

Taboos, violations, and punishment among the Urhobo people of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: As a result of modernization, what constitutes a Taboo in Urhobo is getting thinner by the day. A taboo is a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing. The aim of this study is to explore some of the taboos, violations, and punishments among the Urhobo people of Delta State. The descriptive and analytical methods are adopted to achieve the aim of the research. The findings show that many taboos exist in Urhobo; however, some of them are being violated as a result of factors like modernization, religion, and acculturation. The paper concludes that Taboos are still being practiced among the Urhobos, and in cases of violations, there are consequences. The study recommends enlightenment on culture by families, social-cultural groups, and traditional institutions as a way forward.

Keywords: Nigeria, punishment, taboos, Urhobo, violations.

INTRODUCTION

The word "taboo" comes from the Tongan word *tapu* or *tabu*, which means "forbidden". Captain James Cook introduced the word into the English language after visiting Tonga in 1771 (Ikeke, 2024). Taboos are meant to ensure that societies function properly, and they can help protect individuals. They can also help groups maintain their identity and sense of belonging. Among the Urhobo People, there are several Taboos, things that constitute violations, and punishments that are meted out in cases of such violations.

Meaning of taboo in Urhobo

Taboo refers to culturally enforced prohibitions, rooted in moral, religious, or social norms that proscribe certain behaviors, speech, or practices, and whose violation is met with moral disapproval, supernatural sanctions, or social sanctions. Such taboos function to maintain social order, harmony between humans, the spiritual realm, the environment, and communal identity. (Ameyibor and

Tayviah, 2024; Babane and Mushwana, 2022). The Urhobo people of Delta State, Nigeria, have things they term as Taboos.

In the Urhobo language, the most common word for "taboo" is "*Egha*", and it signifies something forbidden or considered culturally inappropriate in Urhobo society. Another common word is the word "*Aghà*", which is loosely translated to mean "forbid" or "forbidden". What constitutes a Taboo, the violation of such, and the punishment vary from one kingdom to another; however, the majority of these taboos are similar to one another in most cases. This study examines the significance of taboos in Urhobo culture, including the types of taboos prevalent in Urhobo land, their associated violations, and the corresponding punishments.

A BRIEF NARRATION ON THE URHOB0 PEOPLE

The Urhobos are a people located in southern Nigeria, near the northwestern Niger Delta (Ojaide, 2022). They

are the major ethnic group in Delta State. The people of this ethnic group speak the Urhobo language (Sanya, 2014). Their population is approximately 7 million (Ekeh, 2008).

The Urhobo people live in a territory bounded by latitudes 6° and 5°, 15° North and longitudes 5°, 40° and 6°, 25° East in the Delta and Bayelsa States of Nigeria. Their neighbors are the Isoko to the southeast, the Itsekiri and Ijaw to the west, the Edo people to the north, the Ijaw to the south, and the Ukwuani people to the northeast (Nigeria Galleria, 2025).

The Ughelli and Agbon Kingdoms are the oldest kingdoms in Urhobo land. The Ughelli and Agbon Kingdoms can be traced to about the 14th century (Ajiki, 2018). Ughelli oral tradition has it that the great ancestor and founding father of Ughelli (Ughene) was the second son of Oghwohwa, a prince from the Benin Kingdom (Otite, 2003). The Okpe Kingdom is also one of the twenty-four kingdoms in Urhobo land (Ikime, 1980). The Kingdom has been in existence before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century. The Okpe Kingdom was established formally in the 17th century (Otite, 1973). The Okpe people are known to have migrated to found the present-day Sapele, and the Orodje of Okpe still exercises authority over the land of Sapele (Erivwo, 2005b). Based on gerontocracy, the Urhobos are governed by the eldest man in each Urhobo community, locally known as the "Okpako Orere" (Erivwo, 2005a).

According to Emekpe (2025), the Okpako Orere is the eldest surviving male in each Urhobo community, who is also considered the indigenous political head of the community. He is called Okpako Ewo by Isoko-speaking clans, and he is also referred to as Okaroro by Urhobo-speaking clans. His position is succeeded on the basis of gerontocracy when he dies, and the next most senior elder of the community takes his office. The Urhobo people are very hospitable.

TYPES OF TABOOS AND VIOLATIONS IN URHOBO

There are various types of taboos in Urhobo; however, for convenience, they will be classified into four: Food Taboo, Environmental Taboo, Marital Taboo, and Moral Taboo.

Food taboos in Urhobo

These are taboos that regulate what to eat and what not to eat. There are food restrictions in Urhobo land. Food prohibition is an act of not allowing a group of persons to eat some kinds of food articles. These acts may be the total forbidding of the affected persons from ever eating those mentioned food articles, or a partial restriction of those affected persons from eating the listed kind of food articles only for a season or for a specific period of time (Anyanwu *et al.*, 2015). For instance, the people of an area known as Orogun, an Urhobo community in Ughelli North

Local Government Area of Delta State, located in the Niger-Delta region, apparently prohibit the killing and consumption of *Ogborigbo* or Iguana Lizard in English. This species grows to great sizes and, because they are not hunted for food, is therefore numerous in the community. They are allowed to go about 'majestically', unmolested and can go into the traditional homes of the people uninhibited. The people call them *Inene*, meaning 'mother', and they are usually venerated by the people whenever they come across any one of these lizards. They are allowed and even encouraged to pick whatever food items they want, both at home and in the farm. If there is any accidental killing of these big lizards by the community dwellers or if any one of them is run over by a vehicle, the person involved has to spend huge sums of money to conduct an actual burial ceremony for these creatures. The big lizard is the recognised 'god' or the deity that the indigenous population worships, and it is therefore treated as the manifestation of the 'god' of the area. The animals have never been reported to have harmed any of the indigenous people; they are usually given elaborate burial rites when they die.

The people of Orogun, a community of the ethnic Urhobo nation, must not eat the meat of dog and of *Ogborigbo* (Iguana). There was an ancient history of how some bush dogs led some trapped warriors who were engaged in an inter-tribal war off the battlefield to safety. This action was subsequently tied to a deity, and the dog, as the physical manifestation, is still being worshipped. So, all wild dogs and domesticated dogs are not to be killed for meat under any circumstances. The domesticated dogs are treated well by their owners.

In another community, the people are not allowed to hunt wild fowl that abound in their forest and bushes. These fowls are so numerous and lay a large quantity of eggs in the forests. But the indigenous population is forbidden from hunting the fowls for meat or picking their eggs for food. Legend has it that it was some bush fowls that led some trapped ancient warriors of the community to safety when they would have been massacred by an opposing army (Onyesom, 2007). The story has it that the entire community vowed never to eat these fowls and apparently tied it to the worship of a deity. Here, punitive measures have been decreed for anybody who intentionally or unintentionally harms or kills any of these fowls (Ogbeide, 1974).

Consequently, the fowl have multiplied greatly in the community, and a rich source of free protein has been denied to the indigenous population and foreigners alike. Even a foreigner who does not even worship the deity of the local population is equally banned from eating the fowl or picking their eggs for food. If he does and he is caught, he is liable to receive the same or even a more severe punishment than that decreed by long-gone elders of the community (Okpako, 2022). The laws are strict, and the people obey them out of fear of some calamities that might befall them if they dare to disobey them.

Also, the great River Ethiope that runs across a long part

of the Delta State contains several species of fish. Again, a couple of communities, like in Abraka and Oghara Kingdoms, that live along the bank of this large freshwater river may not hunt certain fish from that river and will not eat some types of fish. Non-indigenes are, however, free to do both fishing and consumption of the fish.

Among the indigenous population of Uvwiamia Community in Agbarho Kingdom, the meat of a tortoise is absolutely forbidden for everyone who is a freeborn of the community (Eriwo, 2005b). This community has a river running through it, and this animal thrives and multiplies freely around this river; however, it is taboo to eat them. Another such myth and belief is the one from the Ophori community of the Urhobo ethnic nation. Here, boys and adult men do not eat snails at all. The ancient story said that again, during an inter-tribal war, the warriors from this community were led to safety by some migrating snails. Again, the cost for the sacrifices that will be made by a person who breaks the taboo is usually exorbitant, and this will be a burden on the person who, most time, is already economically/financially handicapped (Waibel, 2025).

In the Olomu Kingdom, crocodile is seen as a god. The people of this community in Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria, have for ages been worshipping the crocodile as Inene (Mother). The story goes that the sea animal protects them from deadly opponents and fought supernaturally for them in the ancient days. Till the present day, a shrine known as "Ovwirrho" is dedicated to the worship of this deity. The belief is that if any member of the believing community is involved in any accident while on the sea or river, and then calls on the name of the deity, a big log of wood would appear at once, and the person will be on top and the log will carry the victim to safety (Darah, 2022). If an Olomu person kills a crocodile, it is taken seriously as if the person has murdered a human being. Therefore, the crocodile must be buried like a human being with all the full honours due an actual human being. It is a strict taboo to kill and eat the meat of a crocodile, and anybody who does so will develop severe rashes all over their body, with severe itching and scratching. No medication works, and the person must perform certain rites. Failure to do so will result in the culprit developing swollen body and abdomen and death eventually (Anyanwu *et al.*, 2015).

Among the people of Orokpo in Ethiopie East Local Government Area, an Urhobo community of the Urhobo ethnic nation, they do not hunt or eat the meat of "Awawa", or Lynx, which abounds freely in their community. It is said that if any member of the community should eat the meat of this animal, the person will develop severe and throbbing pains in the part of his body which corresponds to the part of the animal that he ate. So, if it is the leg part of the animal that he ate, he will have severe, unexplained pain in his legs. The cure again comes from presenting oneself to the priest of the deity, who prescribes that some sacrifices be performed. Of great importance here is that the indigenes of this community are majorly gifted as

traditional bone setters (fracture healers), and they are sought after from far and near for their expertise in treating all kinds of bone fractures.

Among the Abraka people in Ethiopie East Local Government Area, it is forbidden to kill or eat squirrels. The reason is similar to the ones mentioned above; it is believed that these species have been kind to the people in the past in times of danger. Several other taboos involve vegetables, edible insects and reptiles that need to be elicited and reported. Various communities have various taboos binding on its people.

Marital taboos in Urhobo

Urhobos believe in the sanctity of marriage. In those days, it was taboo for a man to have a handshake with an Urhobo wife. It was also against Urhobo marital vows for an Urhobo wife to put on trousers of any kind. It was equally unheard of for an Urhobo wife to move out of her home or compound with one-sized piece of wrapper (Erhiurhor, 2023). It was expedient and compulsory in those days for every Urhobo wife to dress in two-sized pieces of wrapper once she was leaving her home to another place, whether within or outside the community (Ejoor, 2011). It is believed that, Urhobo wife must dress decently to present herself to other men that, she was a married woman. It was also a taboo for another man to hold the hands of an Urhobo wife, let alone touch her face, breasts or buttocks. A married man is not expected to have anything to do with the wrapper of woman who is not his wife. These were grievous marital atrocities in those days in Urhobo land. Any Urhobo wife who commits such acts must be inflicted with one kind of sickness or the other, or inflict the children with such strange sicknesses to force the mother to confess immediately. In case she refused to confess, the child might die in the end. Some women who have stormy hearts or are adamant to repent have lost many of their children as a result of indulging in such extramarital affairs (Erhiurhor, 2023).

Therefore, the highest and most dreaded of all the extramarital affairs in Urhobo land in those days was for a Urhobo wife to have a sexual relationship with another man, yet she claimed to be the wife of a particular man in the family or community. This marital offence was so dreaded that the offender, who in this case was the woman, would always be made to sacrifice a male goat to appease the ancestral spirits before she could seek freedom in the marital home (Foss, 2004). No matter how powerful such a woman was, the man's ancestral spirits must pursue her to bend. Either she confesses or loses her children born to the man. It was really a terrible situation in those days. As a result of this, many marriages were protected and secured by constantly maintaining the dignity and sanity of marriage through the actions of the Urhobo ancestral spirits. Having known that, many marital shortfalls were being instigated by wild women who just covered up with

the name of marriage (Erhiurhoro, 2023). Some forbidden taboos for Urhobo married women include, but are not limited to the following:

1. It is taboo for a married woman of Urhobo to allow another man other than her husband to lap her, or for her to lap another man. A married woman is not allowed to be in close proximity with another man who is not her husband. For example, it is taboo for an Urhobo married woman to board the same bike with another man who is not her husband. She is not allowed to have another man in front of or behind her in close range.
2. It is a taboo for an Urhobo woman to eat from the same plate with other men. It is also Taboo for another man to walk across the legs of an Urhobo married woman stretched on the floor
3. It is also Taboo for an Urhobo married woman to sit opposite another man on a bench to play games like Ekò, ludo, Apene or cards.
4. It is Taboo for an Urhobo married woman to sleep on the same bed with another man, other than her husband.
5. It is an offence for another man to hold the wrist, touch the breasts, tap the buttocks or hold the hips of an Urhobo married woman.
6. It is a taboo for a married woman to take money without the permission of her husband, especially from another man.
7. It is a taboo for an Urhobo married woman to embrace or kiss another man who is not her husband.

Unfortunately, today in Urhobo land, all these strict marital laws and vows to enforce dignity and sanity in the marriage institution have gone into the abyss. The Urhobo marriage institution is now weak because it was shaken to the roots by some unforeseen and foreign cultural changes (Irogbo and Agbamu, 2024). The respect and honour accorded Urhobo wives today is not as of old. There are reasons for such sudden changes. Some of the reasons are acculturation, modernisation and civilisation. The Urhobo culture generally and the marriage institution in particular had gone through many stages of cultural and sociological transformations. The Urhobo culture is today mixed with other cultural practices and values from other neighbouring ethnic groups or even from foreign lands, alien to the Urhobo ways of life or contradicting the Urhobo traditional marriage (Erhiurhoro, 2023).

Again, modernisation and civilisation have contributed to the weakness of the Urhobo marriage institution (Onuorah and Ayo, 2003). These two social tools have exposed many Urhobo women through the power of education to know more about themselves and their fundamental rights, even as women in society. Today, Urhobo women are now agitating for their rightful places or positions in government, corporate organisations, communities and socio-cultural groups within or outside Urhobo land. During the colonial

and pre-independence periods in Nigeria, it was very rare to hear of women being in politics or holding positions in the government of the day. But today, the story has changed in Urhobo land through the power of modernisation and civilisation brought about by education. Today, Urhobo women are celebrities in different fields and professions. They are very active in politics and also hold different positions in government (Erhiurhoro, 2023). These same social tools have wiped away the specks in their eyes by smashing to pieces those Urhobo hard restrictions placed on Urhobo married women by the Urhobo ancestral spirits.

Environmental taboos in Urhobo

There is a great connection between man and his environment, especially what is considered an indigenous environment (Kanu, 2022). Urhobo people believe that water, trees, plants, land, and air contain spiritual forces called *edjo*. These spirits are believed to be pervasive and have power over all aspects of Urhobo life (Ikeke, 2022; Chemhuru and Masaka, 2010). The environment, therefore, should be treated with some form of sacredness. It is Taboo, for instance, to be whistling in the night. It is also taboo to cut some trees or to gather certain herbs at night. Urhobo indigenous beliefs and practices about nature help to promote justice for ecosystems. For instance, among the Uvwie people of Urhobo, but is a taboo to fell trees in the *afieki*, the groove around the Effurun market, because they are believed to be spiritual trees. Another instance is that it is a taboo to attempt to stop a moving whirlwind or *Aziza*. It is also a table to eat meat with their blood in it, or to eat animals and plants that are not mature. Such animals and plants are only good for *Izobo* or sacrifices.

There are also Taboos related to days of the week. The Urhobo *Okpo* (week) is made up of four days, based on regulated market cycles, religious worship, marriages and other community life. The four days are *Edewo*, *Ediruo*, *Eduhre* and *Edebi*. *Edewo* and *Eduhre* are believed to be sacred days to divinities, spirits and ancestors. Most markets are held on these days. On *Edewo*, ancestors are venerated. Most traditional religious rituals are held on *Eduhre*. Spirits are believed to be active in the farmlands and forests on *Edewo* and *Eduhre*; therefore, it is a taboo to host certain celebrations on these days.

Moral taboos in Urhobo

Moral taboos among the Urhobo are locally grounded prohibitions and normative rules that regulate personal conduct, gender roles, family relations, spiritual obligations, and human–environment interactions. These taboos combine social sanction with cosmological belief: violating a taboo risks social opprobrium and, often, supernatural

sanction from ancestors or deities. Recent empirical and analytic work treats Urhobo taboos as simultaneously moral, religious, and political phenomena that help maintain communal order and identity (Ikeke, 2024).

Urhobo moral codes vary from one clan to another, but there are some commonalities. Urhobo people's actions and consciousness are centred on their community's customs and norms. These norms can be seen as rules or standards for regulating people's shared behaviour. For instance, one cannot kill his fellow human being. The only people authorised to kill for religious reasons are the traditional igbu in some customs, who are the militia department of the traditional culture. It is also Taboo for an Urhobo man to have sexual intercourse with a married woman. Other Taboos include the prohibition of stealing and other social vices. It is also a Taboo in Urhobo for one person to eat alone what he or she is supposed to give to the family. For instance, money given to two or more persons should not be cornered by one person.

PUNISHMENT AND SOLUTIONS TO CASES OF TABOOS IN URHOBO

If by any chance someone breaks these strict taboos in Urhobo land, there are repercussions. Some are instantaneous, while others may take some time. For instance, in the killing of sacred animals and totems, it is quick to manifest. The offending person apparently comes down with huge pruritic eruptions all over his body. The body becomes rough and scaly. The culprit will need to present himself or herself to the chief priest of the major shrine for cleansing. This usually involves some expensive sacrifices, after which the person recovers totally.

For marital Taboos, for the men it may lead to a fine and compensation to the family of the offended, but for the women it is even worse. It can lead to the death of the husband or children. The solution is for the couple to speak up to the extended family, who will *giye* or perform a sacrifice of atonement for them by offering sacrifices to the ancestors to forgive the woman. If this is not done, any man who sleeps with an adulterous woman will die (Agbofuodoh and Arugbeni, 2018). And in some cases, if the man is aware and refuses to inform the family, *Eriwwin* (Cult of Ancestors) will also strike him, with evidence of a bent mouth.

In cases of environmental and moral Taboos, the punishment also varies from community to community. It is believed, for instance, that if one eats community money, that person will be visited by a strange ailment or sickness. The solution will be for the person to confess so that the ancestors can be appeased in order to get forgiveness, or else such a person will die (Ikeke, 2024).

For stealing, anyone caught will be made to dance naked, carry the items stolen, and be paraded around the village with derogatory songs being sung as the person is paraded (Pulse Niveria, 2023). This will bring shame and

disgrace to the family of the thief and serve as a warning to others.

CONCLUSION

Taboos are things that are forbidden in Urhobo land, and they range from food, environmental, marital and moral Taboos. The practices and observance of taboos are real in Urhobo, and they are still very much present in Urhobo lands. However, modernisation, civilisations, and acculturation seem to be militating against the strict observance or enforcement of Taboos. The violations of taboos in Urhobo have repercussions and consequences, and most communities have recorded cases of such consequences, even though the frequency of occurrence is not as it used to be as a result of modernity and the influence of Christianity in many Urhobo communities. Anyone who violates such taboos is punished traditionally. However, as a result of Christianity and other new religious movements, the strict adherence to some traditional Taboos is dwindling. Notwithstanding, a lot of Urhobo people and the community still hold firm to their traditional belief systems. It is believed, however, that the effects of violating traditional Taboos cut across one's religion, hence there is the need for more cultural enlightenment via the channels of family, communities, social-cultural groups, and traditional institutions, among the Urhobo people to preserve the culture and traditions, especially the ones that bring sanity and order to Urhobo societies.

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