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## ISSUES IN URHOB0 CULTURE: INSTANCES OF BURIAL AND MARRIAGE

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### ***Abstract***

*Globally, many things are changing because; the only phenomenon that is constant is change. These changes could be good or bad. Whichever may be the case, the changes that this paper addresses are that of bad which is affecting the Urhobo people and their culture negatively resulting to almost loss of identity. The paper focuses on some aspects of the Urhobo culture that are fading which include: burial and marriage. The aims of this paper therefore are to bring to bear/awareness or attention of the world particularly the Urhobo people the need to quickly trace their steps back in order to avoid the loss of their identity and heritage which is traceable to the feeling spirit of "it does not matter or anything goes" that is very common with the current generation. Our data were elicited from different burials and marriages conducted within some selected kingdoms in the Urhobo land. These were collected through personal observations and personal interviews with people between the age bracket of 30 to 60 years. It was found out that so many of the rituals that were related to burials and marriages in the culture are no longer viable in the present day's burials and marriages across the Urhobo, these leading to so many harms such as: lack of blessings, infertilities, promiscuity, divorces and lost of ancestral protections among other vices. The paper concludes with suggestions that the Urhobo people should think and reflect on where they got it wrong and cultivate the*

*attitude of re-building up these cultural heritages by putting modalities in place to checkmate and to enhance the practices of this rich culture.*

**Keywords:** Urhobo, culture, heritage, burial, marriage, Iko-epha, Ancestral spirit

### **Introduction**

As it is now, one does not know how to describe or classify the Urhobo people and their culture in this generation of “anything can go”. By “anything goes”, we mean that they (Urhobo people) accept anything that comes into their way (culture) as a result of what they refer to as civilization. Before now, the Urhobo people were known for certain distinctive features of their culture and the way they used to do things. For instance, they were known for their respect, greetings, dressing, hard work etc. The Urhobo woman in those days was sacred and well respected that not every dick and harry could touch or hold her anyhow without recourse to her marital status. All these have been undermined and thrown into the dustbin as it is now. The Urhobo married women can now be held, hugged, pecked and have a hand-shake with anybody without recourse to the sacredness of the ancestors. The culture demands that as a betrothed lady or a married woman, such a woman is a sacred person and as a property of a certain family and a certain ancestral spirit is assigned to monitor such a lady for protection so that no other man can trespass. It is so sacred that if any other man gives the lady any gift(s) such as money, food etc., the lady must report to her husband before spending or eating such gift(s).

With this current generation of ‘anything can go’, the question is; what is the fate of the Urhobo people and culture? This question is necessary because there are different arguments in different fora by men and women of Urhobo saying that the Urhobo culture is not friendly and as such, making

postulations and counter arguments trying to water the culture down. Some of these propositions are coming to play or even over shadowing the original culture of the land. According to Ekeh (2005), culture is the people's social heritage or tradition that is passed on from one generation to another, across many generations. Culture is characterized by the beliefs, arts, values, customs, habits and the behaviour of a particular society or nation and their material objects that constitute the people's way of life. Generally, culture is the totality of the way of life of the people. That is, the ideas, customs, beliefs and other manifestations of human collective intellectual achievements. In other words, it is a term which encompasses the social behaviour and norms found in human society. It is a term derived from a French and Latin word “colere” which means to tend on the earth and grow or to cultivate and nurture. It include arts religion, social habits, cuisine, language, values, beliefs, symbols that are generally accepted by the people.

In all these explanations of culture, the Urhobo people as a group or nation appear to be gambling with their right considering the fact that, some of these values are fading away as a result of the spirit of “anything goes”.

### **The Urhobo People**

The term Urhobo is used in it general sense to refer to the people and their language. They (Urhobo) belong to the Niger-Delta Region in Delta State and spread into ten (10) Local Government Areas in Delta Central and part of Bayelsa State. According to the 2006 population census, the Urhobo both at home and diaspora were estimated to be over five million. Linguistically, Urhobo is a Southwestern Edoid language spoken extensively in Delta State and part of Bayelsa.

## **Methods of Data Collection**

Our data were elicited from different burials and marriages conducted within some selected kingdoms in the Urhobo land through personal observations and personal interviews with people between age bracket of 30 to 60. We shall illustrate this spirit of “anything can go” as it is currently trending in the culture of the Urhobo people across the Urhobo land with burial and marriage. The aim of this paper therefore is to bring to bear or the awareness of the Urhobo people that some of this Urhobo cultural heritage that are being neglected/forgotten as a result of neglecting their practices in this current generation is wrong. And there is a need to correct these ills as it is now across the Urhobo land as not to abandoned the Urhobo heritage. Also, there is an urgent need to document the culture for posterity seeks because the culture is gradually facing out and going into extinction. Ejobee (2018), notes that when the language of the people is lost the people's culture is lost considering the fact that language being the central hub that holds the culture and the entire people.

## **Burial in the Urhobo Culture**

The Urhobo people as a nation have special or unique way of burying their love ones. Burial is the ceremony of putting a dead person in a grave with certain rituals as the last respect for the person. In the Urhobo culture, the dead are buried according to how the person died. For Instance, if a child (toddler) dies or a pregnant woman dies, there is a special way of burying them, if a woman dies in the course of delivery, there is special way of burying her, if a witch/wizard dies, there is a special way or place of burying, if an aged person dies, there is a special way and place of burying etc.

In the culture for instance, if a loved one dies, the person is buried in the house because they believe that the person is still a member of the family and his/her spirit will protect the

members of the family. But if the dead person is young, he or she is buried outside in the family compound with the intention that the person's spirit should go for war and fight whosoever that may have hands in his/her death. Then, if a pregnant woman dies in the course of delivery, there is a special burying ground where such people are buried which is called "*Aghwarode*" because, the culture sees such death as an abomination and in order not to have such occurrence, the person is buried in "*aghwarode*" so that such person's spirit will not live with the people but live in the forest as to fight whosoever that is behind the death. These are some of the reasons why different places are specified in the culture for burials so as to take care of these different spirits. But as it is today, this aspect of the culture is faced out. That is, irrespective of the nature of the dead, the person can be buried anywhere the family wishes without regard to the cultural observance .

### **Arguments Arising from burying Urhobo Married Woman in their Marital Homes**

When a married woman dies, the culture demands that such a woman be returned to her family compound or her home to be buried for several reasons as the culture demands. Some of the reasons are:

- (i) The female children are not slaves and they are not sold out for many reasons including marriage therefore, they must be returned home at death.
- (ii) Because of the influential nature of women to bring/influence development in the communities, culture demands that, at death, they must be returned home.
- (iii) Because of the fact that they (women) know that upon their death, they must be brought home; they develop their communities and bring their children to their

father's home town for visits or residence.

- (iv) In order to avoid mal-treatment by their husbands and in their husband's houses, and in case of any marital challenges, they (women) have a home where they can claim and they will not be treated as slaves or a second class citizen but have the sense of belonging as a member of their parental families.

There are arguments at different fora in Urhobo land that the women can and should be buried at their husbands' homesteads considering the fact that some religion/culture regards that the husband and wife are one and for convenience sake, both can be buried in the same place. Also that both the husband and wife lived and laboured together so, they should be buried in the same place. This is becoming a practice in the Urhobo land against the above reasons that had been there in the culture from the beginning. Remember that when a married woman according to the culture is to be buried, the corpse is first of all taken to the family compound of her husband before the corpse will be taken to her father's home and in the process; there are some incantations and rendition of songs such as:

*Esuo kpo urhu? x 3*

*Inene ghwuru*

*K?yen me su?/sh?*

*Esuo kpo urhu? x 3*

Translated to mean:

We are escorting to her home x 3

Mother died

She is the one we are escorting

We are escorting to her abode x 3

“Urh?” is the place of origin or a place where one hails from. So the spirit of the deceased is escorted to her home for eternal rest and this is significant in the culture. This is significant because the people believe that such person that is escorted to

her place of origin, her spirit will settle down and it will not trouble the children or family members. The Urhobos believe that if someone is not well buried, the spirit could be hovering around and that is not good for the children and members of the family. In fact, this practice has watered the Urhobo culture down seriously and it should be noted that it is a borrowed culture from the neighborhood communities such as the Ukwanis and the Aniomas.

### **Burial Rituals**

The Urhobo people are known for their hospitality and care, during the burial ceremony of their loved ones. They usually invite their families, friends and well-wishers to come and felicitate with them. After the interment of the deceased, the culture demands that the family of the deceased will go round the venue of the event three times greeting the invitees as a way to appreciate them for coming. The three times walk around for the greeting signifies the unity and the well coordination of the family and a way to cherish their visitors. Again, the three times moving around to greet the people is to appease the gods and the spirit of the deceased which is very symbolic in the culture. In the Urhobo culture, the number three (3) has the connotation of being spiritual, magical, emphasis, completeness, symbolic, confirmation of facts etc. Hence, during many of the cultural activities in urhobo, e.g *Iye-?g?*, *?pha-?bo*, *?rhovwo-?n?* in most cases, the names or the incantations are repeated three times to signify the above connotative meanings. It also follows the saying in the language that “Ab? erha Okpako nyo ota” meaning it is trice that an elderly person will hear or listen to a word before he/she can react properly. In other words, if the same issue is said three times, it means that issue is most likely to be true. Therefore, the elderly person would have confirmed the fact about the matter.

In some places in the Urhobo land now, this greeting that is so symbolic in the culture has been abandoned and sometimes just once, negating the purpose of its origin and implication

### **Condolence in Urhobo Culture**

When somebody (man or woman) who has given birth to children in Urhobo dies, the in-law (s) who married the deceased's daughter is expected to come for condolence, or visit to the deceased family as culture demands to wipe or stop their weeping with some cultural rituals.

In Urhobo, usually, the burial ceremony is supposed to last for at least four (4) days of ritual ceremony and one of the rituals is the condolence visit. The in-law(s) will fix a date for the rituals where both families of the deceased and the in-law will meet for the in-law(s) to pay for the burial rites. Generally, because of the several activities that are involved in the burial, it is not convenient and proper for the condolence to take place on the day of the interment (burial). The in-law(s) ought to show that he loves the parent(s) of his wife and he is expected to invite his family and friends, cook and invite a musician to come and display as a symbol of respect for his in-laws and care for his wife.

In the process, there are expressions of eulogies from the wife to her husband and his entire family praising them for honoring her by that gesture of the burial rite. One hears the in-laws chanting songs like;

*? g? m? seri ma rhire*

*Use na use r? igho'. Repeatedly*

Interpreted as:

'My In-laws have invited me

The invitation is that of money'

The activity is a very rich one which may take a full day loaded with cultural rites and rituals showcasing the cultural heritage. To show the importance of this, if an in-law dies and the



husband of the daughter could not do the condolence as stated above, it leads to a lot of mocking statements and interpretations are given and giving room for insinuations within and outside the environs. These different days activities of the burial ceremony have been merged to be one day event as it is today watering/destroying the culture in the spirit of anything can go-whereby many of the activities are thereby omitted and abandoned as the case may be resulting to incomplete or half-hazard burial. In some cases, the spirit of the decease as the culture has it, is not at peace or unrest leading to a lot of misfortunes today.

***Ewwe Ewun or Inu and ? to Ebro (The Rituals of the Waist Goat Shaving of Hair)***

Culturally, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the burial ceremony, the children of the decease are expected to kill a goat to the decease family as a mark of respect to the decease to show that he/she used his/her waist well by giving birth to children. Note that if the decease does not give birth to a child, this ritual of killing the goat is not done.

Some kingdoms calls it *?vwe-ewun* 'waist goat' while others call it *?vwe Inu* 'cleansing goat'. The first one implies that the waist of the parents were well used through the bearing of children when he/she was alive and the children are acknowledging that by killing the goat and the second is that during the course of giving birth, there were so many dirt that the parents past through that is, the dirt that follows in delivery room, the physics that the parents packed when they were young, the vomit and other stress that they passed through, the children are now cleansing all that through the rituals of the goat killings.

To show the significant of it, if the children are young at the death of their parent(s) as they are old, they must do the rituals and failure to do that, if they die, their own children cannot

perform the rituals for them until they do that of their grandparent(s) first. Also, if you have not done for your deceased parent(s), you cannot partake in eating other people's parents. This aspect of the culture is most dead.

As for the shaving of hair, all the children of the deceased are expected to have their hair shaved and bath/watch away all the spirit of the deceased from themselves as to avoid spiritual contaminations.

When all these are done to the dead person as the culture demands, there will be peace for the spirit of the dead and the children of the deceased whereby the spirit of the deceased is ready to intercede, guides and fights any person/spirit that wants to trouble their children anytime or any day. This peace and protection will bring about prosperity and longevity to the children.

We were duly informed by some of our informants that the causes of premature death in the Urhobo land today is not far from this half hazardous burial that people are doing today as a result of this spirit of "anything can go".

They traced some of the premature death to these factors because, many of these cultural rites are no longer there and the spirits of the dead are not at peace thereby roving around without interceding and protecting their children as they as to be done before.

### **Marital Issues in Urhobo Culture**

Marriage on the other hand is a very vital cultural display that is highly connected to both physical and spiritual activities in the Urhobo culture. Marriage according to Eruvbetere (2005) is the state or relationship of being husband and wife which is sacred and capable of bringing two independent families together forever especially when they are blessed with children. Ejobee (2018), posits that marriage is the

relationship between a man and a woman who are of marriageable age which is cemented by the two families involved culturally. Traditionally, it is a conjugal relationship between two families that have cultural rites and spiritual bounds. The Chamber Dictionary refers to marriage as the total embodiment of socially recognized and approved union between individuals who are committed to one another with expectations of stable and enduring intimate relationship.

According to the Urhobo culture, there are different customary rites/payments that the man is supposed to pay before the woman can be referred to as a wife of such a man/family. These customary rites/payments have serious and significant implications that are protective in nature. But the spirit of it does not matter and anything can go has watered down the ancestral bounds as it used to be in the culture. We shall demonstrate this with some rites that have been abandoned in the Urhobo culture.

### **Issue of *Ik? -? pha* (Bridesmaids)**

In the Urhobo culture, as parts of the customary rites, the lady (bride) is to be circumcised that is, the cutting of the clitoris as to curtail issue of promiscuity in marriage because; the Urhobo woman is sacred to the husband alone in terms of sexual intercourse. Scott (1928) says that marriage is an exclusive inter-sexual covenant between one man and woman which is ordained and sealed by God. This is in line with the Urhobo culture.

In the process of the circumcision in the culture, there are a lot of bridesmaid who are teenagers that will be with the bride for seven days helping the bride to work, sing praying and keeping her accompany wherein, they bridesmaids (*Ik? -? pha*) will be fed by the groom. The bridesmaids also serve as guides/soldiers. This has a lot of spiritual underscore in the culture. The prayers and the songs that the bridesmaids are

praying and singing are words/incantations composed to mean well for the bride and the groom all the days of their life without any complications in child bearing, marital life, long life, prosperity, cancellation of premature death, peace and comfort etc. It is the belief in the culture that the prayers of these teens are very efficacious and powerful and can sustain the life span of the intended couple. One of the implications is that, any of these bridesmaids who has prayed and eaten your food cannot plan any harm against the person and if peradventure they do, it will backfire against the person. This cultural display has been completely eroded. See the colourful pictures of the last one done in the 1980s that we could get from our informant.



**Pictures of the bride and the bridesmaids surrounding her as soldiers**



**The Bride with two of her second in command**



**The bridesmaids cheering up the bride**

The picture showing how the bridesmaids surrounding the bride as security guides and praying for her with scarlet all over their bodies.

### **The Issue of Farm Clearing (*Igbiroba-? gb?*)**

Also as part of the marriage rituals, the groom is expected to show some level of his strength and capability if he is worthy and strong enough to take care and feed the intended family. To show this strength, a day is usually fixed for the groom to do that before the marriage. The father-in-law will show the

intended groom where he wants him to clear and that is what the (Urhobo) refers to as '*Igbiroba-? gb?*'.

As at this research, all the informants said that this practice is no longer in existence especially in the urban areas of the Urhobo communities. The culture is rather, being monetized in marriages now whether the father in-law is a farmer or not. In fact, many people of this generation do not know what is meant by that aspect of the Urhobo culture. It is now there in the marital list as part of what the groom will pay for with money.

### **Presentation of Dry-Gin (*Ogogoro*) as a Requirement**

One of the things that is expected for the groom to pay is 20 litres and seven bottles of dry-gin called *ogogoro*. This *ogogoro* is the drink that is used to pray for the intended couple and to appease the ancestors for peace and protection in the marriage. These liters of the drink are well stipulated and shared appropriately across quarters in the family of the bride. The major purpose of the *ogogoro* is to appease the forefathers and for the different quarters to drink and pray for the success and the blessing of the marriage with the belief that anybody who has eaten your food cannot mean bad for you. By implication, the spirits of the ancestors are protecting the marriage and those that are alive who have drunk of the drink will also protect and mean well for the intended family.

Our findings also show that in many parts of the kingdoms, in most cases, this has equally been monetised for one reason or the other. In some cases, the arguments whether to provide this drink or not will take up to two (2) hours. The reason for the long argument is that some members of the family will say that their religion forbids them from taking *ogogoro* and such the *ogogoro* must not be there in the marriage while others within the same family will argue that it our culture so we must follow the culture.

### **The Issue of Excursion**

Again, in the Urhobo culture, after all the payments of what is necessary for a bride, the last stage is the excursion of the bride to her husband family compound. In the list of the excursion as the culture demands, it comprises at least, four (4) men and six (6) women. Total of these ten (10) persons are selected from the bride's paternal and maternal families. The essence of this selection is for the both side of the families to be involved in order for them to know where or the place where their daughter's hand is given out for marriage in case of any eventuality.

The excursion itself has so many rituals that are so significant in the culture. Apart from the fact that it is an opportunity for the bride's families to know where their daughter is going to for marriage it is a forum for the two families that is, the groom and the bride to eat together as one family that marriage has tied together.

In the cause of the excursion, before the bride is brought into the house of the groom, there is a ritual performance of slaughtering a He-goat or cock (fowl) as a form of welcome to the bride in the family. To cleanse her from any contamination she might have contacted when she has not been formally married with other men as the case may be or peradventure she has slept with any man before, this cleansing will wipe away those sins and she is purified. Also, by so doing, an accentual spirit of the groom's family will be assigned to monitor the woman in case she has any extra-marital affairs outside the married husband, the ancestral spirit will act and shame the woman. By this act, the woman is covenanted to the family and she dare not collect anything that the culture does not approve from any other men nor any man dare not hold her anyhow and if that happens without her reporting to her husband, the ancestral spirit will act immediately on behalf of

the husband and the entire family by striking or killing the woman involved in the evil act.

In the course of this research, it was discovered that this vital aspect of the culture has been monetised and about 80% of marriages do not observe it again. The practice now is that after the white wedding, the couple goes to where-ever they want to go without recourse to this aspect of the culture that is very vital.

The Urhobo people do this now as a result of the spirit of “anything goes” and Christianity. They see it as being fetish in nature. An old popular musician Prof. Johnson ? setejovwore Adja sang it in one of his albums that this abandonment of these Urhobo culture makes so many marriages to collapse, leading to divorces and untimely death among the Urhobo people. This is not far from the truth following the cultural beliefs. If these rites are not properly followed and the ancestral spirits are not there to monitor and do their work, the protective measures are not there to guide and protect the people.

### **Conclusion**

This paper arrays some of the aspects of Urhobo culture as it concerns burial and marriage across some of the kingdoms. It was observed that many of the Urhobo cultural heritages are going into extinction. These cultural rites have their significant roles of monitoring, protecting, providing progress in life, longevity and prosperity among other things.

Many of the cultural rites have been converted to money making ventures and they are being monetized as observed in our discussions above e.g, the presentation of *ogogoro* and *Igbiroba-?gbe*.

As observed by our informants and in the discussions, the abandonment of these cultural rites has caused the people so



much harms such as lack of protection by the ancestral spirits leading to untimely deaths of the people and also, causing a lot of infertility in the land.

So many of the spirit of the dead are roving looking for who to destroy because they (dead) were not given the rite burial befitting of them.

The spirit of “it does not matter and anything goes” is demonic, satanic and barbaric to the people and their culture making them to almost losing their culture and identity as a people.

It is therefore, suggested that the Urhobo people should trace their steps back and corrects these anomalies and drive away this spirit that is ravaging them so that posterity will not condemn them.

Also, if possible, there should be enforcement agency established by the Urhobo kingdoms to monitor these practices and punish any offenders as a detriment to others who are destroying and killing the culture. An appeal to the spirits of the ancestors should be made to forgive, cleanse and re-claim our heritage as a nationality.

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