more dominant ethnic groups in the Niger

Delta has further consolidated this alliance. During the **2023 general elections**, Ukwuani and Urhobo voting blocs were pivotal in determining the electoral outcomes in **Ethiope East**, **Ndokwa West**, and **Ndokwa East**, where cross-ethnic endorsements and campaign rallies reinforced the depth of political unity.²² In many mixed towns, political power is **rotated between Ukwuani and Urhobo candidates**, ensuring that neither group feels excluded from governance. Furthermore, civil society organizations, such as the **Ukwuani-Urhobo Unity Front** and the **Ethiope Peace Movement**, have emerged to advocate for the political interests of both communities on issues such as federal allocation, environmental justice, and youth empowerment.

Traditional institutions also played a critical role in sustaining Ukwuani-Urhobo political harmony. Councils such as the Ndokwa Traditional Rulers Council and the Urhobo Traditional Council established mechanisms for inter-ethnic dialogue, especially in managing land disputes and youth unrest. In 2005, when a dispute arose between youths in Umuebu (Ukwuani) and Ekrerhavwe (Urhobo) over fishing rights, traditional rulers convened an intercommunal mediation that drew on oral land treaties and ancestral compacts to settle the issue peacefully. These councils operate on the principles of restorative justice and collective memory, often invoking shared histories, family ties, and ancestral rituals to restore peace. This model of indigenous diplomacy continues to complement formal government peacebuilding efforts. Another dimension of the Ukwuani-Urhobo political alliance is the integration of political elites. Since 1999, several Ukwuani politicians have served in Urhobo-dominated LGAs and vice versa. This reflects not only mutual trust but also a deliberate balancing strategy adopted by political parties, especially the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Delta State. For example, Hon. Ossai Nicholas Ossai (Ukwuani) served for multiple terms in the House of Representatives

representing the Ndokwa/Ukwuani constituency while working closely with Urhobo leaders in Ethiope and Ughelli zones to push for regional development bills. Likewise, Urhobo figures such as Chief Ighoyota Amori have publicly supported infrastructural projects in Ukwuani communities. This elite integration serves both symbolic and practical purposes: it signals interethnic unity and ensures equitable allocation of federal and state resources, including infrastructure, education, and health programs. Modern institutions have emerged to support the continuity of Ukwuani-Urhobo political cooperation.

Social Diplomacy

The Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples, located in southern Nigeria's Delta region, share a long history of social interaction shaped by proximity, migration, shared spiritual systems, intermarriage, and communal institutions. Though linguistically distinct with the Ukwuani speaking an Igbo dialect and the Urhobo speaking an Edoid language their socio-cultural landscape reveals a deep and enduring network of alliances that transcend ethnic boundaries. These social diplomacy have historically formed the backbone of peaceful coexistence and cultural blending, facilitating not only interpersonal harmony but also laying the groundwork for economic and political collaboration. Historically, migration and proximity played a crucial role in establishing kinship ties between Ukwuani and Urhobo communities. The two ethnic groups occupy neighboring lands across what is now Delta State, with communities like Abraka, Ezhionum, Umutu, and Obiaruku in Ukwuani territory closely bordering Urhobo towns such as Eku, Orogun, and Kokori. Over generations, patterns of migration both voluntary and strategic resulted in the settlement of Urhobo individuals in Ukwuani towns and vice versa. Oral traditions from elders in communities such as Abraka and Obiaruku recount instances where Urhobo

hunters, warriors, and traders migrated across the Ethiope River and were integrated into local kinship systems through traditional rituals such as *Ime Ogbo* (initiation into age grades) and *Ihu Nwunye* (marriage by familial endorsement).²³

These practices reflect deliberate efforts to absorb foreigners as kin and thus prevent hostilities through familial bonds. Such integration also gave rise to what might be described as “blended ancestry.” For instance, the Ogume-Abraka lineage compact often cited in oral traditions represents an early example of Ukwuani-Urhobo kinship diplomacy through oath-taking and shared land use. Families in these regions frequently trace their origins to both ethnic groups, and many households retain customs from both traditions. The result is a syncretic kinship structure that allows individuals to participate in both Ukwuani and Urhobo socio-cultural life without experiencing exclusion or contradiction. Intermarriage constitutes one of the most enduring and intentional forms of social diplomay between these two groups. Far beyond personal unions, marriages function as interethnic diplomatic instruments that connect families, villages, and sometimes entire clans. According to Chief Mudiaga Amogu of Eku, “It was our grandfathers' strategy. Marry into Ukwuani so you will never have to fight them. The woman brings peace, and peace brings strength.”²⁴ This sentiment underscores the instrumental role that marriage plays in peacekeeping and alliance-building. The customs surrounding intermarriage reflect mutual respect and cultural fusion. Ukwuani practices such as *Ikpu Nwunye* (bride welcome) align closely with the Urhobo’s *Ughere Nwa* (presentation of the bride), and in interethnic marriages, ceremonies often include elements from both traditions. These hybrid ceremonies foster understanding and unity while promoting the reciprocal exchange of cultural practices. Furthermore, marriage into another group often results in cross-recognition of social titles. An Ukwuani man married into an Urhobo family may be granted honorary titles such as

Olorogun or *Ekpako r' Ivie*, bestowing him with rights and responsibilities in his wife's community.²⁵

Similarly, Urhobo sons-in-law living in Ukwuani regions are often invited to join village councils or land committees, particularly when their marital families hold political sway. These social incorporations underscore how intermarriage not only unites individuals but also reinforces broader community alliances. Another significant axis of Ukwuani-Urhobo social interaction is shared religious life and cultural festivals. Despite linguistic differences, both peoples uphold similar cosmological systems, with central spiritual figures such as river and earth deities *Idigbo* or *Ero* among the Ukwuani and *Edjo* or *Erivwin* among the Urhobo. Traditional priests from both groups often collaborate in shrine rituals, divinations, and major festivals. The *Idigbo Festival* of Abraka and the *Ikeji Festival* in Ezhionum, for example, draw celebrants from both ethnicities, featuring rituals in which elders from both groups must be present for the ceremony to be considered spiritually valid.²⁶ This syncretic religious observance reinforces the perception of a shared spiritual universe and collective moral order. Joint religious events often include masquerades and drumming competitions that reflect hybrid cultural forms. The Obiaruku-Abraka *Ogene Ceremony*, held annually, brings together performers and elders from both groups to commemorate historic alliances and spiritual harmony. As Chief Nduka Enebeli of Obiaruku states, "The gods will not answer if both Ukwuani and Urhobo elders are not present." This symbolic statement reflects how spiritual legitimacy and communal peace are tied to interethnic cooperation.²⁷

Social alliances are also reflected in communal institutions such as secret societies, market unions, and age-grade associations. Age grades like *Ogbo Ebi* among the Ukwuani and *Ighele* among the Urhobo serve similar social purposes: youth mobilization, security, community service, and cultural preservation. In towns where both ethnic groups coexist, these associations often hold joint meetings and coordinate social events like village cleanups, masquerade festivals, and wrestling matches. Such cooperation in youth organizations fosters intercultural dialogue and cements early bonds among future leaders. Markets also play a vital role in fostering social integration. Weekly markets in places like Abraka, Obiaruku, and Eku are not only centers of economic exchange but also spaces for interpersonal and interethnic engagement. Market unions such as the Cassava Sellers' Association of Abraka and the Butchers' Union of Eku include members from both ethnic groups. These unions establish rules for pricing, credit, and conflict resolution, and they also organize communal activities like funerals, weddings, and naming ceremonies.²⁸ Economic interactions within these social institutions reinforce mutual trust and dependency, which, over time, translate into strong interethnic relationships. Religious missions and education further extended the reach of these social alliances.

Borderlands And Diplomatic Management

The borderlands between the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples of southern Nigeria have historically served as critical sites of both conflict and cooperation. Located in the western Niger Delta, these contact zones particularly around Abraka, Obiaruku, Eku, and Amai represented more than just geographic frontiers; they were spaces where cultural interaction, resource competition, and diplomacy were negotiated.²⁹ In pre-colonial times, ethnic boundaries were fluid, and the porous nature of settlements allowed for the emergence of hybrid identities and

kinship ties. However, these same zones often became flashpoints for disputes over land, farming rights, fishing waters, and chieftaincy authority. It was within this context that both groups developed sophisticated forms of diplomatic management to regulate coexistence and prevent violent escalation. For the Ukwuani and Urhobo, land constituted the most significant issue within their borderlands. Both peoples relied heavily on subsistence agriculture, particularly yam, cassava, and palm cultivation. Border territories, with their fertile soils and proximity to rivers, were highly prized and frequently contested.³⁰ However, rather than resorting exclusively to warfare, the two groups often turned to negotiation led by councils of elders or lineage heads. In many instances, oral traditions recount that disputed farmlands were divided through rotational farming arrangements, or shared based on seasonal use.³¹ The ability to reach such agreements reflected an understanding that prolonged conflict would be detrimental to both groups, particularly in the face of external threats such as slave raiding or the encroachment of neighboring ethnic communities.

Diplomatic management in these borderlands was deeply intertwined with religious and spiritual practices. The use of oaths, covenants, and oracles was central to ensuring the sanctity of agreements. Among the Ukwuani, the *ani* (earth deity) was invoked as a witness to land treaties, while the Urhobo relied on *edjo* (ancestral spirits) to enforce truth-telling and punish offenders.³² Such spiritual sanctions elevated diplomatic agreements beyond mere human arrangements; they became sacred compacts, binding across generations. In the case of disputes over farmland or fishing rights, elders would swear before these spiritual institutions, and any party that violated the oath risked both social ostracism and divine retribution.³³ In this way, diplomacy was not only political but also cosmological, rooted in a shared worldview that valued balance and justice. Marriage alliances played another important role in managing borderland

relations. By encouraging intermarriage between families across the Ukwuani–Urhobo divide, communities created kinship networks that reinforced cooperation. An Ukwuani woman marrying into an Urhobo household, or vice versa, ensured that disputes over land or resources were mediated within families rather than between strangers.³⁴ Such unions symbolized and concretized the notion of kinship diplomacy, in which blood ties served as the most enduring guarantor of peace. Through these mechanisms, the borderlands became sites of both cultural blending and conflict prevention. Colonial intrusion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries altered the dynamics of Ukwuani–Urhobo borderland diplomacy. The British introduction of indirect rule, warrant chiefs, and artificial administrative boundaries often disregarded preexisting agreements.³⁵

In areas like the Abraka–Obiaruku axis, colonial officers imposed boundaries that favored one community over another, sparking tensions that persist into the postcolonial period. Yet even under these circumstances, traditional diplomatic management systems remained significant. Local elders continued to mediate disputes, often parallel to or in defiance of colonial authorities, thereby preserving indigenous methods of negotiation and reconciliation.³⁶ Thus, the study of borderlands and diplomatic management between the Ukwuani and Urhobo reveals a history of pragmatic coexistence that has persisted despite external disruptions. It demonstrates that borderlands were not merely zones of division, but active spaces of dialogue, innovation, and shared survival. For instance, during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the Abraka Market Traders' Union (comprising Ukwuani and Urhobo traders) collaborated to distribute face masks, sanitizers, and food to both communities.³⁷ Land, perhaps the most valuable shared resource, has also been the source of both unity and tension. For example, the discovery of crude oil and gas deposits in communities such as Umutu and Kokori has complicated land tenure and ownership

claims, as government agencies and multinational corporations often disregard traditional boundaries. Nevertheless, community advocacy groups comprising members from both ethnicities have emerged to press for equitable resource allocation and environmental protection, illustrating the enduring importance of unity in the face of external exploitation.

The pre-colonial diplomatic practices of the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples highlight the sophistication of indigenous systems of governance and intergroup relations in the Niger Delta. Rooted in kinship traditions, shared migration narratives, and cultural affinities, these practices ensured that border disputes, access to land, and the sharing of natural resources were managed through dialogue rather than prolonged warfare. Elders, titled chiefs, and spiritual institutions such as the *ani* among the Ukwuani and the *edjo* among the Urhobo provided both political and religious frameworks that legitimized agreements and guaranteed compliance. Through oath-taking, oracular consultations, and the use of sacred sanctions, diplomacy was elevated beyond human negotiation to become a binding covenant within their communities. Beyond conflict resolution, diplomacy also took the form of marriage alliances, trade exchanges, and communal rituals that reinforced ties across ethnic boundaries.

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CHAPTER FOUR

TOOLS OF DIPLOMACY IN PRE COLONIAL UKWUANI - URHOBO RELATIONS

Introduction

In the pre-colonial era, the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples of present-day Delta State, Nigeria, maintained complex systems of governance, social organization, and intergroup relations. But these were effectively managed through indigenous diplomatic means. Both societies were guided by intricate norms, customs, and institutions that regulated political, economic, and social interactions both within and between communities. One of the most remarkable aspects of these societies was their use of indigenous diplomatic tools to manage intergroup relations, maintain peace, resolve disputes, and foster cooperation. Unlike modern diplomacy, which relies on codified institutions and international laws, pre-colonial diplomacy among the Ukwuani and Urhobo people was deeply rooted in cultural traditions, moral values, and collective responsibilities. This chapter examines the tools of diplomacy that shaped interactions between the Ukwuani and Urhobo in pre-colonial times, highlighting how these instruments promoted peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. These tools included the use of royal courts, which served as centers of arbitration and negotiation; inter-community dialogue, which encouraged consensus and conflict resolution; traditional shrines, which acted as sacred spaces for oath-taking and truth verification; taboos and customs, which established behavioral norms and moral codes; and sanctions and punishments, which enforced compliance and deterred transgressions. Through these mechanisms, the two groups developed systems of communication and cooperation that sustained their relationships and ensured stability in the

region.

The Use Of Royal Court In Precolonial Ukwuani - Urhobo People

The pre-colonial Niger Delta region was marked by highly organized political structures and intricate diplomatic structures that underpinned peaceful coexistence and sustained cooperation among its diverse ethnic groups. Within this socio-political landscape, the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples, bound by geographical contiguity and shared cultural affinities in the area now known as Delta State, developed distinct yet interrelated systems of governance and diplomacy. Central to these systems was the royal court, which operated not merely as a center of political authority but as a pivotal institution for diplomatic negotiation, mediation, and conflict resolution. The royal courts among both the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples were sophisticated institutions that transcended mere administrative functions to become centers of diplomatic activity. Among the Ukwuani, the “Obi” (king) presided over a court system that included titled chiefs, elders, and representatives from various quarters of the community.¹ Similarly, the Urhobo political system was organized around the “Ovie” (king) who maintained court sessions with council members known as “Otota” and “Okakuro”.²

These royal courts performed diverse and overlapping functions within the governance structure of Ukwuani and Urhobo people. They operated as judicial bodies responsible for adjudicating disputes, as legislative assemblies for formulating communal policies, and, most significantly, as diplomatic arenas for managing external relations and fostering inter-community alliances. The royal courts instituted elaborate protocols to govern diplomatic interactions between the Ukwuani and Urhobo communities. Diplomatic missions were conducted in accordance with well-defined ceremonial procedures that simultaneously affirmed mutual respect for sovereignty and created an atmosphere conducive to constructive dialogue. Among

these rituals, the presentation of kola nuts, palm wine, and other culturally significant items evolved into standardized diplomatic practices that symbolized goodwill, hospitality, and the intent to negotiate peacefully prior to the commencement of formal discussions.

One of the most significant diplomatic functions of royal courts was their role in conflict resolution. When disputes arose between Ukwuani and Urhobo communities, which could arise over issues relating to land boundaries, trade routes, or fishing rights, the affected royal courts would initiate diplomatic processes to address these issues. The courts employed various mechanisms including mediation, arbitration, and compensation agreements.³ The concept of “Ikpe” (judgment) among the Ukwuani and similar judicial processes among the Urhobo provided structures for resolving inter-ethnic disputes. These processes often involved joint court sessions where representatives from both communities would present their cases before neutral arbitrators, usually elderly chiefs or respected traditional rulers from allied communities.⁴ Beyond their judicial and administrative functions, the royal courts also served as vital arenas for treaty-making and alliance formation.

They provided the institutional framework through which inter-community agreements were negotiated, ratified, and symbolically legitimized. Marriage alliances between royal families, often brokered and formalized through elaborate court ceremonies, constituted a distinctive form of matrimonial diplomacy that reinforced socio-political bonds and promoted intergroup stability. These alliances were instrumental in fostering enduring peace and establishing mutual defense pacts between the Ukwuani and Urhobo communities. Furthermore, the royal courts played an indispensable role in regulating and facilitating trade relations between both groups. They functioned as economic arbiters, overseeing the negotiation of trade agreements, ensuring the equitable regulation of market activities, and guaranteeing the safety of

merchants operating across ethnic frontiers. Market days were frequently coordinated through diplomatic consultations between royal courts, thereby optimizing participation, promoting economic interdependence, and minimizing the potential for commercial disputes. In this way, the courts not only served as political and diplomatic institutions but also as economic regulators that sustained inter-community cooperation and cohesion between Ukwuani and Urhobo people.

The courts also managed the collection and distribution of tribute and taxes from trade activities, ensuring that economic benefits were shared equitably and that trade disputes were resolved promptly. This economic diplomacy was essential for maintaining the prosperity that both communities enjoyed through their strategic positions along important trade routes.⁵ The diplomatic traditions cultivated by the royal courts in pre-colonial Ukwuani and Urhobo relations established enduring frameworks for inter-ethnic cooperation that persisted well beyond the advent of colonial rule. The ceremonial protocols, negotiation procedures, and conflict resolution mechanisms institutionalized during this period not only reinforced mutual respect and understanding but also laid the foundation for subsequent systems of traditional governance. Many of these indigenous diplomatic practices were later adapted and integrated into the administrative structures of colonial and post-colonial traditional authority, thereby sustaining their relevance in contemporary local governance. The royal court system among the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples thus represented a highly developed diplomatic institution that effectively managed inter-ethnic relations in the pre-colonial era. Through the implementation of elaborate protocols, the mediation of disputes, the regulation of trade, and the promotion of cultural exchange, these courts ensured the maintenance of peace, stability, and inter-community collaboration.

Inter - Community Dialogue as a Tool of Diplomacy

Inter-community dialogue refers to the structured and sustained process of communication, negotiation, and interaction between distinct communities aimed at promoting mutual understanding, resolving conflicts, and fostering peaceful coexistence. In the pre-colonial period, it functioned as a vital diplomatic mechanism through which communities such as the Ukwuani and Urhobo engaged in collective decision-making, settled disputes, and coordinated socio-economic or cultural activities. Beyond mere conversation, inter-community dialogue embodied a formalized system of indigenous diplomacy grounded in respect, reciprocity, and shared norms, serving as a cornerstone for maintaining harmony and cooperation among neighboring societies. Inter-community dialogue between the Ukwuani and Urhobo operated through several structured mechanisms. The most prominent was the institution of boundary meetings, known locally as "Nzu Ani" among the Ukwuani and "Erhuvwu" among the Urhobo. These gatherings brought together elders, titled men, and community representatives from both sides to discuss matters of mutual concern.⁶ The dialogue process typically followed established protocols that respected the cultural sensitivities of both communities.

Meetings were often held at neutral locations, frequently at boundary markets or sacred groves that held significance for both groups. The use of interpreters was common, as language differences required careful translation to ensure accurate communication of intentions and agreements.⁷ Economic cooperation between the Ukwuani and Urhobo was significantly enhanced through inter-community dialogue. Regular meetings established trade protocols, standardized exchange rates for goods, and created mechanisms for resolving commercial disputes. The famous Kwale-Ogwashi-Uku trade route, which connected Urhobo and Ukwuani territories, was maintained through continuous dialogue that addressed issues such as market

days, security arrangements, and trade regulations. Dialogue sessions also facilitated the establishment of inter-community markets where both groups could trade freely. These markets became symbols of successful diplomacy and served as venues for continued dialogue and relationship building.⁸

Inter-community dialogue functioned as a central diplomatic mechanism for the resolution of disputes and the maintenance of harmony between the Ukwuani and Urhobo communities. Given the foundations of both societies, conflicts arising from land boundaries and resource use were frequent, yet they were typically addressed through structured dialogue sessions that emphasized evidence presentation, witness testimony, and adherence to customary legal principles. The process of dialogue was further reinforced by traditional conflict resolution mechanisms that imbued the proceedings with spiritual legitimacy and moral authority. Ritual practices such as oath-taking, libation ceremonies, and the invocation of ancestral spirits were often integrated into these sessions to sanctify agreements and ensure compliance. These spiritual dimensions raised the conversation beyond simple bargaining, turning it into a strong moral agreement based on shared beliefs. Consequently, inter-community dialogue not only functioned as a diplomatic instrument but also as a culturally grounded system of justice that preserved social equilibrium and reinforced the sanctity of communal relationships.

Traditional Shrines as a Tool of Diplomacy

A traditional shrine can be referred to as a special place or building that is dedicated to honoring deities, ancestral spirits, or other spiritual forces in an indigenous belief system. It represents both a real location and a symbol of spiritual power, serving as the medium through which rituals are carried out, sacrifices are made, divinations are performed, and prayers offered to maintain balance between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. Across many African

societies, particularly among the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples, traditional shrines transcended their strictly religious character to assume vital socio-political and judicial functions. They operated as sanctified venues where oaths were administered to validate agreements, disputes were adjudicated under divine oversight, and communal decisions were legitimized through spiritual endorsement. Owing to their perceived neutrality and sacred inviolability, shrines frequently served diplomatic purposes, providing credible and respected platforms for inter-community negotiation and conflict resolution. The traditional shrine functioned not merely as a site of worship but as an institutional nexus linking spirituality, governance, and justice. Traditional shrines in both Ukwuani and Urhobo territories were strategically positioned to serve diplomatic functions. Many shrines were located at boundary areas between communities, creating natural meeting points for inter-ethnic dialogue. According to Otite, these boundary shrines, known as "Okwu Ani" among the Ukwuani and "Edion" among the Urhobo, served as neutral territories where representatives from both communities could meet without fear of territorial violation or spiritual contamination.¹⁰

The geographical positioning of these shrines was not accidental but reflected deliberate planning by ancestral communities who understood the importance of creating sacred spaces that could transcend ethnic boundaries. Certain shrines, particularly those dedicated to earth deities and river spirits, were recognized by both Ukwuani and Urhobo communities as having jurisdiction over shared natural resources, making them ideal venues for diplomatic negotiations concerning land use, fishing rights, and trade routes.¹¹ The priests and priestesses who served these shrines often functioned as diplomatic intermediaries, their spiritual authority lending credibility to their role as mediators. These religious figures, known as "Eze Mmuo" among the Ukwuani and "Ohen" among the Urhobo, possessed intimate knowledge of both communities'

customs and could navigate cultural sensitivities while facilitating dialogue. Their perceived connection to the divine realm made them trusted arbiters whose decisions carried both spiritual and political weight.¹²

Among the most prominent diplomatic roles performed by traditional shrines was their function as venues for oath-taking ceremonies that formalized and legitimized inter-community agreements. These ceremonies, held in the presence of sacred objects and under the spiritual supervision of priests or custodians, created binding covenants believed to be enforced by supernatural powers. Such rituals imbued political and economic arrangements with moral and spiritual gravity, ensuring adherence to agreed terms. Representatives of the Ukwuani and Urhobo communities often engaged in joint libation rites, invoking ancestral spirits and tutelary deities as divine witnesses to treaties of peace, commercial partnerships, or territorial settlements. Through this process, diplomacy was not merely a human negotiation but a sacred covenant under divine guardianship. The ritual process typically involved the presentation of offerings, the recitation of traditional formulas, and the symbolic sharing of sacred substances such as kola nuts or palm wine. These ceremonies created a sense of shared spiritual experience that transcended ethnic differences and established common ground for future cooperation.¹³ The deployment of traditional shrines for diplomatic purposes was governed by a set of carefully observed ritual protocols that balanced reverence for the sacred with the practical imperatives of inter-community negotiation. Engagement within these sanctified spaces demanded strict adherence to established customs, including rites of purification for participants, the observance of prescribed dress codes, and the use of formalized greetings or titles that conveyed respect for both the spiritual authority of the shrine and the political stature of the envoys involved. These procedural requirements emphasized the understanding that diplomacy conducted in such

settings transcended ordinary human interaction and was, instead, an act performed under divine witness.

The observance of these ritual protocols served several critical diplomatic functions. It affirmed mutual recognition of shared spiritual values, established an atmosphere of solemnity that elevated the seriousness of negotiations, and provided a culturally sensitive setting for managing inter-community differences with dignity and restraint. Thus, any deviation from or violation of shrine etiquette was perceived as a breach of both spiritual and diplomatic order, capable of undermining trust and disrupting the negotiation process. In this way, adherence to shrine protocols not only legitimized diplomatic proceedings but also reinforced the moral and cultural foundations upon which inter-community relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples were built.

Taboos and Customs

Taboos and customs constitute fundamental elements of indigenous social organization and moral regulation in many African societies. A custom refers to an established pattern of behavior, belief, or practice that is collectively accepted and transmitted across generations. Customs embody the shared values, norms, and traditions that guide interpersonal relations, social conduct, and communal identity. They function as unwritten laws that sustain social order and cultural continuity within a community. A taboo, on the other hand, represents a prohibition or restriction against specific actions, words, or behaviors considered offensive, impure, or disruptive to the moral and spiritual equilibrium of society. Taboos are often grounded in religious or cosmological beliefs, with violations believed to provoke ancestral displeasure or spiritual retribution. They therefore serve as powerful mechanisms of social control, reinforcing communal discipline and respect for sacred values. In pre-colonial Ukwuani and Urhobo

societies, customs defined acceptable social practices, such as marriage procedures, trade relations, and kinship obligations, while taboos delineated boundaries of behavior, particularly regarding sacred objects, rituals, or inter-community relations. Together, taboos and customs functioned as both moral codes and diplomatic tools, ensuring peaceful coexistence and regulating interactions within and between communities.

Both Ukwuani and Urhobo societies acknowledged certain fundamental taboos that transcended ethnic boundaries, creating common ground for diplomatic engagement. These shared prohibitions served as diplomatic languages that could be understood and respected by both communities, facilitating communication and cooperation even in the absence of formal treaties or agreements.¹⁴ Taboos, known as "Nso" among the Ukwuani and "Emu" among the Urhobo, represented more than mere prohibitions; they constituted a sophisticated system of social regulation that extended beyond individual communities to govern inter-ethnic relations. These prohibitions carried supernatural sanctions that made their violation not just socially unacceptable but spiritually dangerous, creating powerful incentives for compliance across ethnic boundaries.¹⁵

One of the most significant applications of taboo-based diplomacy involved the regulation of territorial boundaries between Ukwuani and Urhobo communities. Sacred groves, burial grounds, and ritual sites were often designated as taboo areas that could not be violated by members of either community, creating natural buffer zones that prevented territorial disputes. Taboo boundaries marked by sacred trees or ritual objects, served as internationally recognized demarcation lines that were respected by both communities.¹⁶ The institution of boundary taboos represented a distinctive form of cultural diplomacy that intertwined spirituality, law, and territorial governance. Their establishment required careful negotiation and mutual recognition

between the Ukwuani and Urhobo communities, as both parties needed to acknowledge the spiritual legitimacy underpinning these prohibitions. Once agreed upon, such taboo boundaries became self-regulating mechanisms, sustained by the collective belief in the dire supernatural consequences of transgression. The fear of ancestral retribution or divine punishment rendered these boundaries more effective than any form of human enforcement, thereby minimizing territorial disputes and maintaining inter-community harmony. The durability of these taboo systems, however, depended on continuous diplomatic cooperation.

The use of market-day customs served as instruments of commercial diplomacy. The regulation of inter-community trade through culturally embedded norms and taboos reflected a sophisticated form of economic governance rooted in mutual respect and spiritual accountability. Among the Ukwuani, markets held on days such as “Afor” or “Eke”, and among the Urhobo on Eken, were governed by elaborate customary laws designed to ensure fair dealings and prevent commercial conflict. These included prohibitions against acts of violence within market environs, restrictions on specific transactions during sacred periods, and mandatory purification rituals for traders prior to market participation.¹⁷ Inter-marriage between the Ukwuani and Urhobo communities functioned as a strategic instrument of diplomacy, governed by intricate customs and taboos that balanced cultural integrity with political cooperation. These regulations not only defined acceptable marital relations but also created structures for legitimate alliances that reinforced peace and mutual trust. Marriage negotiations, characterized by elaborate protocols of gift exchange and ritual observance, provided structured spaces for diplomatic dialogue between families and communities. Certain prohibitions against unions during periods of conflict served as preventive measures, while the lifting of marriage taboos often signified reconciliation and

renewed cooperation.¹⁸ Thus, inter-marriage operated as both a cultural institution and a diplomatic mechanism for sustaining long-term inter-ethnic harmony.

The intricate web of customs and taboos among the Ukwuani and Urhobo communities reveals the sophistication of indigenous diplomatic systems in pre-colonial Nigeria. Far from being mere cultural observances, these practices constituted structured mechanisms of governance, conflict prevention, and inter-community cooperation. Through marriage alliances, both peoples institutionalized social and political bonds that reinforced peace and facilitated long-term collaboration.

Sanctions and Punishment

Sanctions and punishments played important roles in maintaining social order and justice in traditional African societies. They helped to keep moral standards, support community stability, and discourage bad behavior. A sanction was any action taken by the community to encourage good behavior or to punish those who broke the rules. In pre-colonial Africa, these sanctions could include public shame, cleansing rituals, fines, or temporary exclusion from the community, depending on how serious the transgression was. On the other hand, punishment was a direct reaction to a crime. It was aimed not only at retribution but also at restoring harmony within the community's social and spiritual life. Traditional punishment systems were not only about punishing; they focused on healing relationships and helping offenders reintegrate into society. Sanctions and punishment held considerable diplomatic importance. They ensured adherence to customary laws, oaths, and inter-group agreements while reinforcing the belief that violations of treaties or taboos invited both social repercussions and spiritual retribution from ancestral forces. In Ukwuani–Urhobo relations, sanctions operated as deliberate instruments of diplomatic

regulation and communal discipline. They were collective responses designed to reaffirm moral boundaries, correct misconduct, and safeguard the legitimacy of established agreements. Beyond simple coercion, sanctions expressed a fusion of moral authority, economic leverage, and spiritual symbolism. One of the most potent forms was the economic sanction, which drew strength from the centrality of commerce in inter-group relations. Markets and trade routes served not just as economic lifelines but as venues for diplomacy. When one community violated a trade compact, the other could impose retaliatory measures such as restricting access to markets, increasing tariffs, or withholding vital commodities. There were forms of economic pressure that conveyed disapproval and compelled negotiation.¹⁹

Equally powerful were social sanctions, which functioned through moral and cultural exclusion. Communities that breached treaties or disregarded shared customs could be ostracized, in ways which included denied hospitality, participation in festivals, or intermarriage opportunities. Such exclusion was a potent diplomatic weapon as it isolated the offending party, eroded prestige, and pressured them to seek reconciliation. Restrictions on mobility also operated as symbolic and practical sanctions; offenders could be barred from using trade routes, fishing grounds, or sacred spaces, thereby cutting them off from both material resources and ritual legitimacy. These non-violent yet consequential measures communicated the suspension of normal relations until redress was achieved. Punishment complemented these sanctions by providing a structured means of redress. Fines and compensations which were often in livestock, goods, or produce, were the most frequent penalties, designed to restore social balance while reaffirming communal justice. In more serious cases, confiscation of property or farmland could serve as restitution for unfulfilled obligations or serious moral offenses. Though physical retribution was rare, it was sometimes applied as a last resort when diplomacy failed, manifesting

in limited acts of reprisal or seizure intended to restore equilibrium rather than provoke open conflict. Disputes over territorial boundaries, for example, were initially handled through mediation; if unsuccessful, sanctions such as land restrictions or targeted punishments were applied.²⁰ Similarly, violations of trade agreements, such as defaulting on agreed quantities or engaging in deceitful transactions, invited embargoes or compensatory payments.²¹ In instances of murder or grievous harm, offenders or their communities might be compelled to offer material compensation or face retributive justice.²²

The integration of sanctions and punishment within the diplomatic order of pre-colonial Ukwuani–Urhobo relations emphasized the depth of indigenous governance and moral reasoning. Far from representing crude instruments of control, they embodied a sophisticated balance of law, ethics, and spirituality. Through the calibrated use of economic restrictions, social exclusion, ritual sanctions, and compensatory justice, both groups maintained peace, regulated conduct, and upheld the sanctity of inter-community agreements. Ultimately, Ukwuani and Urhobo approach to sanctions and punishment indicated a deep understanding of diplomacy. Their approach was based not just on talking things out and using pressure, but also on the belief that social harmony relies on being moral and holding everyone accountable together. These systems created a strong structure that helped keep order, fix wrongs, and constantly refresh the moral basis of diplomacy. Their lasting impact shows how pre-colonial African societies devised complex and culturally grounded systems for ensuring justice, peace, and stability long before colonial interference.

In conclusion, the study of diplomatic practices among the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples in the pre-colonial Niger Delta reveals a highly organized and culturally grounded system of inter-community relations. These societies developed intricate mechanisms that facilitated peaceful coexistence, conflict resolution, and mutual cooperation. Their diplomatic institutions, rooted in shared cultural values and spiritual beliefs, functioned as dynamic tools for sustaining social order and political stability. The royal court system, which served as a political, judicial, and diplomatic institution, provided an organized framework for negotiation, treaty-making, and alliance formation. Inter-community dialogue complemented these formal institutions by emphasizing direct negotiation and consensus-building. Spiritual rituals, such as oath-taking and libation ceremonies, reinforced the moral and sacred dimension of diplomacy. Traditional shrines served as neutral grounds for resolving disputes and formalizing agreements under divine witness. Taboos and customs regulated behavior and preserved harmony across ethnic boundaries. Seasonal and ceremonial customs provided regular opportunities for diplomatic engagement through shared rituals, festivals, and trade interactions. Sanctions and punishment ensured the enforcement of diplomatic agreements and the maintenance of communal discipline. The pre-colonial diplomatic heritage of the Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples stands as a testament to Africa's indigenous capacity for structured, ethical, and sustainable intergroup relations.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The study examined the diplomatic relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo people in pre-colonial Nigeria. It revealed that diplomacy, as practiced by indigenous societies, was a deeply entrenched and multifaceted process that governed inter-ethnic interactions. Far from existing as isolated entities, the Ukwuani and Urhobo people maintained robust systems of cooperation, negotiation, and alliance-building that ensured peaceful coexistence and socio-economic development. Their diplomacy was built on shared cultural values, trade interdependence, and kinship ties that transcended ethnic boundaries. What began as an inquiry into the mechanisms of peace between two neighboring groups has revealed a deep and structured system of indigenous diplomacy; one built on kinship, shared moral order, and cultural reciprocity. Across centuries, the Ukwuani and Urhobo sustained a stable relationship that combined social, political, and spiritual systems to promote coexistence. Their experience challenges modern assumptions that diplomacy and conflict resolution in Africa began with colonial rule or Western influence. Instead, it demonstrates that both peoples had long developed internal structures capable of sustaining peace and justice within their own moral universe.

Towards achieving the foregoing objective, the study interrogated the historical and cultural foundations of these relations. The Ukwuani and Urhobo occupied contiguous territories, interacted through migration, intermarriage, and trade, and over time evolved shared institutions that reflected their common ancestry. Their histories, though narrated differently, converge in cultural and linguistic affinities that encouraged cooperation rather than rivalry. Whether one accepts the Benin, Igbo, or autochthonous origin theories, what remains evident is that their

contact and settlement patterns nurtured a sense of kinship. This shared identity became the moral and emotional ground upon which diplomacy stood. The geography of the Niger Delta; fertile, water-rich, and economically interdependent, also made peaceful relations both practical and necessary. Through this symbiotic environment, the two groups developed diplomatic habits rooted in mutual respect and communal interdependence.

These foundations matured into a sophisticated network of social, economic, and political cooperation. One of the most enduring features of their diplomacy was marriage diplomacy. Marriage diplomacy emerged as one of the most enduring forms of inter-group relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo. Marriage went beyond a social contract; it served as a strategic alliance that linked families and communities, thereby reducing the risk of conflict. Oral testimonies from Ukwuani and Urhobo elders confirm that intermarriages were used to seal peace agreements or renew old alliances after disputes. Through such kinship ties, diplomacy was humanized and personalized, creating an emotional and social foundation for peace. Inter-community marriages were not random unions but deliberate instruments of peacebuilding. By exchanging brides, the Ukwuani and Urhobo turned neighboring communities into extended families, making war morally impossible without violating sacred familial bonds. Such marriages symbolized both political trust and cultural continuity, ensuring that ties of blood reinforced ties of trade and governance. Marriage diplomacy emerged as one of the most enduring forms of inter-group relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo. This system of kinship diplomacy created social networks that transcended ethnic boundaries and institutionalized peace in everyday life.

Economic cooperation formed another pillar of their diplomatic structure. Shared markets and trade routes, such as those connecting Kwale, Amai, Abraka, and other adjoining towns, became spaces of daily negotiation and exchange. Market authorities and elders maintained order, fixed prices, and resolved disputes through dialogue rather than punishment. Through this process, the communities discovered that sustained prosperity depended on mutual stability. Trade, therefore, became both a symbol and a guarantee of peace. Ukwuani and Urhobo realized early that economic interdependence was the most effective deterrent to hostility, which is a principle that modern political economists would later describe as “the peace of shared interest.” The political and social alliances between both peoples further reinforced this order. Councils of elders and titled chiefs acted as custodians of peace, mediating between communities and creating channels of continuous communication. These alliances extended into joint participation in festivals, ceremonies, and rites of passage, all of which deepened the sense of cultural brotherhood. The exchange of emissaries, attendance at royal coronations, and shared feasts were symbolic reaffirmations of unity. In times of external threat, these political pacts guaranteed defense cooperation, while in peace, they ensured coordination in resource management and communal decision-making. In addition to these formal ties, both groups demonstrated remarkable foresight in their shared resource management. They developed collective agreements on land use, fishing rights, and trade boundaries. Conflicts over land or waterways were settled through dialogue at neutral grounds, often under the guidance of elders or traditional rulers. These interactions reflected a recognition that land and water were divine trusts to be shared, not conquered. The avoidance of permanent territorial wars between the two groups underscores the success of this indigenous ecological diplomacy.

Furthermore, the study explores the instruments that sustained this system were moral, spiritual, and institutional practices. The chapter showed that the royal courts: the Obi among the Ukwuani and the Ovie among the Urhobo, served as formal centers of arbitration, treaty-making, and alliance formation. Here, grievances were aired, compensations negotiated, and peace settlements ratified. Through their authority, justice became not merely a legal matter but a moral obligation. Similarly, inter-community dialogues provided regular opportunities for leaders to meet, deliberate, and reaffirm peaceful coexistence. These dialogues, often accompanied by rituals of kola nut presentation and libations, symbolized transparency and mutual trust. The traditional shrines played perhaps the most powerful spiritual role in diplomacy. They served as sacred courts where oaths were administered, disputes settled, and agreements consecrated. When an oath was taken before the deities, it transformed a mere verbal promise into a binding covenant enforced by fear of divine punishment. This belief system replaced the need for external enforcement with moral accountability. Taboos and customs, on the other hand, functioned as invisible legal codes that shaped acceptable behavior. They defined the boundaries of respect, regulated interactions, and ensured that the peace was maintained not only through law but through conscience. When violations occurred, the societies employed sanctions and punishments rooted in moral restitution rather than coercion. Economic embargoes, social ostracism, and symbolic acts of apology were common means of restoring order. These sanctions worked because they appealed to the community's collective sense of shame and moral duty. Rarely did disputes escalate into violence, since the focus was always on reconciliation and the restoration of harmony. In all these systems, whether political, economic, or spiritual, the goal remained the same: to preserve the moral balance of the community. Taken together, the total evidence across the study shows that the Ukwuani and Urhobo developed an advanced and

integrated diplomatic culture. Their peace was neither accidental nor imposed; it was the product of conscious moral engineering, an intentional effort to embed diplomacy into the fabric of daily life. Unlike modern systems that separate politics from ethics, theirs fused governance with spirituality and economics with morality. Theirs was diplomacy not of documents and decrees, but of kinship, faith, and shared responsibility.

In our times, this history offers powerful lessons. Nigeria today struggles with inter-ethnic tensions, boundary disputes, and competition for resources, challenges not different from those the Ukwuani and Urhobo once faced. Their history is proof that true peace cannot be achieved through law alone; it must rest on relationships, trust, and shared prosperity. Policymakers and peacebuilders can learn from their relational model; one that values dialogue over dominance, empathy over enforcement, and collective interest over sectional gain. The pre-colonial Niger Delta was not a void waiting for civilization; it was a living space of indigenous diplomacy, with lessons still relevant to modern governance and conflict resolution.

It is against this backdrop that it is safe to assert that the diplomatic relations between the Ukwuani and Urhobo people in pre-colonial Nigeria represent a model of indigenous peacebuilding that successfully balanced political, economic, and spiritual elements. Through these practices, both groups preserved harmony, promoted development, and sustained a legacy of cultural unity that remains relevant today. Their diplomacy was guided by kinship, governed by custom, and enforced by conscience. It was a system where culture served as law, where faith upheld justice, and where peace was both a duty and a way of life. The endurance of their relationship stands as a timeless testament to Africa's capacity for self-governance and peaceful coexistence. If modern societies could recover and adapt even a fraction of this wisdom, the

continent would find within its own traditions the blueprint for unity, justice, and lasting harmony.

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Name	Age	Relationship with study	Place of Interview	Date
Chief. Samson Okoh	75	Elder	Obiaruku	17th, September 2025.
Hon. Fidelis Enujeko	60	Delta Legislator	Delta State	18th September, 2025.
Dr. Daniel Iwueze	58	Lecturer	UNIBEN	5th July, 2025
Chief. David Onajite	73	Trader	Abraka	17th September, 2025.
Chief. Ndukka	61	Elder	Obiaruku	17th, September, 2025.
Mr. Peter	69	Farmer	Abraka	18th September, 2025
Mrs. Joy	53	Trader	Abraka	18th September, 2025.
Hon. Ossai Nicholas	60	Politician	Ndokwa	10th, August, 2025.
Chief. Mudiaga Amogu	54	Trader	Ndokwa	17th September, 2025.
Mr. Lucky Opute	50	Trader	Ndokwa	18th August, 2025.
Mrs. Towe	61	Farmer	Benin	12th August, 2025.

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