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Author

Diakparomre, Abel Mac

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Artifacts as Social Conflict Resolution Mechanism in Traditional Urhobo Society of Nigeria's Niger Delta

Introduction

Artifacts are objects that have been purposively modified through human action. Often they become material culture objects because people employ them to satisfy one need or another. In addition to this existential nature of artifacts, they provide clues to prehistoric civilizations and ecological conditions, and for the construction/reconstruction of social history. In Urhobo¹ society, these objects have proved to be vital clues to the society's evolution, particularly, as ingredients in the regulation of the cultural behaviour of the people. That artifacts provide clues to the cultural behaviour of the people is exemplified by the preponderance of the objects, and the fact that they are tied to institutions in the society.² One of the facets of Urhobo society in which there is a concentration of these material culture objects is social cohesion and social conflict resolution.

The Urhobo live in the north-western area of the Niger Delta in Nigeria.³ The current population includes both aboriginal peoples and those who migrated from Egypt/Sudan, Ife, and Benin.⁴ While exact dates of these migrations into the Niger Delta region are not known, it is speculated that segments of the Urhobo may have been in the region for about 2000 years. A glottochronology of the Niger Delta by Kay Williamson supports this speculation.⁵

Urhobo traditional culture and social ideologies (modes of thinking, acting, and feeling) were determined largely by their history and geographical environment until about the fifteenth century, when external influences from neighbouring power centres, like the Benin Kingdom and later, influences from Europe - started impacting these local ideologies.⁶ In spite of these influences, as well as the disparate sources of Urhobo migration, social stability has remained a dominant feature of their society.

Studies of Urhobo culture suggest that social stability may have evolved from a system of reciprocal responsibility in which social conflict is considered sympathetically rather than with hostility.⁷ This is implicit in results of investigations into the modes of social conflict resolution in the society. For instance, an individual's odious personality traits affect an entire lineage; hence the Urhobo would say that *Oma vue orhue-e, je oma vue ihwo roye*, literally meaning, even though the insane person does not feel ashamed, his people do. But rather than impose sanctions on such an individual, the social conflict that results is collectively resolved. Similarly, reciprocal responsibility for the purpose of social stability is responsible for the collective concern that is expressed when there is lack of progress in the occupational endeavors of a member of the lineage. Collective efforts are also made to resolve this conflict situation. This system of reciprocal responsibility is a functionalist one. It attempts to ensure that society works efficiently; hence the society strives to resolve conflicts emanating from social contradictions by the synchronous application of artifacts and rituals which palliate rather than punish.

However, previous studies of Urhobo social control and justice systems seem to have concentrated on the application of sanctions in the regulation of society and the stimulation of stability.⁸ There also seems to have been neither any serious documental focus on the artifacts and rituals which are integral to social conflict resolution in the society nor have there been attempts to classify and evaluate the social conflict

situations and the mechanisms and strategies adopted for their resolution. This dearth of information is compounded by the fact that literature on Urhobo art and its role in the society, generally, has been minimal.⁹ The research burden, thus, remains for a better knowledge of the levels/categories of social conflict in traditional Urhobo society and means of their resolution.

This paper attempts, therefore, to identify, classify and evaluate the social conflicts prevalent in traditional Urhobo society and the resolution mechanisms employed. To do this, I have drawn on my own survey of social-conflict-inducing situations and their modes of resolution in six of the twenty-two Urhobo sub-culture units: the Agbon, Oghara, Eghwu, Ughievwen, Ewvreni and Ughele. The Agbon and Oghara are located in northern Urhoboland and have the Bini as non-Urhobo neighbours while the Eghwu and Ughievwen in southern Urhoboland have the Ijo as non-Urhobo neighbour, and the Ewvreni and Ughele, in central Urhoboland, have the Isoko as non-Urhobo neighbours. These sub-culture units were selected on the basis of their geographical location within Urhobo territory, and their history of origin and migration.

Accounts of Urhobo occupation of parts of the Niger Delta suggest that groups of Urhobo entered the region from various directions over a period of time. The Agbon and Ughele sub-culture units identify Benin territory as the primary source of migration, with Ijo territory as secondary source. The Ughievwen sub-culture's account of origin refers to direct migration from Benin territory into their present location, and the Eghwu only remembers that they migrated from Mein (Ijo). Similarly, the Ewvreni sub-culture unit refers to an Igbo source of origin - Elele in the east of the lower Niger. The founding of Oghara was as a result of population growth and internal conflicts in the parent sub-culture unit, Agbarha, which traces primary migration from Benin and a secondary one from Ijo territory.¹⁰ The information gathered during this survey was analyzed and a typological classification carried out using the participants in particular social conflicts as parameters to determine type.

Study of the components of social conflict resolution in traditional Urhobo society has become particularly imperative given the pressures of modernity on the traditional socio-cultural environment in the Niger Delta and the emergence of new variants of deviant behaviours and situations; traditional Urhobo society being an interpretation of that natural and social environment of the Urhobo which is devoid of influences of European and Western cultures relating to food, shelter, dress, government, property, division of labor, birth, adulthood, marriage, death, religious ideas concerning magic and supernatural beings, as well as, art, mythology and the universe.

Social Conflict in Society

Generally speaking, conflict is an expression of difference. It “gives rise to perceptions of threat that activate intense feelings of anxiety, fear, and anger. It may also engender contentious behaviours.”¹¹ These contentious behaviours have the capacity to disrupt social stability.¹²

Social conflict is a specific human phenomenon that may arise from acts, behaviours, or situations that are perceived by members of a particular society to be contrary to prevailing social norms. Sometimes these acts and situations can induce conflicts because they have the capacity to negatively affect how individuals or groups

of people are perceived, and thus elicit hostile and antagonistic responses.¹³ Such acts and situations are often regarded as deviant or nonconformist. Not all sociologists agree, however, that hostility and antagonistic opposition necessarily give rise to deviance and social conflict. For instance, Coser explains that social conflict may in fact solidify a loosely structured group, and that in a society that appears to be disintegrating, intergroup conflict may restore the “integrative core.”¹⁴ Irrespective of such differing views in conflict theory, the main concerns of social conflict are values, beliefs, and norms. In Urhobo society, social conflicts are perceived to emerge from deviant and nonconformist behaviours and situations, which may be consciously and voluntarily engineered, as in behavioural deviance, or may be unconscious and involuntary/imposed, and outside the control of the individual or group, as in circumstantial deviance occasioned by malevolent spirits.

Previous research has shown that the causes of conscious and voluntary deviant or nonconformist behaviour in Urhobo society may be psychological or sociological.¹⁵ When viewed psychologically, the cause/origin of behavioural deviance may be found in unsatisfied needs, unmanageable drives, or emotional problems which are entrenched in socio-cultural expectations. The sociological causes of nonconformity derive from failure of socialization processes. For example, I identified parental neglect, excessive demands upon a child, rigid authority, and continuing conflict between parent and child as tendencies in the socialization process of the child that encourage rejection of, or disregard for cultural prescriptions.¹⁶ Behavioural deviance may, therefore, be said to be based on the characteristics of the culture and social organization in which such deviant behaviour occurs.

On the other hand, unconscious and involuntary deviant and nonconformist behaviour, or circumstantial deviance, as seen by the Urhobo, is not due to social or cultural, or indeed human, instigation. This is because circumstantial deviance occurs in spite of social or cultural prescription; the victim(s) act compulsively. They are usually not able to account for their conduct because the circumstances are completely outside their control; hence such conduct/situations are ascribed to the individual’s destiny.

While there may be social conflicts that are common to humanity, each particular human society has some peculiar social conflicts that demand peculiar resolution mechanisms. We shall, therefore, look at the social conflicts encountered by the Urhobo and the mechanisms by which these are resolved.

Types of Social Conflicts in Urhobo Society

The Urhobo believe that deviant conduct and reprobate circumstances engender social conflicts. These deviant behaviours and situations are many. Therefore, when any member of the society acts or behaves in ways which are at variance with the society's expectation, efforts are made to get such deviant or the aberrant situation back to normalcy. This is achieved through a number of ways.

Previous research shows that the Urhobo consider actions, behaviours, and situations like falsehood, stealing, misappropriation of collectively owned resources, oppression, bewitching, adultery, cheating, poisoning, blackmailing, incest, insubordination, and recalcitrance to elders as unacceptable deviant conduct that engenders social conflict. Other conduct and circumstances that have the capacity for engendering social dislocation and disorder, and as a consequence elicit the society’s disapproval, include murder (patricide, matricide, wife-killing), arson, assault,

childlessness, poverty, lack of progress in personal endeavors, and uncontrolled aggressiveness.¹⁷ Because of the impact of these acts and situations on the individual or a group, the aberrant situations are confronted for the purpose of re-establishing normalcy. Using the participant parameter mentioned earlier, that is, individuals and groups through whom one form of social conflict or another has been engendered, three distinct levels of social conflict are distinguishable: intercommunal, intrapersonal, and interpersonal.

Intercommunal social conflicts involve antagonistic forms of behaviour of member(s) of one community towards member(s) of another community. For example, the murder of a member of one community by a member of another community, or the abduction of a married woman of one community by a man from another community, is regarded as a deliberate affront on the victim's community as a whole.¹⁸ These situations engender intercommunal social conflicts that require urgent resolution in order to re-establish social harmony between the communities.

Intrapersonal social conflicts exist at individual level. Here, the conflict is not instigated by the action or inaction of another person. These are typified by role conflicts in which incompatible demands are made on an individual occupying one or more roles. Examples of this type of conflict are found in Urhobo institutional concepts concerning destiny (from which success and progress are the expected norm), unrestrained aggressiveness (which is antithetical to harmonious coexistence with fellow community members), and belligerence of the "spirit-spouse" (that interferes with family harmony). In all of these conflict situations, the individual is seen as both cause and victim.

Interpersonal social conflicts arise from disputes occasioned by breakdown of concordance among individual members of the society. This involves two or more persons and may emanate from boundary disputes, inability or refusal to pay debts, and divorce. Also, interpersonal social conflict may arise when individuals feel that their rights in the society are being undermined by other persons, or when behaviours of members of the community become incompatible.

Urhobo Social Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Irrespective of the type and level of social conflict, two mechanisms are employed in Urhobo society for their resolution: retribution (laws and regulations) and modification (artifacts and rituals). While the retribution mechanism is employed for the resolution of the social conflicts occasioned by conscious and voluntary (behavioural) deviance, the modification mechanism is applied for the resolution of social conflicts arising from unconscious and involuntary (circumstantial) deviance.

Retribution Mechanism

The instrument employed in retribution mechanism is human. This is through the application of law and the imposition of sanctions. But because there were no legislative and constituted jurisprudential authorities in traditional Urhobo society like there are in contemporary society, "laws" that became operative in the society emerged from the collective conscience of the people, as expressed in acquiescence or deference to norms and values. The conflicts that were resolved through this mechanism included murder, manslaughter, arson, adultery, and witchcraft. According to Otite, the

resolution of the social conflict occasioned by murder was the execution of the perpetrator, while for manslaughter the family of the offender gave a man and a woman as compensation to the family of the deceased. For arson, the offender was made to make full compensation or sold into slavery. The sanction for witchcraft was “trial by ordeal” and for theft, the offender was made to pay a fine or make restitution. Adultery and assault resulted in the penalty of a fine.¹⁹

Since 1890, when the first direct contact with Europeans was made by the Urhobo, the establishment of Western judicial system has atrophied the retributive approach to the resolution of many of the social conflicts arising from behavioural deviance. Today behavioural deviants are brought before criminal courts and offences are adjudicated upon. However, certain conflicts arising from behavioural deviance are not just against individuals or communities. In some instances, the ancestors or village or clan gods are considered to have been deliberately affronted. Conduct that is considered an affront to the ancestors and clan gods includes incest, adultery, and witchcraft. To resolve the social conflicts arising from these kinds of deviance, the ancestors and gods are propitiated through prescribed rituals, in addition to any sanctions that may have been imposed through the retribution mechanism.²⁰

Modification Mechanism

The instruments employed in the modification mechanism are non-human; they are artifacts and rituals that are symbolically associated with ancestors and deities and that are brought into conflict resolution to elicit the compassion of the ancestors and solicit their assistance in effecting behavioural change through personality modification. Ancestors and deities are believed to be omnipresent and to help “police” people against contravening the “laws” of society. According to Ejoywoke, the efficacy of the ancestors and deities, in ensuring conformity and orderliness in the society inheres in their powers to modify the behaviour of members of the society, as well as in their capacities to enforce conformity.²¹ These powers of the ancestors and deities are normatively institutionalized, and are generally respected by members of Urhobo society because every aspect of morality is associated with one deity or another.

Ancestors and deities, according to extant Urhobo beliefs, have superintending authority over the living. Implicit in the appeal to ancestors and deities are psychological approaches such as mental coercion, systemic desensitization, and aversion techniques which are deployed for the resolution of maladjusted behaviour patterns and corporate social dislocation. The psychological essences of these devices are contained in the visual images (sculptural artifacts), which are complimented by the associated rituals.

Visual symbols and rituals, in human society generally, have a way of contributing to the reinforcement of consensus and solidarity among a group, as well as to the strengthening of allegiance to the group. Social harmony is thereby reinforced and regenerated. This is particularly so as the gathering of people reminds the individual of his social responsibility and his membership in the whole.²² Adiokho, a paramount chief (*Ohonvwore*) of the Agbon sub-culture unit, re-echoed this position when he said that the use of visual symbols in conjunction with appropriate rituals, elicits the assistance of ancestors and deities in the resolution of specific conflicts in Urhobo society. According to him, the images and rituals have symbolic meanings which embody commonly revered myths, traditions, shared values, and accepted obligations by both the living and the dead.²³ It is not surprising, therefore, that

performance/dramatic rituals are combined with visual images to create situations that compel “conformity” and the resolution of social conflict in Urhobo society.

Intercommunal conflict resolution

As mentioned earlier, intercommunal social conflicts arise mainly from the conduct of individual members of a community which affront the real or perceived interest of another community. The most heinous of these behaviours are murder of a “freeman” (*Omuvwie*) and the abduction of a married woman. The resolution of the conflicts arising from this conduct depends on the relationship between the two communities. Where the relationship is not cordial, the conflict degenerates into war (and in modern times, prolonged litigation in a court of law). Where the relationship is cordial, however, urgent steps are taken to ensure the resolution of the conflict through diplomacy; this involves the prompt dispatch of emissaries to the offended community and the convening of a meeting where the offence is examined, the offender reprimanded, and sanctions are imposed.

Intrapersonal social conflict resolution

A number of intrapersonal social conflicts occur in traditional Urhobo society. These are mainly in the realm of circumstantial deviance. One of these intrapersonal conflicts is that engendered by the spirit-spouse (*Oshare r'erivwin/Aye r'erivwin*). The concept of spirit-spouse is pervasive in Urhobo culture. Until about the mid-twentieth century when the people's worldview began to change in response to the spread of Christianity and Western education, the problems associated with the inability of a member of the society to meet up with societal expectations of adulthood - that is, marriage and raising one's own family - was normally blamed on the belligerence of a spirit-spouse. This concept is based on the belief in a simultaneous existence of a spouse partner in the earthly realm (*Akpo*) and the other in the ethereal (*Erivwin*). According to Onojorhoevwo, a traditional chief and field informant,²⁴ the Urhobo believe that the two “worlds” mutually influence each other, even though the ethereal wields greater influence. This belief persists and several persons in the society, according to informants, still readily subscribe to the resolution of this conflict through the mechanism of ritualistically divorcing the spirit-spouse.

The traditional Urhobo belief is that spirit-spouses feel estranged and become belligerent when their earth-partner wishes to marry or gets married. The spirit-spouses are said to be ready to do anything to either prevent marriages from taking place, or reverse such marriages if they have taken place. Spirit-spouses are, therefore, held responsible for the inability of men or women to marry, and even for childlessness in the case of married couples. Examples of other intrapersonal conflicts that are believed to be caused by malevolence spirit-spouses include matrimonial discords and squabbles that ultimately lead to separation and divorce, the incidence of “wet-dreams” or dreams of sexual engagements with unknown or unfamiliar women or men, temporary impotency of the male while with earth wife, inability to sustain love relationships, and miscarriages by pregnant women due to sexual intercourse with spirit-husband.

The mechanism deployed by the Urhobo for the resolution of these social conflicts involves the use of visual symbols and dramatic rituals. On the prescription of *obuepha* (herbalist/priest), the victim (man or woman) acquires a carved wooden representation of the spirit-spouse (Figure 1) which has to be formally divorced through a simulation of the death of the spirit-spouse. This ritual-drama involves tying heavy

substances to the carved wooden representation and dropping the object into the water in a river or a lake, thus simulating the drowning of the spirit-spouse. The “surviving” partner and accompanying party then return home, crying over the “death” of the spouse. On arrival at home, a mock burial ceremony is organized in order to fulfill the customary obligation to a deceased. With this done, a divorce is believed to have taken place and the surviving partner can then go on to take another spouse.

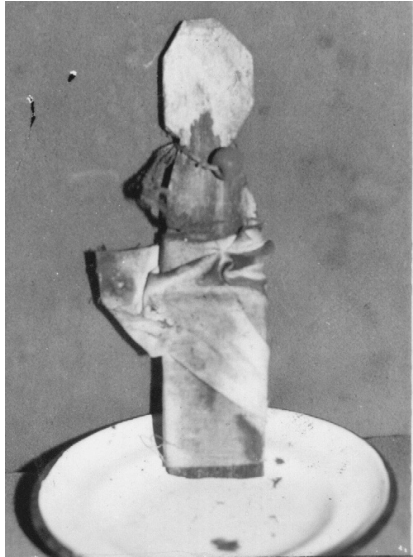


Figure 1
Aye r'erivwin



Figure 2
Obo (Abstract)



Figure 3
Obo (Representational)

Lack of success or progress in occupational endeavors, as mentioned earlier, also induces social conflict in traditional Urhobo society, which depends economically

on subsistence farming. The social worth or prestige of a man or a family unit is, therefore, measured by the extent of success in occupational endeavors. However, the most hardworking person does not necessarily achieve the highest level of success. Crop failure occasioning low yield, ill-health leading to farm abandonment, and unfavorable climatic conditions such as flooding and drought, are occupational misfortunes that are attributed to the destiny of the victim. Apart from the economic impact on the victim and members of his family, occupational failure also affects the individual's personality and results in loss of self-esteem, respect, and then loss of status in the community. An intrapersonal social conflict situation thus arises. This situation is usually ascribed to malevolent spirits/deities. To facilitate a resolution of this conflict, another non-human instrument, *Obo* (occupation deity), is employed.

When such situations occur, an *Obuepha* (herbalist/priest) is consulted. More often than not, the *Obuepha* affirms that bellicose or malevolent spirits are responsible for the occupational misfortunes and the *Obuepha* prescribes the possession of *Obo* as a solution to the victim's problems. A carver is then commissioned to produce a visual representation of the deity for the victim. At a ceremony that involves members of the victim's family, his close and distant associates, as well as the *Obuepha*, the object is imbued with appropriate powers to ward off the belligerent spirits, and then the *Obuepha* hands the object to the owner. After this ritual, the victim (now an *Obo*-patron) takes the object into his house and keeps it in his/her living room or bedroom. From then onward on a daily basis, particularly before engaging in any occupational endeavor, the *Obo*-patron makes supplication to *Obo* by pouring local gin into the platter on which the object is placed and requesting that success attend his efforts. The song-text below approximates the incantation of the *Obo*-patron:

Me yara re-o.
Me wian ra vwe abae,
Erere no cha re-e.
Mi rue eke we ko we nure-o
Je obo ri mi re ru ejobi none yovwi re

Translation:

I am going again.
 I have been making efforts all this while,
 No success has come.
 I have done for you what is your due.
 So, let there be success in all I am going to do today.

The morphology of *Obo* varies. It may be highly abstracted, as in Figure 2 or surrealistically representational, as in Figure 3. The features of the *Obo* include its conical form and a base or mid-section that is embellished with natural or sculpted cowries. Together with appropriate rituals as described above, it is believed that *Obo* has the capability to reverse negative trends in an individual's economic and occupational endeavors.

For the resolution of conflict arising specifically from commercial endeavors, another artifact, *Oneki*, is employed. The morphology of *Oneki* is usually a carved representation of a human figure (male or female) carrying a bowl of tradeable items on its head. When an individual encounters frequent runs of misfortunes or lack of profit in commercial engagements, the Urhobo believe that a form of intrapersonal conflict is

engendered due to that person's loss of self-confidence and stature in society. The individual sees him-- or herself as a failure, and withdraws from society. When this occurs, the *Obuepha* prescribes the production of *Oneki* and the performance of associated rituals in order to resolve the conflict. Through appeasement rituals, a reversal of the misfortunes is believed to be effected. Even after a reversal of the negative trends, the victim continues to possess *Oneki* and performs associated rituals to ensure that there is continuity of good fortune.

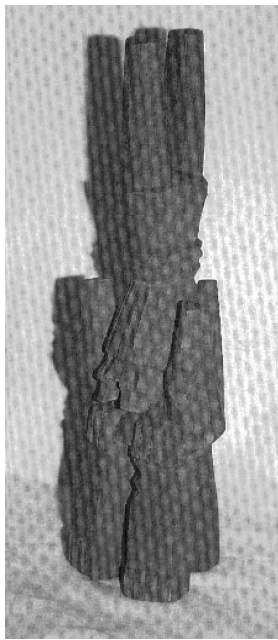


Figure 4
Iwri



Figure 5
Iwri



Figure 6
Iwri

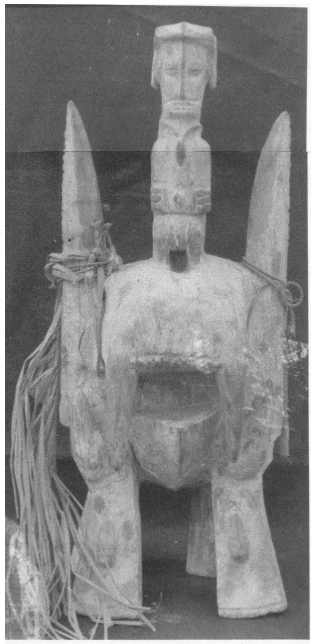


Figure 7
Iwri

Aggressiveness, unrestrained assertiveness, and normatively unacceptable behaviours such as unceasing argumentativeness and unwillingness to concede or to compromise are some situations which also induce social conflict at the intrapersonal level in Urhobo society. Other traits that cause intrapersonal social conflict in the society include deep-seated, uncompromising resentment and unwillingness to forgive petty transgressions, bellicose and truculent character, cantankerous personality, and impulse for constant litigation. The resolution of this type of conflict is through behaviour modification. This is achieved by the employment of *ivbri/ivwri/iphri*.²⁵

The morphology of *ivbri* varies widely (Figures 4-7), ranging from those that are highly schematic (Figure 4) to those that are formalistically narrative and explicit of the attribute of the concept (Figure 7). Basically, however, *ivbri* morphology includes a dominant, fierce-looking, four-legged animal figure with exaggerated sets of canine projecting upward and downward from its mouth. The animal-figure is also usually surmounted by a human-figure representation. In fact, the iconography of *ivbri* typifies the metaphoric attributes of the concept, and hence it has often been referred to as an “image of aggression”.²⁶

According to Union Itebene, the Chief Priest of the *Ohworhu* cult of Evwreni, *ivbri* controls the excesses of the overly contentious individual. This is why, according to him, a child who cries constantly for no apparent reason or suffers from chronic childhood ailments, and who generally, makes his parents’ lives unpleasant and even unbearable, has an *ivbri* made for him and worn around his neck upon the prescription of an *Obuepha*. Itebene further states that a child who is unusually self-centered and greedy, refusing to share his food with his siblings (children normally eat together from the same bowl in traditional Urhobo society), similarly has an *ivbri* made for him.²⁷ The ritual associated with the resolution of this social conflict includes daily application of palm-oil to the surface of the *ivbri*. It is believed that this will make the individual’s temperament softer.

The purpose of creating of *ivbri* is to provide a medium into which can be channeled misdirected and combative energies that may instigate aberrant situations that would lead to intrapersonal conflicts. Through this re-directing of behavioural excesses and belligerent energies of the individual, some form of equilibrium and a more balanced personality is cultivated. By extension, communal harmony, which is essential for maintaining peaceful social relationships in society, is believed to be established.²⁸

Interpersonal social conflicts resolution

Interpersonal conflicts in Urhobo society arise mainly from social failure and depravity. Social failure is the inability of the individual to measure up to society’s expectation in his chosen occupation or in responsibilities that are ascribed by society. This state of affairs is an unacceptable social situation in Urhobo society. But, failure is never a personal wish. It is for this reason that conflicts (loss of respect among kindred, denial of leadership position, etc.) that are engendered by this situation are considered involuntary. This kind of social conflict is believed to have its origin in pre-destiny (*Urhievwe*). *Urhievwe* is the guardian spirit of an Urhobo, and the controller of an individual’s destiny.

Urhievwe is normally formalized in wood as a human figure’s head because the head is believed to house the totality of a human being’s essence (Figure 8). Sometimes, however, *Urhievwe* is rendered as a standing full-human figure representation (Figure 9). The convention for rendering this figure depends on

provenance and professional competence of the commissioned carver.

The Urhobo believe that pre-destiny cannot be changed. This belief is pervasive in the people's philosophy of life and religious observances.²⁹ This belief occasions such personal names as *Odjuvwu ede rhie* (it is in heaven that destiny is determined) and *Efe urhievwe* (wealth is predestined).³⁰ But the Urhobo also do not accept social failure. The blame for misfortunes is, therefore, usually placed on perceived adversaries within and/or outside the family. This situation of distrust engenders interpersonal conflict. In order to avoid/resolve the conflict thus engendered, the Urhobo seek to influence the victim's destiny by adopting resolution strategies that delay the occurrence or frequency of occurrence of such misfortunes, since the victim's destiny cannot be altered. Influencing the course of an individual's life however, becomes possible only if the influences are acceptable to the person's *Erhi* (spirit), and only to the extent that the fortunes in the individual's life would be released and misfortunes



Figure 8
Urhievwe (Full Figure)



Figure 9
Urhievwe (Head)

delayed. The resolution of this form of interpersonal conflict is by entreaties made through *erovwo* (prayers) and sacrifices of drinks and food to the individual's *Urhievwe*.

The act of adultery also engenders interpersonal social conflict in Urhobo society. Indeed, adultery is regarded as a grave insult to the husband of the woman and a confrontation with the ancestors of the husband. If the act becomes public knowledge, it is usually resolved in one of two ways - diplomacy or vengeance. The use of diplomacy requires that the family of the offender send emissaries to the offended party for settlement of the conflict. The resolution of the conflict may include the payment of a fine or compensation. Where the offended husband wants to resolve the conflict

through vengeance, he or any of his relations, soon after the offence, commits adultery with a wife of a member of the family from which the original offender came. According to Ikime, however, vengeance as a means of resolving social conflicts emanating from adultery is often difficult, as no woman would voluntarily submit herself to be used to appease the aggrieved man.³¹ While many cases of adultery today are, resolved through diplomacy, vengeance, according to informants, is still often contemplated by many offended husbands.

In addition to the use of diplomacy and vengeance for resolving the conflict engendered by adultery, propitiations must be made to the ancestors of the offended party. Here, artifacts and rituals are employed. However, if the act of adultery is concealed, and as a result propitiations are not made, the ancestors of the offended husband intervene by inflicting the adulterous woman with “germ disease”. The “germ disease” is kind ailment that presents with the swelling of the feet, hands, and stomach but without a known cause. Upon this occurrence the adulterous woman must own up to her deviant conduct and then the necessary propitiations are made to the ancestors of the husband.

The incidence of incest is not common in Urhobo society. Nonetheless, this deviant conduct induces serious social conflict because of the disapproval of such conduct by the ancestors. The reaction of the ancestors to this is to precipitate an interpersonal social conflict in which the offenders, but in most cases, their children, get afflicted with one form of ailment or another.

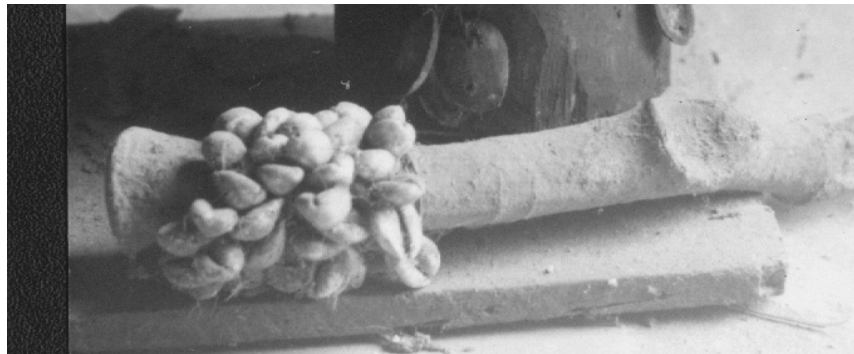


Figure 10
Evbo

To resolve the conflict engendered by adultery or incest, *Evbo*, a non-figurative composite object that is made of wood and cowries is employed (Figure 10). *Evbo* is a multi-divinity associated with ancestors. Through *Evbo*, propitiations are made to the ancestors to grant forgiveness to the offenders, bring relief to the afflicted, and re-establish harmony and stability in the society.

Evaluation of Resolution Mechanisms

As mentioned earlier, social conflicts in Urhobo society are resolved in order to ensure that society works. It is, therefore, essential that the resolution mechanisms employed in the society be evaluated. In the foregoing, it was shown that the retribution mechanism is mainly applied to the resolution of interpersonal and intercommunal social conflicts, while the modification mechanism is more frequently applied to

intrapersonal social conflicts.

The resolution of social conflict through retribution is a kind of “power” strategy: one party wins and the other loses.³² Unfortunately for the loser, the conflict may have just begun. This research revealed, for instance, that hostility, anxiety, and actual physical damage are usual by-products of the win/lose tactic, as is common with the resolution of conflicts such as those arising from claims over land and physical property and allegations of witchcraft. Also, the feeling of loss is palpably evident in the resolution of social conflicts arising from falsehood, stealing and misappropriation of resources, oppression, bewitching, cheating, poisoning, and blackmailing.

In spite of the application of the retribution mechanism that involves sanctions and punishment, Urhobo society does not seem to have emerged as a society that “works.” The social conflicts for which this mechanism is applied still persist in the society, as was confirmed by respondents during this study. The seeming ineffectiveness of the retribution mechanism is possibly due the fact that employing it only assists in making people to repress their urges. An individual may avoid stealing because of the penalty attached and the pains of immediate social isolation, but not because of a conviction of the social dislocation to the victim and society that arises from stealing. The retribution mechanism, therefore, does not provide satisfaction to the society as it leaves doubts and fears about avoidance capability by the individual when confronted with such problems in the future. What can be said for the retribution mechanism is that it contributes to the pressures that compel obedience to cultural prescriptions.

The modification mechanism is employed in Urhobo society because of the notion that the ultimate objective of conflict resolution is the emergence of a harmonious, deviance-free society: a society that “works.” Whereas the retribution mechanism may provide some relief to the “successful” party in a social conflict, it does not adequately resolve the communal social dislocation and attendant disharmony occasioned by circumstantial deviance. This is because the cause(s) of the social conflicts that arise from circumstantial deviance are non-human; therefore, sanctions and punishments are not capable of mediating them. As a result, there is always recourse to the modification mechanism, which encourages diffusion and the modification of the behaviour or situation. This mechanism tries to cool off situations, at least temporarily, or keeps issues so unclear that conflicts become impossible. The modification mechanism is, therefore, a “delay-action” strategy, and is applied in conflicts resulting from occupational failure, aggressiveness, childlessness, adultery, and incest.

Conclusion

I have attempted in this paper to identify and classify the types of social conflicts that occur in Urhobo society, and to evaluate the mechanisms that are employed to resolve them. The retribution mechanism appears to be effective in ensuring social harmony only from the point of view of the “successful” party in the conflict, whereas the modification mechanism is more “efficient” in ensuring harmony and socio-political stability because it provides a constructive approach to social conflict resolution. In the modification mechanism, both sides in a conflict win: the conflict is resolved in a manner that is mutually satisfying to all parties involved. It engenders consensual relationships between contesting interests, and therefore

safeguards society against the disruptions that may emerge from antagonistic claims. This is exemplified by the way in which the social conflict engendered by the spirit-spouse (*Aye r'erivwin/Oshare r'erivwin*) is resolved.

Author

This author holds a Readership position at the Delta State University in Abraka, Nigeria. He has a Master of Fine Arts degree in Sculpture and a doctorate degree in Art History. His research activities have largely been on the traditional arts of the peoples of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

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NOTES

1. This is the standardized spelling for "Urhobo," the name by which the people call themselves. Because the colonial British found it difficult to pronounce the compound consonant "rh" in Urhobo language, they called the Urhobo "Sobo". Similarly, they called Urhiapele "Sapele." The name "Sobo" was corrected to Urhobo as of January 01, 1938, by the British after protests from the Urhobo (see government Notice No. 1228, p. 652 of Nigeria Gazette, No. 49 Vol. 25 of 8.9.38). For more on the reversal of colonial policies in Urhoboland, see text of Peter Ekeh's lecture on "Historic Contributions of Urhobo Progress Union to the Unity and Development of Urhobo Nation."
2. Vansina, *Art History in Africa*, 204.
3. Aweto, "An Outline Geography of Urhoboland," 683; Foss, "An Introduction to the Urhobo," 21.
4. Otite, "A Peep into the History of the Urhobo," 25-29.
5. Williamson, "Linguistic Evidence for the Prehistory of the Niger Delta".
6. Ekeh, "A Profile of Urhobo Culture," 1-49; Ekeh, "Fresh Perspectives on Urhobo Culture," 11-19.
7. Otite, *Autonomy and Dependence*; Nabofa. "Akpo: Urhobo Ontology of Life and the Universe," 122-42; Nabofa. "Reincarnation," 288-98.
8. Ikime, "Traditional System of Government and Justice," 298-300; Otite, *Autonomy and Dependence*, 61-67.
9. Otite, "Political Institutions," 327-49; Ikime, "Traditional System of Government and Justice," 283-300. Minimal study of Urhobo art may be due to late direct contact between the Urhobo and Europeans (occurring only in 1890). The first publication about an Urhobo art object was in 1895 by Siegfried Passage. Reginald K. Granville and Felix N. Roth's publication of an Urhobo art object in 1898 in the

Journal of the Anthropological Institute, however, marked the real beginning of scholarly enquiry into Urhobo creative enterprise. The cursory comments about Urhobo sculpture by Henry Ling Roth in his comparison of “Sobo (Urhobo) Fetish” statues with Benin ivory in his study of Benin culture, as well as the references to Urhobo art objects by Richard Karutz (1927), Eckart von Sydow (1930), and Fagg & Plass (1966) provide some other information about Urhobo art. Perkins Foss (1975, 1976a, 1976b and 2004), Edoka, P.N. (1938), Bruce Onobrakpeya (2004), Tanure Ojaide (2004), Michael Nabofa (2004) are some other publications on aspects of Urhobo art.

10. For detailed accounts of Urhobo history of origin and migrations, see Otite, *The Urhobo People*, 29-206.
11. Eadie and Nelson, *The Language of Conflict and Resolution*, 61.
12. Ojaide, “Language & Literature in Conflict Management in Africa,” 3.
13. Goode, *Deviant Behaviour*, 29.
14. Coser pioneered the merging of structural functionalism and conflict theory. His work was directed at finding the functions of social conflict.
15. Diakparomre, “Developmental Imperatives,” 129.
16. Diakparomre, “Developmental Imperatives,” 129.
17. Identification and classification of social conflicts in Urhobo society being part of a study of masks and mask performances as icon and act.
18. Ikime, “Traditional System of Government and Justice,” 295.
19. Otite, “Political Institutions,” 341.
20. Oyibo Akperegi explained during an interview at Oghara on June 28, 2007, that retribution (either as prescribed by tradition or by modern judicial systems) is inadequate to mitigate the offences arising from certain behavioural deviances, especially as there is no guarantee that the offending individual would be weaned from his conduct by mere restitution.
21. Ejoywoke, “Traditional System of Law and Order in Urhobo,” 17.
22. Chinoy, *Society*, 461.
23. Interviews with Chief Ageh Adiokho at Okpara Inland on July 19, 2006.
24. Interviews with Chief Blackie Onojorhoevwo at Okpara Inland on February 30, 2007.
25. The terms *ivwri*, *ivbri*, and *iphri* are used in this text. In Urhobo orthography, “vw” and “vb” convey the same sound. These affricates are more commonly used in the Agbarho dialectic of the Urhobo. The southern Urhobo people (Evwreni, Eghwu, Ughwerun, and Ughle sub-groups) used the affricate “ph.” The term “*iphri*” is thus used for the same phenomenon in the documentation from that part of Urhoboland.
26. The attributes of aggression in *ivbri* are conveyed in Tanura Ojaide’s “Poetry, Performance, and Art: Udje Dance Songs of the Urhobo People”, (2003). Ikpama Aduri’s “Praise Poetry for *Iphri*” in *Where Gods and Mortals Meet: Continuity and Renewal in Urhobo Art*, ed. Perkins Foss (Ghent: Snoeck Publishers, 2004), 141-43 is another expository of the attributes of aggression in *ivbri*. Perkins Foss (1975, 1976a, 2004) also draws attention to these attributes.
27. Interviews with Union Itebene at Ewreni on April 17, 2007.
28. For details of the absorptive concept of *ivbri*, see Foss, “Images of Aggression,” 135-40.
29. See Eriwwo, “Urhobo Traditional Beliefs and Values” (194-222) and Erhueh, “Image of God in Man,” (227-78) for traditional Urhobo philosophy to life and how

this has regenerated itself in modern times.

30. Nabofa fully articulates the concept of *Urhievwe* among the Urhobo people in “*Erhi* and Eschatology,” (351-75) and “Reincarnation” (288-99).
31. Ikime, “Traditional System of Government and Justice,” 299.
32. Ikime, “Traditional System of Government and Justice,” 296-97.

About the author: Dr. Abel Mac Diakparomre Faculty Member, Delta State University, Abraka – Nigeria Member, Pan-African Circle of Artists Current mailing address: Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka. Delta State, Nigeria. Phone: +234 803 6486 877 E-mail address: diakparomre@yahoo.com He holds a Readership position at the Delta State University in Nigeria. He has a Master of Fine Arts degree in Sculpture and a doctorate degree in Art History. He was an ethnographer with the Nigerian National Commission for Museum & Monuments (September 1977 to March 1985) before joining mainstream academia in April 1985. His research activities have largely been on the traditional arts of the peoples of the Niger delta region of Nigeria. The findings from these efforts have crystallized in journal and book publications, and were valuable resources for his doctoral thesis titled “Performance Sculptures of the Urhobo: Icon and Act”.