

**HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL POLITICAL
SYSTEM OF URHOBOLAND**

By

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STUDIES**

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**BEING A RESEARCH SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **Ugonoyovwe Edafe Unity**,
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Faculty of Arts, University of Benin Benin City, under my supervision

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Signature & Date

Dr. J.C. Nwaka
Head of Department

.....

Signature & Date

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to God Almighty for his grace and protection all through my stay in the University of Benin, Benin City, and also to my lovely parents Mr. and Mrs. Edefe Ugonoyovwe for their unwavering support.

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I wish to express my profound gratitude first to God Almighty, for it was by his grace I was not consumed throughout my study in University of Benin.

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To all my lecturers for giving me the opportunity to share in their knowledge I thank you all.

I am sincerely grateful to my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Efafe Ugonoyovwe for the effort they made towards giving me a sound education and for all the wonderful advises they gave me I do not take them for granted. May the good lord shower you with abundant blessings, guidance and protection. May you reap the fruit of your labour. Amen.

To my lovely siblings, thank you for your prayers, support and encouragement. God bless you.

To my friends within and outside the University of Benin I am indeed grateful to you for making my stay in UNIBEN a memorable one. I love you all and may God bless you all richly in Jesus name. Amen

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ABSTRACT

There is hardly any study of pre-colonial Africa examined through the prejudiced lenses of European scholars that did not downplay the existence of any history of interaction. Hitherto, theoretical analysis of inter-group relations in pre-colonial Africa was one that embraced a verdict of non-existence. For these scholars, pre-colonial Africa was bereft of any meaningful cultivation of interaction, and should it be credited for such, it was one replete with incessant hostilities amongst 'natives' and 'tribes'. That is such assessment usually emphasized isolation and hostility. However, this raises the question: In a world wherein relations eminently necessitate survival, how possible is it to exist in isolation? As the axiom goes; no nation is an island – Undoubtedly, no human society notwithstanding its level of development is all-sufficient. Variations in natural endowment, for example, breeds an inevitable need for inter-group relation.² All groups are mutually inter-dependent and same holds true for pre-colonial Africa societies.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Intergroup relations connotes the contact between two or more groups which can lead to a state of friendship or hospitality, cooperation, alliance or enmity, peace or war between the groups or their respective members.¹

There is hardly any study of pre-colonial Africa examined through the prejudiced lenses of European scholars that did not downplay the existence of any history of interaction. Hitherto, theoretical analysis of inter-group relations in pre-

colonial Africa was one that embraced a verdict of non-existence. For these scholars, pre-colonial Africa was bereft of any meaningful cultivation of interaction, and should it be credited for such, it was one replete with incessant hostilities amongst ‘natives’ and ‘tribes’. That is such assessment usually emphasized isolation and hostility.

However, this raises the question: In a world wherein relations eminently necessitate survival, how possible is it to exist in isolation? As the axiom goes; no nation is an island – Undoubtedly, no human society notwithstanding its level of development is all-sufficient. Variations in natural endowment, for example, breeds an inevitable need for inter-group relation.² All groups are mutually inter-dependent and same holds true for pre-colonial Africa societies. The Urhobos, with her neighbours – the Isokos to the south-east; the Itsekiris to the West; the Binis to the North; the Ijos to the South and the Ukwuani to the North-east spun multifaceted webs of contact and interaction consciously or otherwise to ensure survival and growth.³ Accordingly, giving substance to I. Tseror’s assertion that “man must co-operate out of necessity”.

This paper thus affirms, contrary to the wrongful Eurocentric projection of pre-colonial Africa, that African societies had a long history and high level of contact and interaction prior the colonial subjugation. In so doing, it unveils the overflowing stream of political (antagonistic and harmonious), economic (trade)

and socio-cultural (arts, dance, music, marriage, mode of dressing, language, rituals, etc.) relationships that flourished in the period, citing the Urhobos and her neighbours in the Niger Delta province as a case study.

Aim and Objectives

The aim and objectives of this research is to bring to the fore, the nature and networks of inter-group relations between the Urhobos and her neighbours up to 1900. It aims to create a furtherance of knowledge in the said topic as well as a general contribution to existing historical literature.

The objectives are;

1. To discuss briefly about the history of Urhobo speaking people.
2. To explain the integral nature of inter-group relations in the area.
3. To explore the various socio-cultural web of relationship that existed between the Urhobos and her neighbours.
4. To assess the various economic interaction that existed between the Urhobos and her fraternal neighbours as well as investigating the impact of such relations.
5. To suggest ways to improve the relations.

Scope of Study

This research basically covers an account of relations between the Urhobos and her neighbours in the pre-colonial period. This study which begins with the origin of the Urhobos, majorly focuses on aspects of her political economic, and socio-cultural relations with the Isokos, Ijos, Itsekiris, Binis, Aboh and Ukwanis up to 1900.

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, historical documents on the subject matter are somewhat lacking, albeit, facts about in oral traditions. Thus, the primary sources include oral interviews conducted in various Niger Delta communities such as Ughelli, Warri, Oleh (Delta State), Ogbia (Bayelsa state), Ovia (Edo State). All oral traditions collected from oral interviews are complemented with available written records, intelligence reports related to this work from Ughelli Township Library, Ughelli, Delta state.

Secondary sources include textbooks, journals, online articles obtained from the University of Benin Library and the internet. All data collated from primary and secondary sources were carefully analyzed to ascertain their historical validity. Furthermore, this study employs the narrative and analytical approaches.

Literature Review

Quite a handful of literature is available on the histories of the Urhobos and her neighbours in the Niger Delta. True, the Urhoboos, in recent years have received some appreciable attention in the field of academic research. However, most available scholarly works are almost bereft of any detailed study of the political, economical and socio-cultural relations the Urhobos had with her neighbours. This problem is even more compounded by the poor circulation of many of such publications. However, some of the few relevant available literatures which contribute to the study of the origins of contact and forms of interactions that thrived between the Urhobos and her neighbours are reviewed.

Obaro Ikime, in his book, *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, attempted a survey of the history of the peoples and kingdoms of the delta-province of Nigeria up to 1800. He highlighted the origins, social and political organizations, as well as the economic interaction that flourished in the region. He sub-divided the ethnic groups in the province into two (2) based on their natural vegetation types; viz: the lower delta, comprising of the riverine people – the Ijo, the Itsekiri and Aboh; and the upper delta peoples – the Urhobo, Isoko, and Ukwani (also described as the ‘up country’ people). For him, the natural vegetation types was a significant factor in determining the relations between the peoples of the province, and such exchange of products thus constituted an early determinant of inter-group relations. Articles of trade included fish, salt, earthenware, canoes, yam, plantain, oil palm and other agricultural produce; and slaves from the 16th century.⁴ Certainly, he focused more

on the economic relations than any other aspect of inter-group relations in the region.

In “Thoughts on Isoko – Urhobo Relations”, Obaro Ikime began by surveying the origins of the Urhobo and the Isoko. He claims that most of the Urhobo and Isoko groups are of Benin origin; others such as Ewu, Ughelli and Ugienvwe are of Ijo origin; and the likes of Ewreni, Igbede, Enwe and Olumu have Igbo connections. He further asserted that considering the fact that the Urhobos and Isoko groups were geographically contiguous would mean they would have maintained commercial and social relations made manifest in forms such as trade, intermarriages, rituals, etc. as determined by the needs of the people. The tradition of wars between certain Urhobo and Isoko groups was not neglected. Reasons given for such wars include disputes over land ownership owing to population pressure, as well as the issue of “run-away women”. Regardless, accommodation in the interest of peaceful coexistence between the various groups was also recognized.⁵

Peter P. Eekh’s *Studies in Urhobo Culture*, which represents a comparatively new area of research approached from an indigenous perspective provides a wide-ranging survey of Urhobo culture in Nigeria. It offers diverse perspective on topics such as: naming traditions and practices of the Urhobos; religious beliefs, values and movements, traditions of marriage; artistic productions,

food and dress subcultures; and the geography of Urhoboland as well as agricultural practices. The book also comments on the languages linkages between the Urhobos and Benins at the base, largely in areas of domestic issues, farming, games, and ritual matters – a pointer to the attendant result of early contact and interaction.⁶

Peter P. Ekeh's, *History of the Urhobo People of Niger Delta*, considered one of the most comprehensive compilation and study of various aspects of the history of the Urhobo gives an insight into the origin migration and settlement which reflect in the oral traditions of the people of the area. P. Ekeh begins with an assessment of the prehistory of the regions, with particular focus on the Urhobos and their fraternal neighbours, the Isoko. The development of Okpe as exemplar of Urhobo history is also considered. However, the book does not provide much relevant information on the interaction between the Urhobos and her neighbours. Inter-group relations seem far the focus of Peter P. Ekeh's *History of the Urhobo People of Niger Delta*.⁷

Onigu Otite in his book, *The Urhobo People*, which has met widespread commendation for providing meaningful data on Urhobo culture focuses attention on the origin and socio-political organization of the Urhobo people. He describes the government of the people as a gerontocratic type wherein the eldest person

assumed the mantle of leadership. Additionally, he traces the origin of the Urhobos people to migrations from Bini.⁸

From the above, it is recognizable that considerable that considerable amount of scholarly work in Urhobo studies exists, notwithstanding, most of these works are almost certainly devoid of a detailed analysis of the network of interaction that existed amongst the Urhobos and her neighbours in the pre-colonial period. Very little attention is paid to this aspect of academic discourse. However, the relevant data from these texts complements other sources (such as oral interviews) in an effort to bridge the yawning gap in the study of intergroup relations between the Urhobos and her neighbours in the pre-colonial period. These relations which manifested in various political, economic and socio-cultural forms will be comprehensively examined. In that regard, attention shall be given to the determining variables which prompted and galvanized such interactions. It is pertinent to add that harmonious relations will not be emphasized to the near disregard to antagonistic relation. This is because inter-group relations do not only connote peaceful co-existence; interactions are sometimes peaceful and occasionally violent.⁹

Chapter Outline

This project work is organized into five (5) chapters:

Chapter one: Background to the Study

This chapter provides a background to the study. It includes the aims and objectives, scope of study, methodology and the literature review.

Chapter Two: A Brief History of The Urhobo People

This chapter examines the issues of origin, migration, settlements, cultural practices, customs and traditions of the Urhobos. Additionally, aspects of her socio-political organization and economic activities during the period of study are explored.

Chapter Three: Traditional Political System of Urhobo People.

This chapter evaluates the Traditional Political System of Urhobo people. Here a multifaceted aspects of inter- group relations which manifest in governmental structure, wars, inter marriage, religion, festivals, etc are examined

Chapter Four: The Impact of the Urhobo Political System on its People

This chapter strictly focuses on the impact of the Urhobo political system on its people. .

Chapter five: Conclusion: The final chapter includes the general conclusion, summary and bibliography.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER TWO

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE URHOBO PEOPLE

Numerous Urhobo academic giants have committed an elaborate amount of effort to provide a veritable historical account of the origin of the Urhobos. Such effort however, have been impeded by the dearth of adequate tools necessary for reconstructing the historical past of the Urhobos – a problem by no means sheerly characteristic of the Urhobos alone but embracing most of the African continent. Many a time, the available tool is predominantly the recollection of oral traditions. The Urhobo oral tradition of origin hovers around a recurring theme of migration from Benin on account of the Oba's hostility or or fear of punishment after some serious transgression; and in other instances, migration resulting from population pressure.

Peter P. Ekeh in *Studies of Urhobo Culture*, while commenting on the migration linkages between the Urhobos and the Benin had been quick to point out that while there were no contemporaneous accounts of Urhobo migrations from the land once ruled by kings of the Ogiso dynasty (Benin), these Urhobo traditions are firm in pointing to Benin as the source of their culture. Important markers which testify the prior existence of the Urhobos in Benin are evident in the intimate kinship between both parties – seen in the closeness in languages, religion and custom.¹

Albeit, one must not be too quick to accept such oral traditions. This is because, one significant detail which seem to evade the investigation of these scholars is that, the Urhobo nation is in no way an all-one small entity, it is a conglomerate of different clans, and these clans more often than not, have traditions that link them elsewhere, that is, away from Benin. Thus, while the Urhobo clans of Abraka, Agbon, Orogun, etc. chiefly speak of Benin origin. Others such as Ughelli, may trace her origin to the Ijos. This issue is best captured by Obaro Ikime in *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Here, he aptly presented a number of Urhobo clans and their tradition of origin:

“Five Urhobo clans have traditions which link them with some of the Ijo. The Ughelli clan was, it is claimed founded by Ogele, a son of the founder of the Tarakiri ibe (of the Ijo stock) who moved farther afield as a consequence of population pressure on the original settlement. With him, went two brothers. Agbarha and Ogo who founded settlements now named after them. The three settlements are sometimes referred to as the Owaha clan. Ughelli tradition today confirm this version of their origin and ‘Tarakiri’ is still used at former gatherings as a kind of salutation.

The clans of Ughienvwe and Ewu are said to have been founded from Ogobiri. According to this tradition, Ughienvwe and Ogobiri were brothers who lived first at Ogobiri before some disagreement with their kinsmen forced them to move out. They followed the creeks down to the Bomadi area where they settled for a while before they moved on to found the two Urhobo clans which bear their names.

The Uwherun traditions speak of a Bini who was father to Uwherun, the founder of the clan. Uwherun

(and his two brothers) are said to have fled from Benin because his men had accidentally killed one of the Benin princes during a war... While his two brothers stayed permanently in the delta, Uwherun moved on from there to found what is now the Urhobo clan which bears his name.

The Urhobo clan of Uvwie appear to have been founded by a mixed group. Ijo traditions claim that Evhro-Oto was founded by a migration from Gbaramatu. However, Evhro tradition claim that Evhro was founded by migrants from Erohwo in the Isoko country. The people speak a language that bears a striking resemblance to the Erohwa tongue, and the Evrho town shrine and festivals are also very closely related to Erohwa's. It may well be that both Ijo and Erohwa elements fused in Evhro.

Of the remaining Urhobo clans, Abraka, Agboh, Orogun and Olomu claim to have been founded from Benin. The Olomu traditions also indicate that at some point, Igbo element moved into the area and were assimilated into the population. Agbon traditions also speak of Iriwi in the Isoko country as a place of immediate origin, though they take care to point out that those who founded Iriwi were from Benin.

The Urhobo clan of Ewreni is said to have been founded by Igbo elephant hunters hired in the first instance by the Isoko clan of Iyede. The Agbarho clan is perhaps the youngest in terms of foundation, having been founded by a mixed group from the various Urhobo clans".²

From the foregoing, one clearly pin point a deviation from the popular Urhobo tradition of origin usually attributed to the Benin's. Notwithstanding, that is not to undermine Benin influence in the origin of the Urhobos. This is because, one way or another, the Ijos, Ogobiri, Igbo societies from which some Urhobo

clans claim origin appear to have as their own source of Origin, Benin. However, in view of this, the opinion of Dr. Alagoa becomes pertinent. While speaking of the Ijos, Dr. Alagoa asserted that where a group no longer remembered its place of origin, it is not uncommon to find such group electing another that was powerful and distant enough to confer on it a kind of prestige or legitimacy while not posing any immediate threat to its political independence. And for many of these groups, Benin met this requirement.³

Furthermore, pertaining the issue of origins, a notable bone of contention is that of dating the migrations. Regarding this, several dates have been given by various Urhobo and foreign scholars alike. Jacob Egharevba places the Urhobo migration from Benin in this reign of Oba Egbeka which he claims began in 1370.⁴ J. W. Hubbard, another prominent scholar, dated the Urhobo migration to the closing years of the 16th century.⁵ This he did by working a list of the Urhobo Ivie (Kings). Duarte Pereira, who visited the River Forcados area in the beginning of the 16th century, made mention of the 'Subou' people to the hinterland, in his writings.⁶ Equally significant is William Moore's claim that during the period of the Iginuwa migration (founding of Itsekiri) in the 15th century, there were Urhobo elements already settled in the area.⁷

In view of these conflicting dates, it becomes difficult to embrace any of the given dates as preeminent. One must thus, exercise great deal care in pin

pointing any date as the established period of the Urhobo migration. Peter P. Ekeh, commenting on the historical context of the Urhobo culture highlighted the academic arrogance of various historians to abuse historical methods and allude certain dates to events-creating perfection, “as if history is ever so well-rounded”.

Hear him further:

“The most troubling wrongful projection in reconstructing Urhobo existence in the land of the Ogiso is timing. There are historians of these times who impose a degree of exactitude in dating that surpasses the rigour of the Gregorian calendar. Consider Jacob Egharevba’s (1934:1-6) assertion that the Ogiso dynasty had 31 kings who reigned from 950AD to 1170AD. How would he know? If these dates were given in Western history, one would assume that the dates had been recalculated from the Julian calendar to the current Gregorian calendar. Did Egharevba, indeed, do most scholars who study Benin, in fact know that there was such a difference in the Western calendars they quote?

There is therefore no clear historical basis for saying the Urhobos migrated from the lands of the Ogisos in dates that are certain and that can be determined even within the margin of a century as Egharevba so categorically claims”.⁸

Ochuko Ogbariemu further affirmed this position. He opined that most history teachers are notably adept at highlighting certain dates with so much conviction one would begin to imagine they were present during the occurrence. It need not be so. For one, there are no historical documents evidencing such claims. However, the Urhobo migration could have presumable been in this time frame of

BCE, that is, it long occurred before the rise of the Benin Empire in the 1440s and the arrival of the Portuguese in the Western Niger Delta in the 1480s.⁹

Political and Social Organisation

In traditional African political organization, the Urhobo nation consists of twenty-two (22) autonomous republic or clans with a common ancestral origin. They are: Agbarha-Ame, Agbarha-Otor, Agbarho, Agbon, Arhavwarien, Abraka, Effuru-Otor, Ewreni, Eghwu, Idjerhe, Oghara, Ogor, Okeke-Urhobo, Okparabe, Okpe, Olomu, Orogun, Udu, Ughelli, Ughievwien, Ughwerun and Uvwie. The earliest political system in most part of Urhoboland is a mixture of the kinship system and the rule by elders. Depending on the clan and the system of administration, the king or clan head is called the Ovie or Orodje or Osuivie, Okobaro, Okpako or Okpara-Uku, and such title may be hereditary in some clans.

The basic unit of socio-political organization amongst the Urhobo is the village group. The village is divided into quarters which are essentially lineage groups usually seen as founded by the various sons of the founder of the village. Each quarter is in turn made up of extended families each of which normally lives within a definite compound. The compound which comprised of a man, his wives, and children as well as his grow-up sons alongside their wives and children have the man as the head of the family. He wielded responsibility for the maintenance of law and order in the compound. Next, was the quarter, with the heads of

compounds (usually the most senior in the lineage group) playing the leadership role.

At the village level, the council of elders exercised responsibility for the governance and welfare of the people. These elders, 'Ekpako', alongside a number of officials occasionally met to discuss the affairs of the village common to number of Urhobo clans was the spokesman. The spokesman, 'Otota', which could very well be one of the elders, need not necessarily be of the same age-grade. He was usually chosen on account of his personal qualities, such as good speaking voice, and sound knowledge of the people's laws and customs. The Otota could be said to be one who dominated the deliberations of the council of elders. In judicial matters, the Otota virtually conducts the trial, doing the questioning at any time. And when a delegation is sent to represent the village, the Otota is usually a part of it.

As stated earlier, the administrative structure of the Urhobo nation varies from clan to clan, and while some clan have as their administrative head, an elder, for some others, it is the king, 'Ovie'. Urhobo clans such as Okpe, Agbon, Ughelli, Eghwu possess the office of Ovie. Such Ovie (plural of Ivie) combined in themselves executive and priestly functions, performed for the well-being and survival of the clan. Some of these functions were usually performed with the council of elders referred to as Egware-Ovie.¹⁰

The institution of age-sets is another organization quite universal to the Urhobos. The men are categorized into four (4) age grades, namely: Ekpako, Ivwragha, Otuorere, and Imitete age grades, based on age, life achievements, and contribution to the community. The women are also categorized into three (3) age grades, namely: Ekwokweya, Evweye, and Emete age grades, based on child-bearing status.¹¹ The Ekpako and Ekwokweya age grades assist in the day to day administration of the clan and serve as custodian of the Urhobo culture. While the Imitete and Emete age grades clean and sweep the streets, run errands and perform domestic duties. The Otuorere age grade performs heavy duties like bush clearing, building of shrines, construction works, burial and other social services. The working class and warriors belong to the 'Ivwragba age grade.

Religious Belief System

In the pre-colonial era, the Urhobos were purely followers of traditional religion. The main focus of the Urhobo traditional religion was the adoration of Oghene (Almighty God), the supreme deity and recognition of 'Edjo' (native gods) and 'Erivwein' (ancestors).

Amongst the Urhobos, the concept of God is discoverable from the names and attributes of God from stories, as well as from religious ceremonies.¹³ The edjo are generally believed to inhabit water – the numerous creeks, tributaries of the

Niger delta, which abound in Urhoboland. There exist Olokun, Omanuku – water spirits who bestow blessings on whom they deem fit.

Indeed, if the order of spiritual forces of the Urhobo is illustrated by a pyramid or triangle, at the apex was the supreme God (Oghene) and on either sides were native gods (edjo) and ancestors (erivwin). And as one would expect, they are not accorded the same level of primacy. While *prima facie*, it may appear that the edjo belonging to a whole clan might feature prominently in the life of the citizens, but generally, the erivwin rather than the edjo receive the greater emphasis and attention. Any Urhobo traditional worshipper confronted with the question of having to arrange in order of importance the powers and spiritual beings, who control the life of the nation, would give the order to Oghene, erivwin and edjo. With Oghene being treated as father, and the others, his children.¹³ Oghene is seen as the Orovw'akpo, the owner and the supreme controller of the whole universe, the source from which other spiritual forces derive their existence and power.

However, it is the worship of the ancestors that occupies the most vital part of the religious life of virtually all Urhobos. This is because the ancestors are perceived to be direct “watch men” of the family affairs. Worshipped through the medium of gin (alcoholic drink) and the performance of incantatory poetry, the ancestors are believed to possess the powers to bless and also seen as guardians of morality. Other reasons for ancestral worship include: instances of bad dreams,

sickness, the need to give thanks; ask for forgiveness of misdeed such as incest, theft, dereliction of duty; as well as the natural propensity to accord worship to one's departed parents.¹⁴

Commenting on the bond that existed between an Urhobo man and his ancestors. Pa. Oghenekaro Akwike recalled the era of Christian evangelism wherein Urhobo converts sought to fuse ancestral worship into the newly embraced Christianity – a practice the church seemed intolerable. This attitude of the church was in turn to beget a considerable drop in church attendance by the Urhobos.¹⁵ Indeed, as aptly put by Samuel U. Eriwo, an Urhoboman would jettison any attempt whatsoever, to detach him from his milieu and his family – a thing which the discontinuation of ancestor worship was believed to cause.¹⁶

Festivals

The Urhobos have different festivals and practice that showcase their rich cultural heritage. Some festivals are annual festivals that includes masquerades, fishing, swimming contests and dancing. Such festivals which are in most cases held in honour of their ancestors such as in Ughelli, provides, an occasion for worshipping them. True, in certain Urhobo clans like Ughievwen and Ewu, the annual festival is in honour of the nature gods. It is also an occasion for worshipping the living-dead.

For the purpose of this discussion, the Kokori people of the Agbon clan will be used as case study.

The Kokori people organize a number of festivals in honour of their native gods. Such festivals include Egba festival occasioned to celebrate the Egba fetish (war-god believed to protect their soldiers by rendering them invisible, impenetrable to machet cuts, arrows and spears); Ogidigbo festival, in honour of the Ogidigbo fetish (believed to bring peace, prosperity, good health and long life of Kokori people at home and abroad); as well as the Otororho festival in honour of the Otoroho fetish.

These festivals are celebrated annually. The annual Egba festival is between January and February and lasts for four (4) days. It begins from Edeniaka which is the small Kokori market day, and ends on the following market day. The festival date is usually fixed by Okarorho (administrative head of the town) in the Ogua meeting, and it is normally based on the position of the moon getting near full circle to allow for darkness to come early to disperse the activists of the celebration. The date usually announced not less than three (3) big Kokori market length in advance (about 24 days) and it must fall on Edeniaka. This big period is given to allow information reach Kokori people staying abroad; and for foodstuffs to be fully stocked as no one is permitted to go to farm or market during the ceremony.

As from the time of festival date announcement, the priests are usually allowed to go out every market day to collect food items and money from passerby at any Kokori outlet roads. However, while the Egba fetish priests could be allowed to seize food items from individuals when voluntary contributions are sufficient, the ogidigbo priests are not allowed to do so, being the fetish, a god of peace.¹⁷

S. Odje gives a descriptive account of a typical Egba festival. He states:

“The first day, one common practice is the throwing of dusty sand about by the members of the community as the Egba priests appears. The dusty sand being thrown is believed to be a blessing of good health, protection and prosperity to survive the coming year.

On the second day, one highly significant event is the mock battle between the Egba priest and the Ogidigbo priest which many interpret to represent the forces of evil against good. Also very common is the large crowd of spectators who are either sitting or standing by the sides of the main streets from one end to the other engaged in drinking or discussing the dancing groups as they pass by”.¹⁸

Indeed, a number of activities performed in the Egba festival is quite characteristic of many Urhobo clan festival held in honour of native gods. Today, inspite of the rise of modernization necessitated by forces of education, Christianity and other like forces in the society, cultural festivals full of arresting visuals and radiant symbols are still very much celebrated in Urhoboland.

Marriage

Marriage is sacred. It looms large enough to tie two independent families together forever. And that of the Urhobo is no exception. In Urhobo culture, marriage is a spiritual and cultural union between two families. This is so because families play a central role in ensuring the success of the relationship from the time of courtship through marriage negotiations to the contracting of the marriage.

In ancient times, marriage was usually initiated by parents of both couples. The parents who feel that their son have come of age, go in search of a suitable girl from a suitable family. An ideal girl for marriage was one that is a virgin, industrious, peaceful, nice looking and of good character; while a suitable family was one that has good public image and reproductive in terms of child bearing. The search involves the parents, their son, friends, relatives and well wishers. If the son is the first to get one, his parents make behind the scene investigations to approve or reject the choice. Should they agree in the choice of a particular girl, the marriage negotiation commences, if otherwise, finding is dismissed for a continuous search.

Marriage Procedure

The programme of the marriage usually covers about twenty (20) principal items. Three (3) of these items are usually settled by privately by the prospective son-in-law before the marriage day, viz:

- i) Gift to the father in-law which includes one walking stick, one hat and one piece of cloth attire.
- ii) Money bargained to be paid to the mother in-law for the girl's circumcision and for the labour of bearing her i.e. money for Oyanvwe and for Ugbererhare.
- iii) Money for the girl's parents to prepare food for the suitor and his entourage.¹⁹

The marriage ritual known as 'Udi Arhovwaje' takes place in the ancestral home of the bride or a patrilineal relation of the bride as agreed by the family. It is believed that the ancestors were a witness to the marriage and that only the physical body is sent to her husband during marriage. Her 'erhi' (spirit double) remains in the family home. This explains why in Urhobo culture, a woman is brought back to be buried in her family home when she dies. Also, should the wife become unfaithful, it is believed that she will be punished by the ancestors – this seem to explain the faithfulness of many Urhobo women to their husbands.

It is imperative to note that the Urhobo marriage extends beyond the couples directly involved; it embraces the extended families of the spouses. Divorce is rare, and the marriage endures beyond the life of the husband. This is due to the fact that in the death of the husband, the wife is passed on to a member of the husband's family for continued marriage. This custom sees to the provision

of emotional and financial stability as well as the continuity of the marriage. However, it must be added that, this practice has substantially waned over time.

Economic Activities

The more southern regions of Urhoboland (including Arharuwarian, Okparebe, Eghwu, Uwheru, Olomu, Evwereni and Ughelli) which border Ijo and Isoko lands, are generally waterlogged, especially in the months of the rainy season from June to October. The more northern areas of Urhoboland (including Oghara, Idjerhe, Okpe, Agbon, Abraka and Orogun) are generally drier.²⁰

These water bodies and the tropical forests in traditional Urhoboland have informed that main occupations of the Urhobo people. Farming and fishing are enterprises that Urhobo men and women engage in large numbers. Farming is usually more for subsistence living and local consumption than for commercial purpose. Only the palm produce from the oil palm industry in which the Urhobos had been engaged ever since they settled on their land was exported overseas. It is reported that over 200 gallons of palm oil were brought by the Portuguese in 1522 for the Forcados River.²¹ This could only have been produced by the Urhobos.

Aside agricultural production, local craft was another significant aspect of the economy. While the men mostly engaged in such specialized industries as blacksmithing, carving, and weaving, the women took such craft as weaving and pottery making. Equally important was trade.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER THREE

TRADITIONAL -POLITICAL SYSTEM OF URHOBOS PEOPLE

In order to prevent a vague treatment of the character and patterns of Urhobo political system, these traditional-political system will be discussed under the following sub-heads: political system, religion and festivals, marriage and finally, war.

Political System

In the pre-colonial period, amongst the people of the Delta province, two broad types of political institutions existed. These were the kingdoms – Aboh and Itsekiri; and the fragmented societies – Urhobo, Isoko, Ijo and Ukwuani. That is, why majority of clans in the former group have as their administrative head, a king, those of the latter mostly had as their administrative head, an elder; a governmental structure usually described as gerontocracy. The basic unit of social and political organization is made up of people who claim common descent from a given ancestor through the male line.¹

The political institutions of the Urhobo people describing the relationship which were strategic to the structure and functioning of the Urhobo society especially how politics, marriage, religion, economy and the judicial system was organized can be described at different levels of gerontocracies, plutocracies and political kingdom. The Urhobos practiced gerontocracy – the government of elders

based on age-grades organization. The oldest person in the community was the head of government known as Okarorho.² The age grades for men and women were organized separately. Also practiced was plutocracy – the government of the rich and wealthy. This was evident in some Urhobo clans, whereby titled wealthy men headed the government such as Osuivie of Agbarho and the Ohworode of Olomu. In some other clans, there existed kings (ovie) such as in Okpe, Ughelli and Agbon. In most contemporary Urhoboland today, there is a combination of gerontocracy (Okarorho), plutocracy (with various chieftaincy titles) and kingship (ovie).

The political structure of the people revealed interactions. This can be traced as far back to the founding of the people. It has been said that the Benin tradition in those days was for an Oba to send out powerful princes and subjects to other lands to found new kingdoms where they could exercise full authority without interference from him. It was in line with this practice therefore that Oba Egbeka sent his favourite son, Prince Urhobo with the title Ogie (now known as Ovie) out of Benin. Prince Urhobo travelled through the river Ethiope until he got to a spot where he settled and founded Avwraka in the vicinity of the present Abraka day town. And with him, went the governmental ideals of his parent stock which he bequeathed to the newly found habitat.³

The Benin influence on the socio-political institutions of the Urhobos is quite evident. The kinship of the Urhobos as well as her neighbours – the Isoko, Itsekiri, Aboh were undisputably based on the Benin model. Among the various Urhobo clans, including even those which claim Ijo origins, such as Ughelli, Agbarha, Ogo, the institution of Ovie and the various titled societies have very strong Benin influence. This holds even more true when it is considered that such titles required the Oba of Benin's investiture. For Ikime, what would seem to have happened is that either a Benin group conquered an original set of settlers and so imposed a political system, or groups already settled deliberately went to Benin to 'acquire' some kind of title which conferred greater prestige and legitimacy. The fame of the Oba of Benin in the palmy days of the Benin Empire was sufficient to explain why groups seeking additional prestige would have gone to Benin to acquire some title.⁴

Aside such political interactions with the Benins, one may find similar interactions with the Ijo speaking people. In the previous chapter, it was mentioned that of the twenty-two (22) Urhobo clans, five (5) have traditions which link them with some of the Ijo. These Urhobo clans – Ughelli, Agbarha, Ogo, Ughienvwe and Ewu, founded as a result of population pressure or disagreement with their kinsmen bore some semblance and links of political structure with the founding Ijo clan. In the case of Ughelli, this version of tradition is confirmed in their

interaction with, the Ijo speaking people in the sense that 'Tarakiri' (of the Ijo stock) is still used at formal gatherings as a kind of salutation.

One cannot afford to miss the political relationship between the Urhobos and her fraternal neighbours, the Isoko. Otite in writing about the Okpe kingdom of the Urhobo, stated that Igboze (father of Okpe) founded the settlement of Erohwa in Isokoland, and then moved on to Olomu. Orhue, one of the four sons of Okpe, later left Olomu and established himself in the territory of Orerokpe. Thus, there came to be an established connection between the Urhobo group and that of the Isoko. This connection between Okpe-Isoko, Okpe-Olomu and Oreokpe, enabled the people to exchange visits on political as well as social matters.⁵

Therefore, in examining the political organization of the Urhobos and her neighbours, it suffices to say that issues of common historical ties and ancestry imposed also some level of homogeneity amongst them.

Religion and Festivals

In the pre-colonial period, the Urhobos, likewise her neighbours were purely adherents of traditional religion. The Urhobo people believed in the supreme God, Oghene. He was seen as the source of beneficent creation. Oghene was believed to be creator of heaven and earth who made both plants and animals. As the source of human life, He gave to each man at the time of his/her birth, a portion of define being called erivwi (spirit). The Urhobo considers Oghene as the

supreme controller of the universe, the source from which other spiritual forces derive their existence and power. They believe that through the worship of their native gods (edjo), they accord worship to God Almighty. They also believed in the existence of ancestors.⁶ The neighbours of the Urhobos in the region share this traditional and belief system. However, the names of these gods or deities could differ from one group to another.

The relevance of these gods or deities to the Urhobos and her neighbours in the eve of colonialism cannot be overemphasized. Before the commencement of planting seasons, farmers offer sacrifices to these deities so as to ensure a fruitful harvest season. These deities were depended on for protection during hunting, warring times and peaceful times alike. Generally, they were depended on for security, the provision of good health, long life and good living to the people. Such sacrifices usually involve animal sacrifice such as fowl, goat, cattle; food items – yam, plantain, fruits, offered to deities represented usually with carved images, depending on the occasion.⁷

The belief in ancestors and ancestral worship was also very strong among the Urhobos and her neighbours during the period under survey. It helped served as a bond of unity between them. This is mostly evident between the Urhobo and Isoko clans. During this period, festivals held in honour of the deities were usually attended by both members of each ethnic group at the specified location, usually a

market square.⁸ Also, during this period, death was regarded a misfortune, and marriages were forbidden. Defaulters were liable to pay fines.

Indisputably, such festivals showcased the rich cultural heritage of the people. They were in themselves vents for inter-group relations between the peoples. They also revealed the extent to which the people were related and linked up. These festivals served as instrument of peace, harmony and unity. Although at other things, they were sources of conflict. As already mentioned, these festivals were mostly held in honour of the numerous deities worshipped by the people. Such festivals include masquerade feasts, fishing festivals, swimming contest, and many more.

During the pre-colonial period, the Uvwie clan of the Urhobos worshipped a deity called 'Owhoru'. This deity was also worshipped by the Erohwa people of Isokoland. At festival times, both peoples exchanged visits. Often times, they met to offer a common sacrifice to the deity. A similar practice was observed between the Olomu of Urhoboland and Olomoro of Isokoland who exchanged visits during annual festivals. Such special relations promoted peace and harmony between them. No Uvwie person would dare lay violent hands on an Erohwa person and vice-versa.⁹ Thus, the socio-cultural life of the people seemed an out-growth of their religious life and belief. This as it were greatly influenced inter-group relations among the various Urhobo peoples and their neighbours.

Marriage

Marriage in pre-colonial Urhoboland was a mark of responsibility and a symbol of adulthood. It was a group affair that involved two unrelated kinship groups. It qualified the parties for full participation in the community and served as a means of forging political, military and economic alliances. The essence of marriage in pre-colonial Urhoboland was not only merely to unite two lovers but primarily to establish a legal basis for procreation which because of the emphasis on children, the Urhobos regarded as an obligation to the ancestors. An act based on a belief that those born owe the debt of begetting others.

In Urhoboland, various forms of marriages existed. Such as Ose; wherein dowry has not been fully paid but couples may live together and enjoy full de facto conjugal rights; Esavwijoko wherein parents propose marriage on behalf of their son or daughter at an early age; Arranged marriage in absentia whereby a man, who is abroad request his family to marry a wife of their choice for him.¹⁰ A system of marriage which allowed fathers to use their daughters as collateral for loans was also practiced in the pre-colonial period. It was not uncommon to find local rulers and very influential men contracting marriage for the purpose of establishing political, military or economic links.

Marriages unite people to each other, binding families, lineages and other groups in reciprocal duties and obligations. Between the Urhobos and her

neighbours, marriage created an interlocking web of kinship relationships which bound families and linkages, villages, towns, and clans together. It promoted trade, most especially long distance trade. Many traders were said to have married from distant neighbours so as to ensure their safe and easy passage through those villages. By such marriages, the traders became accepted members of their in-laws' clans. Thus, interlocking marriage ties, between the leading families in the villages along the trade routes were useful in ensuring the security and convenience of traders from these villages operating along that trade route. This was confirmed by A. E. Afigbo who observed that most long distance travelers were polygamous and usually took care to choose their wives from important and strategically located towns along their normal route of business. The mere mention of an in-law's family could constitute a safe passage.¹¹ This observation by Afigbo holds true for the Urhobo communities where some of the trade routes passed.

Marriage promoted inter-group contact and integration in the period under review. There is evidence to suggest that the Urhobos inter-married with their neighbours. The traditions of most of the various Urhobo clans are replete with instances of nuptial relations with other ethnic groups. The Olomu of the Urhobos inter-married with the Olomoro of the Isokos. The Ughienvwe and Ewu of the Urhobos inter-married with the Mein of the Ijos. Similarly, the Evhro people inter-married with Erohwo in the Isoko country. The members of Urhobo clan of Uvwie married with the Itsekiri. So also, the Abraka, Orogun peoples appeared to have

had marital relationships with the Benins.¹² Such marital development between the Urhobos and her neighbours helped concretized cross-cutting loyalties between the peoples long before the advent of the British. This tradition of inter-marriage was further reinforced as the process of contact matured between groups. Thus, throughout the pre-colonial period, marriages between different groups helped to promote and cement inter-group relations in the region.

Indeed one highly significant objective of marriage between the Urhobos and her neighbours in the pre-colonial period, was to maintain the continuity of the family and sustain the age long ties between the people. Marriage was one inevitable way that fostered inter-group relations between the Urhobos and her neighbours.

War

As earlier mentioned, the Urhobo speaking people and her neighbours on the eve of colonial rule enjoyed relatively peaceful relations, though not without occasional disagreements. The people at times engaged in some inter-ethnic skirmishes or feuds and even wars in extreme cases. The negative connotation of war by no means imply a deviation from the theoretical framework of this work. This is because war is a continuation of politics by other means. It is a form of interaction.

Amongst the Urhobos and her neighbours, land and boundary disputes resulting from the desire for more land to meet the demands of the growing population. This formed important source of quarrel or conflict amongst the various people. However, there were some other sources of disputes not connected with land, like assault on women in public, stealing, molestation of traders, abuse of custom and traditions, careless use of abusive words and dispute over marriage, burials and so on. However, the issues mostly caused conflict and disagreements but not full blown intra – or inter group wars.

The weapons used usually involve spear, guns, knives, machetes; and the decision to attack an enemy camp was usually taken by elders, titled men, priests of deities and diviners when measure to bring peace failed.¹³ Soldiers had to be mobilized since there was typically no standing armies. They made use of able bodied men especially those that belonged to the various age sets and they formed the army.

Several measures and preparations were made to fortify the warriors for the task ahead. These involved both physical and spiritual preparations; the engagement of native doctors and diviners who prepared different charms for the troops. These were performed to avoid failing in the war.

During wars, all women and children were free from molestation and attack. Thus, women were employed and used as spies through their interactions at

neighbouring markets with fellow women. To avoid such spying and sabotage, the movement of women were restricted.

During the pre-colonial period, a number of conflicts did occur between the various Urhobo and Isoko sub-groups, or clans. The Urhobo and Isoko groups that were geographically contiguous or not too far from one another, not only maintained commercial and social relations (Ughelli-Iyedi, Evwereni-Enwhe, for example); whose centres were famous for specific products and attracted people from considerable distances (like the Uzere “Eni Juju” did right up to the opening years of colonial rule), but also engage in wars between themselves. Such traditions of wars between certain Urhobo and certain Isoko groups – for example Egweru-Enwe, Igbide-Evwreni, Iyede-Ewu, Emevor-Agbarha, Ughweru-Igbide.¹⁴ Virtually, all of these wars were fought over disputes about ownership of land as well as struggle for crude power to have dominion over others.¹⁵ As the population of the various groups increase there was a need for more land. Sometimes wars were fought over run-away women. Such wars were fought between the groups indicated.¹⁶

Obaro Ikime, commenting on the source of slavery from the Urhobo country made mention of the fact that the traditions of the Urhobo and Isoko clans are replete with stories of wars between clans. He agreed with the view that most of these wars were fought during a period the various clans, having lived for a

while and around the area of the parent settlement, began to push outwards in response to population and other pressures. Such a push, he contended, would have been common to many of the clans and so produced conflict which led to war. Infact there is hardly any case of an Urhobo or Isoko clan not having gone to war with one or other of its neighbour.¹⁷

Despite these wars, a salutary point however, was that wisdom prevailed in the long run. Such wars usually ended with the groups entering into pacts of perpetual friendship which forbids future wars. Such means of settlement could be through the intervention of neutral neighbours, or through selected members made up of priest of deities, elders, titled men from both groups who met at a neutral place or a ceasefire arrangement.¹⁸ The leaders usually initiated and entered into covenants between and amongst themselves to ensure sustainable peace. Some of the covenants are still in existence today and they are respected by the groups that covenanted as they were respected in those days. For example, the covenant between Erhowa, Iyede and Aviara is highly respected and feared. It promotes peace and understanding among the people of these communities; no evil or harm is done to each other under any circumstances.¹⁹

O. Ikime further suggested that these wars were partly responsible for the development of some common identities and interests between the Urhobo and Isoko as they sought to find an answer to common problems and a formula for

peaceful co-existence.²⁰ Through peaceful settlement, freedom of movement and interactions amongst the various peoples were restored after. Contravening of such settlement by any party or group carried serious punishment from the ancestors. Thus, through settlement mutual relationships between the Urhobos communities and her neighbours were maintained.

Thus, war as a factor of contact should not be dismissed. Although, its place in inter-group relations in pre-colonial times is often overemphasized. The people of Nigeria were never as war-like as portrayed by colonial anthropologists. Consequently, we must note that where war as a social activity occurred, it should be seen as a last resort, for the overriding concern of groups was to support their continual survival. Pre-colonial wars were waged for various reasons and for the fulfillment of various purposes as: 1) to occupy and establish political hegemony over another territory; 2) to resist foreign occupation and domination; and 3) to fight internal enemies.²¹ The occurrence of war mostly led to the movement of people, either as war captives, or refugees, from their original settlements to new settlements. Wherever the people went, they took with them their culture, which was usually integrated with that of the receiving people. Thus, not only was war a form of interaction, its attendant consequence of migration fostered same.

From the foregoing, one can observe that various waves of socio-political forces also engendered contact and interdependence amongst the peoples. Socio-

cultural and political factors such as religion, marriage, festivals, political system, war, etc. promoted interaction between the Urhobo speaking peoples and their neighbours.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE IMPACT OF THE URHOB0 POLITICAL SYSTEM ON ITS PEOPLE

The Urhobo political system is rooted in a decentralized, gerontocratic structure with significant emphasis on consensus-building and community governance. Each Urhobo community is led by the eldest male, known as the "Okpako Orere," who serves as the traditional political head. While gerontocracy is a core element, the system also incorporates elements of consensus-seeking and communal decision-making. The Urhobo political system, traditionally based on gerontocracy and consensus, has significantly shaped their social structure and identity. While modern influences have introduced elements of a representative democracy, the traditional system continues to play a vital role in local governance and community affairs¹.

The Urhobo political system, characterized by its republican and decentralized nature, has significantly shaped Urhobo identity and social structures. This system, while fostering individual liberty and community autonomy, has also presented challenges in terms of national unity and proactive alliance-building, especially in the context of modern Nigeria². The system's emphasis on consensus and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms has also influenced social interactions and justice delivery

Urhobo political organization historically emphasized individual liberty and autonomy, with each community (or clan) having its own governing structure and decision-making processes. This decentralized system, while promoting local control, has sometimes hindered the development of a unified Urhobo front in national politics.

Urhobo societies traditionally relied on elders and established processes for resolving disputes, both within and between communities. This system emphasized fairness, quick resolution, and often involved spiritual consequences for those who perverted justice³. Men were organized into age grades (Ekpako, Ivwraghwa, Otuorere, and Imitete), with the elders (Ekpako) playing a crucial role in governance, cultural preservation, and dispute resolution.

Historical connections with the Benin Kingdom influenced some aspects of Urhobo political organization, leading to the adoption of certain monarchical elements in some communities. However, the Urhobo also resisted complete assimilation, maintaining their republican ideals. The Urhobo system fostered a strong sense of individualism and independence within a communal social structure. This duality has had both positive and negative consequences, influencing their ability to organize for collective action⁴.

The traditional political system and associated institutions have played a vital role in preserving Urhobo culture, language, and customs. The Urhobo's

republicanism and individualism have sometimes influenced their relationships with other ethnic groups, leading to both cooperation and conflict. The consensus system of government of the people is erected on political structures. For the purpose of effective administration, there exist many levels of government. The village (town) and the clan (Kingdom) administrations are easily identifiable. Also, the kingdom is structured into units which include the Okpe, Agbon, Ogo and Ujevwe, clans amongst others⁵. This means that each Kingdom is made up of clans which are composed of villages and towns. following towns and villages: Isiokoro, Kokori, Eku, Igun, Okpara Orhokpor and Ovu (Ogome 2009). Each clan has its own but related system of Government which revolves around the *Ovie*. This implies that each clan has its own natural ruler known as the *Ovie*. The village or town governments are basically gerontocratic. There are two types of governments under the village administration namely, the family and that of the community.

Government at the family level represents the basic and one of the most effective political units of government at the grassroots where it enjoys the royalty and support of the family members and the villages or the community at large. The *Ekugbe* is an important process for the actualization of the religious, social and political ideals of the individual, family, community and the society as a whole. An analysis of the structure of the *Ekugbe* is therefore necessary for its importance for this thesis. It is important to note that there exist different types or genres of *Ekugbe*, each of which takes care of an aspect of the life of the Urhobo people. It

should also be noted that there is no necessary uniformity among their modes of procedure. We may now discuss them one by one⁶.

The varied political system in the different regions of a place come to imply that if the people are to satisfy their various needs, the political structure is to play an integral part of their co-existence. This is because no nation or ethnic group can be independent without having anything to do with its neighbours. Ethnic groups and peoples are not equally endowed with particular natural resources, others may not, and so, those that do not have to depend on those who have. Some other nations may have particular natural resources but not enough to meet all the needs of their people and so they have to depend on those who have more than enough to meet their shortfall. Other nations may not have certain natural resources at all, and so, they have to depend totally on those that have more than enough to exchange with them⁷. As nations are not equally endowed with material and natural resources, they have to depend on one another to meet the demands of their people. It is a well known fact that the type of goods produced by a people is contingent on the resource profile of the environment. So different groups and peoples produce different types of goods based on the material and natural resources that are available to them. They therefore, exchange their surpluses for those goods they do not produce in sufficient quantities or not at all. This exchange could be in form of trade with immediate and distant neighbours across innumerable trading routes.

For the Urhobos and her neighbours during the pre-colonial period, this was exactly the scenario that played itself.

The Urhobo Socio – Political System

The Urhobo traditional socio – political system is a reflection of the moral and religious beliefs of the people. The end or goal of politics, to the Urhobos, is the promotion of the good life of the people. All political actions are geared towards the balancing of the moral or ontological order. According to Aristotle in his politics, every man is a political animal in the sense that man lives in groups or in communities with a view to providing security and good governance⁸. The Urhobos are no exception to this clarion call.

Urhobo Political Institutions

An institution is a system of patterned expectations which defines the proper behaviour of person playing certain roles enforced both by the incumbent's own positive motives for conformity and by the sanctions of others.. One of the main issues derived from the above definitions is that institutions have a tendency towards normative behaviour or account of their “fairly permanent” character. This implies that they have the capacity to outlast the individuals “who at any given time comprise the role players within them. From the foregoing, political institutions refer to the system of patterned expectations while defining the behaviour of persons in any given society⁹.

Politics is about the use and exercise of political power to attain certain goals, including the maintenance of the groups' integrity. Thus, government and politics are means rather than ends for controlling society. The traditional urhobo society has a well entrenched system of political institutions. The goal here is to show that the political and social institutions exist mainly to promote and reinforce the uniting bond of communalism in the society. They also represent the framework, from which government of the urhobo traditional society is erected.

Gerontocracy

Gerontocracy can be defined as government mainly by elders. It is based on the age grade organization. Among the Urhobos, women and men are separately organized. Men are organized into four major age – grades: *Ekpako*, *Ivwraghwa*, *Otuorere* and *Imitete*.

The *Ekpako* Age Grade

The *Ekpako* (Elders) age grade is made up of men of about 60 years and above. They are saddled with the day to day administration of the Urhobo nation. They are the trustees and custodians of their history and culture.

The *Ivwraghwa* Age Grade

The age grade consists of men between thirty and sixty years, who form the largest work force, and are of the age required in pre – colonial societies as warrior and executors of orders which emanate from the elders's council.

The Otuorere Age Grade

This age grade assists the older age grades in doing heavy jobs such as building of community, shrines, houses and wooden bridges¹⁰.

The Imitele Age Grade

This group is made up of children of circumcision age. They are usually of the age ranging from 6 to 15 or 20 years. They assist the older age – grades in doing minor jobs and going on errands, such as cleaning of the towns, clearing of bushes, sweeping the streets and compound and acting as town criers. Apart from the men who are organized into four main groups, women are also organized but in three major grades, namely, *Ekwokweya*, *cals*, *Emetogbe* – women who are divorcees and widows who returned from their marital homes to settle in their home town or village. They are usually between 40 to 50 years of age. Some of them are very old and have passed menopause. They don't have leaders with a fixed tenure; rather their leaders are elected on ad-hoc basis. Same for their *Otota* who is usually elected

“during crises to present petitions and suggestion to the town or state council especially in ritual affairs¹¹.

The Eghweya Age Grade: The grade which is between 30 to 50 years old from within and outside the town or village. Like the *Ekwokweya* Age Grade, they elect their leaders and spokesmen on adhoc basis who perform certain duties on their

behalf. Such duties include rites of propitiation and guarding against the destruction of economic crops by goats, cows and pigs.

The *Emete* Age Grade Group: This consists of unmarried young girls who are usually uncircumcised. They perform mainly domestic duties such as cooking and fetching of water from the rivers and lakes. It is important to note here that the age grades may have specific names in some of the clans or towns. Also, the age delimitation varies and transition from one grade to another is a function of one's maturity. Gerontocracy has strong roots in *Orogun, Udu, Ephron – Oto and Ughwerun* clans probably because of their sizes and simple social and political interest¹².

Plutocracies

This is made up of plutocrats – the rich and wealthy in the society. Thus, it is the government of the rich, powerful and wealthy. Example of towns or clans where plutocracy is practiced is Agbaro and Olomo. The plutocrats attain their positions either by virtue of being the first among the order of title – holders or by the acquisition of enormous wealth, power and dignity unequalled by others. A good example is the *Owhorode* of Olomu clan.

Political Kingdoms

This will be discussed under the rubric of age and probable link with Benin. In traditional Urhobo political system, there are kingdoms dating back to time immemorial. Among the various clans, it is not clear which one is the older. But

records have it that the kingship institutions in Okpe, Ogo, Agbarha and Ughelli are very old, while others are of recent development. This can be found in Agbon, Uvwie, Abraka and Oghara clans and towns. In addition to the above, some Urhobo clans such as that of Agbarha, Ewreni, Ogo and Ughelli clan claim to have royal links to the Bini royal Lineage. This explains why they seek and perform pre – recognition rites in Benin during moments of succession to a new throne¹².

Traditional Government of the Urhobos

The aforementioned social and political structures represent the framework from which the Government of the Urhobos is erected. Two main levels of Government can be identified namely the town (village) and kingdom (clan).

The Village and Clan or Town Administration

The village is the basic and most effective political unit of government at the local level. When we consider the urhobo speaking people as a whole, in what sense are they to be regarded as a unit? As shown earlier in this thesis the urhobo people occupies a common territory. They also speak a common language though with many dialectical variations. The Okpe and Effurun dialects are some examples of these variations. With a few exceptions, the variations appear to be mutually intelligible without undue difficulty at least to those who are accustomed to travelling. The existence of common language which makes for effective communication is potentially a strong unifying factor in the

process of reaching consensus on a proposed course of action or in decision making in the traditional society¹³. Language also brings about sense of oneness or identity among the people.

As a result, the people see themselves as one people belonging to a particular village or clan and recognize other neighboring villagers as people with whom they trade and marry. In addition to the linguistic bond between members of the group there is in the economic sphere another bond which holds members of the village together. There is the possession of a central market which is usually held in every four days or in every three days in rare cases. Among the people, trade is second only to agriculture as a means of livelihood and is one of their ruling passions. For the people, markets are important event of the week and arrangements largely revolve around them. All the villages have paths leading to the central market place, and once a year on the same day the villages clear their paths.

This simultaneous acts performed at the season of the annual festivals, is felt to be a symbol of unity among the people. They talk about it and insisted every member of the group must participate. The market is the affair of the whole village and a source not only for economic gains, but for pride, prestige and a matter for much earnest thought. The markets are one of the main features of the lives of the urhobo people. They provide a meeting point for the dissemination of news. They are social events where the spice of gossip, the recreation of dances and the zest of

a bargain relieve the almost continuous toil of hoeing, planting, weeding and harvesting throughout the year¹⁴. In fact, trading is regarded as the breath of life, particularly to the women folks, and the vigour with which bargaining and haggling are conducted is evidence of the prestige which is attached to a successful commercial enterprise.

Another important feature of the village administration is the bond of communal feeling among the people. Most social and political activities are done by communal efforts. For example, in agriculture, the household (man, his wives and children) form the basic unit which co-operates for the production of food crops namely yam, cassava, coco-yam, banana and vegetables. The *oshare* (man or husband) clears the bush at the beginning of the farming season and do the hoeing. But he may often call on some members of his kinsmen to help him for a day or two and will give them food in return. Each member of the band will then be helped in return and will provide food for the rest also. For the purpose of carrying out communal activities, men and boys are divided into age groups or grades. All the boys who have done the initiation rites at the same time are grouped into the same age grade. For example, the communal clearing of village bush paths and carrying of corpses to burial sites are done by this age grade¹⁵.

There are occasions when the voices of this age grade are heard in the running of village affairs. However, the age-grades are largely social and convivial in their activities and concerned mainly with the interest of the community. As for

their convivial side, for example, a man who co-habits with a woman for a considerable long period of time without marrying her could be laughed at by members of his age-grade. It is this discerning bond of common interest, brotherhood and love for one another rather than any specific activity that the significance of the age-grade would appear to be situated.

The urhobo people are divided into small more or less independent social units, the largest being in many cases, the village-groups or clan. This is a collection of villages bound together by certain ties which include that of kinship. But each one, at any rate, largely manages its own affairs. Kinship is the social recognition and expression of genealogical relationships; both consanguineal and affinal which may include socially recognized relationships based on supposed as well as actual genealogical ties¹⁶. Also, kinship is defined as the relationship between “kins”, that is, persons related by real, putative or fictive consanguinity.” The bond of communality, love, common interest, solidarity patriotism and kinship which characterize the traditional urhobo society are replicated in the village and town administrations.

The village administration is managed by a council of elders headed by the *Okalorho* (the oldest of the elders). The venue of such meetings is the *Ogwa* (hut or building) built for such purpose. The council usually meets on market days to handle legislative and judicial matters brought before it by the people. However, the bulk of the village administration consists mainly of judicial matters. The

council's duty lies in the maintenance of social equilibrium. Through adjudication and restitution of materials misappropriated or stolen, reconciliation of individuals and group of people, and the reconstruction of the society is infected.

In other words, the council in "making or administering laws, is mainly concerned with social control and the maintenance of social order. (*Some Nigerian People*, 1993) The actions, activities and decisions of the council are carried out with a view to reaching a consensus. In order to find solutions to matters brought before it, the question often ask, is, does the actions, activities and decisions capable of promoting the common good of the community?. This is true of Aristotle's statement that all human actions are performed in order to attain some end¹⁷.

Functions of the Government

In this section we shall examine the functions expected to be carried out by the kingdom in general. We shall rely on the model of analysis by Jacobsen and Lipman. According to this model, the functions of a state can be divided into three major categories namely, essentially, service and business functions.

(i) Essential Functions

Like in the Plato's *Republic*, there are people in the state saddled with the responsibility for the protection of the state against internal and external aggression. This function includes defence, law and order, collection of taxes and record keeping. The Urhobo traditional system of Government as it were, was based on

the *Ovie* (ship). He and his chiefs make laws for the kingdom and are expected to be obeyed by the subjects. Under the system, there is no separation of powers as in the presidential system of government. Legislative, executive and judicial powers are fused together and performed by the same organ of government, as practiced under parliamentary system. This shows that legislative powers reside with the *Ovie*. In the days of inter tribal wars, the defence of the kingdom is the responsibility of the whole kingdom. Although there are small bodies of *Arualans* (giants) constituted by the *Ovie* – in – council for the protection of the kingdom in times of external aggression, the direct responsibility for the defence of the kingdom lies with the state¹⁸. The *Ovie* is assisted in the day to day administration of the kingdom by the *Ekpako* and the *Invwraghwa* age grade as pointed out earlier.

(ii) Service Functions

This includes activities aimed at the promotion and attainment of the common good for the people. This also includes general functions such as building of roads, general sanitation, care for the needy and poor and provision of educational facilities.

This duty is carried out by the *Imitete* age grade assisted by other age grades. They clear bushes, sweep the streets and compounds, act as town criers, deliver messages for the *Ovie* and his chiefs, build bridges and canoes and perform burial rites on behalf of the Kingdom. They also help to perform religious duties on behalf of the kingdom. Religious calendars are well observed from year to year.

Such a calendar of religious and social events range from ancestral worship to the worships of deities and the gods. The moral equilibrium, peace and the promotion of the common good is achieved and maintained through propitiations and performance of rituals by the *Ovie* or *Oka – orho*, to the gods. For example, the *Echuo'oko* festival at Eku is held annually between September and October of every year on a date decided by the *Oka – orho* and his chiefs with close consultations with the gods and other deities. Here various forms of rituals are performed to appease the gods for peace and the general welfare of the citizens' writ – large. But the attitude of the *Ovieship* to the plight of the poor and the handicapped can be criticized. The welfares of these catergory of persons were regarded as their own problems rather than that of the town or kingdom¹⁹.

Besides, the average problem of the individual is that of the extended family before it will ever becomes that of the kingdom. From the foregoing, it is clear that some of the service functions are neglected by the town or kingdom since they are taken as individual responsibilities. It should be noted that the service functions that are carried out by the *Imitete* age grade are usually done without compensation.

Political Organization And Economy Of Urhobo

In the traditional African society, government was based on the established customs and tradition. Though there were no written constitution as in the case of modern societies, the political organizations in each of the kingdoms, particularly

in Urboboland were responsible for the administration of the societies,. Thus, every society at one time or the other evolved its own peculiar or unique political system whose structure and functions were relevant to the institutionalization of social order and harmony. The idea of kingdom not only run through Africa in general, but also became the most dominant traditional political institution to the Urhobo in particular. The pre-colonial political organization of any Urhobo kingdom was built around a king known as Ovie and his Council of chiefs. Each kingdom in Urboboland has different titles and names for the Ovie. For example, in Agbon clan the Ovie known as Ogulimerime²⁰.

Like in other Urhobo kingdoms, the Ovie title is hereditary and indicates royalty with relationship to Bennis, the progenitor of the Kingdom. The political system of any of the clans in Urhobo operates patrilineal as from 1516-1530 under the rulership of Uzezi, the first Ovie, who was said to be a princess from Benin. The pre-colonial Urhobo political system organization was built around the Ovie and the Oghowore the council member In the economic matters, there were no major difference between the economic activities of the people of Urhobo kingdom and their counterparts in other Urhobo kingdoms in the pre- colonial period. Thus, before 1891, some of the economic activities the people engaged in included agriculture(farming), trade, manufacture, goldsmith and traditional industries such as weaving, black smithing, pottery, palm-wine tapping, wood work among others. The economy of the people of the kingdom changed from food crop production to

cash crop production, especially 1890 due to the event of the era. The period 1890 onward has been described as the age of imperialism by some scholars such as Gallagher and Robinson. It has equally been stressed that the period 1915 and 1945 was significant in the economic history of West Africa of which Urhobo is an integral part. This is because, the period witnessed the growth of “cash economy” Which had its foundation in the development of the agricultural export product usually referred to as cash crops or exports crops. From 1900 when the charter of the Royal Niger Company was withdrawn, however, the administration sought to exploit the access into Urhoboland which the Niger water way offered. As a result, Sapele, Abraka and Warri became the basis for advance into the Urhobo interior²¹.

On the whole, therefore, there were three fronts along which British advances into Urhoboland took place. Of these, the Sapele – Abraka fronts was certainly the most important. In any case, it was along that the first significant encounters between the administration of the Niger Coast Protectorate and the Urhobo took place. By 1890 or so, the states of the Oil Rivers had ceased to pose a serious threat to British imperial pretension. In fact, to such an extent that these states had accepted British imperium, that British consuls came to see it as part of their legitimate duties to champion and advance the interests of coastal traders especially of the Warri traders in the Southern Urhoboland ²²

The political Economy of the Urhobos

The economy of a place is usually determined by the geographical location as well as the resources of the area. In Urhoboland, this factor largely influenced the economic life as well as socio-cultural and political character of the area. The location made the region to be dominated by fishing and farming activities; as well as transportation and trade. The Urhobos mastered their environment as well as developed various institutions which sustained them and their neighbours with whom they had both cordial and hostile relations; especially in the competition for trade. They engaged in trade with their immediate neighbours as well as the people of the coastal region with whom they exchanged their surplus goods for those they could not produce. In this, they participated in the internal and long distance trade that characterized West African pre-colonial societies and had established markets and trade routes that facilitated such interactions.

The rain forest vegetation made Urhoboland a major source of timber and notable timber-producing species such as *Antiaris toxicaria*, *Milicia (chlorophora) excelsa*, *Ceiba pentandra* and *Piptadeniastrum africanum*. Other trees that featured in this rain forest region include *Pentaclethra macrophylla*, *Chrysophyllum albidum* and *Irvingia gabonensis*. The two last mentioned tree species are fruit trees which are important as source of income and dietary supplement. Equally significant were fishing, local craft and trade.²³

Indeed, while agriculture, crafts and other economic activities of the people were vent for interdependence due to the differentials in the distribution of natural endowment and skills in the area, it was through trade that agricultural products and crafts of the people were sold to these in need of the items in their local markets in the communities. Important trading centres included Warri, Sapele and Ughelli. Also, smaller towns and villages had markets that held periodically rather than on a daily basis. when it is a 'market day' in a particular settlement, itinerant traders travel from nearby villages to sell their wares. Farmers also transport their crops such as yams and plantains and also processed cassava flour (garri) to rural markets for sale.²⁴ Indeed, trade and markets in the area developed simultaneously with agriculture and specialized craftsmanship. Local trade and markets in the area had developed naturally largely due to the complementary role it played in providing for the needs of the communities. These markets were periodic, though few were daily. Periodicity varied according to culture areas; but four-day, five-day and eight-day periodicities were widespread. One of the largest periodic markets in Urhoboland, the Kokori market held every eight (8) days.¹⁴ Undeniably, if agriculture was a basic occupation in pre-colonial Urhoboland, trading was a close second. The peoples traded not only as a result of necessity, but also for pleasure. Thus, trade was in consequence a crucial component of the economy, for it was through trade that disparities in productive capacity between various communities were bridged.

Impact of urhobo political system on the people

Traditional Governance:

The Urhobo political system is characterized by a decentralized structure, with each town or community having its own internal governance under the overall leadership of a traditional ruler (Ovie). The age grade system plays a crucial role, with elders (Ekpako) holding significant influence in decision-making and conflict resolution. traditional system emphasizes dispute resolution through established channels, often involving neutral grounds and the involvement of elders. This system values quick and fair resolutions to prevent community discord.

Modernization and the influence of the Nigerian government have introduced changes to the traditional system. The government's role in selecting and recognizing traditional rulers (Ovie) has, at times, led to a degree of dependence and a shift in the traditional power dynamics. While the Urhobo culture fosters communalism, a strong sense of individualism also exists, potentially affecting the ability of the community to mobilize effectively for common goals. This individualism is often linked to the republican nature of Urhobo politics. The evolving political landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for the Urhobo people. The traditional system's ability to adapt to modern governance structures and address contemporary issues like resource

control and development is crucial for the community's future. The Urhobo political system also shapes their relationships with neighboring ethnic groups, such as the Isoko and Itsekiri. Understanding these dynamics is vital for navigating the complex political landscape of the Niger Delta region²⁵.

In conclusion, the Urhobo political system, with its emphasis on republicanism, decentralization, and traditional dispute resolution, has profoundly shaped the Urhobo people's identity, social structures, and political participation. While this system has fostered a strong sense of community and individual liberty, it has also presented challenges in terms of national unity and proactive alliance-building

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Pre-colonial Africa has been described inter alia a period of isolation; a dark era wherein no such thing as inter-group relations existed amongst African peoples. So widely was this view propagated by European scholars, that its discountenance has in recent times been a major facet of Nigerian historiography. Numerous Nigerian scholars have devoted enormous effort and resources in seeking to the eventual evaporation of such Euro-centric view of Africa (and indeed, Nigeria). Attempts have been made to disprove the isolation stance of the African peoples by uncovering the various webs of interaction that knitted the people together. Nigeria, not only had a historical past, but one that was highly operational and relevant to the development process of the people before the advent of the Europeans. To think dependent societies can exist without having some form of interactions exposes the myopia of these European “scholars”.

In Africa’s remote past, societies depended on one another. Differentials in geographical and resource endowment, for instance, necessitated the spinning of network of contacts and intermingling relationships amongst the peoples. The Urhobo speaking people and her neighbours in the Niger Delta region – the Isokos, the Itsekiris, the Ijos, the Ukwuanis, the Abohs and Benins – manifested such contacts wherein a wide range of networks and links flourished.

It is clear from the traditions of origin that many of these groups came into contact with one another, and through various processes, mutual cultural borrowings existed. Indeed, an investigation of the socio-political relations of the Urhobo and her neighbours reveals that the people exchanged beliefs and practices during religious festivals, rituals, etc. Exemplary of this was annual festival exchanges between the Olomu of Urhoboland, and the Olomoro of Isokoland.

Another major aspect of socio-cultural relations was marriage. Marriages aided in establishing, cementing and promoting cross-cutting loyalties between the people. Also, because peace is a fundamental requirement for inter-group relations, war is often seen as an 'unusual' pattern of inter-group relations. However, its role as a factor of contact and interaction was equally important. Societies driven by distinct interests occasionally declared wars against each other. The Urhobo and Isoko oral traditions are replete with examples of wars between their respective clans. Indeed, an eventual outcome of such war was the diffusion of political and socio-cultural ideas.

The economic variables of trade and commerce cannot be undermined. The people interacted with one another, exchanging what they had in abundance for that which they had little or none at all, so as to furnish their environment for a more meaningful survival. The Urhobos, for instance, exchanged their agricultural produce; yam, cassava, plantain, for the fish and salt of the riverine Itsekiris. Trade

routes and markets were also established to facilitate such commercial transactions. Markets, not only provided functional platforms for economic contacts but also for other forms of social relations. Eventually, commercial activities in the area led to emergence of commercial centres such as in Warri, Ughelli, and Sapele.

Hence, from the findings in this study, one can conclude that the Urhobo and her neighbours shared a lot in common from the early times. The impacts of such common ties are exemplified in their cultural festivals, rituals, inter-marriages, customs and even dialect. The oral tradition of the Urhobos, Isoko, Itsekri, Ijo, Ukwuani, Benin and Aboh, attest to the existence and intensity of such inter-group relations in the pre-colonial period. From the foregoing therefore, one can make some reasonable conclusions such as: the Urhobos and her aforementioned neighbours in the Niger Delta region had a common ancestry, notably Benin; they had socio-political relations made manifest in marriages, festivals, rituals, religious belief systems, political structures, war, etc; economic transactions i.e. trade was a highly significant aspect of their interaction.

Thus the nature of inter-group relations between the Urhobos and her neighbours in the pre-colonial period stresses mutuality, inter-dependency, autonomy and occasional conflicts. The insights inherent in this study reveals that the Niger Delta region was by no means a political or economic vacuum before the

coming of the Europeans, rather the peoples of the region had various forms of inter-group relations.

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Mary Onakpoma	79	Trader	Ughelli	19/05/2025
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