



# Urhobo wood sculpture: effective machinery for security and national development

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Of recent, Nigeria has being faced with a lot of security challenges ranging from frequent bomb blasts, to road and air mishaps, kidnappings, cases of armed robbery and ethnic-disharmony. Issues of Fraud, Impersonation, Exam- malpractices, in flocks of fake drugs and other fraudulent practices within the country also form part of these challenges. The Nigerian government so far, has not succeeded in finding lasting solutions to these problems, as such, putting the country in security alert both nationally and internationally. Its approach in tackling these multi-faceted problems has further eroded the foundations of this country. The question on the lips of many within and abroad is what indeed is the way forward? At this juncture, this paper attempts to examine and find lasting solutions through some traditional security systems at curbing this canker worm. Integrating Urhobo traditional security systems with some modern methods is a well thought approach. The Urhobo have security systems which are engraved in their culture and wood Sculptures which, if studied and adopted by government, will assist in tackling some of the security problems experienced in the country today. The method used in carrying out this study derives from psychoanalysis, iconography and selective interviews with persons in communities involved with local policing. The results indicate that integrating some traditional systems of security with modern types is an effective form of tackling security issues in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** security, integration, traditionalism, contemporary, approach, council, limitation, culture

## INTRODUCTION

Within the Urhobo culture, exist security systems which are embedded in their cultural institutions. Some of these systems are sometimes in human or material forms. The human aspect involves their security structures and practices. While, the material types includes their art forms or security objects. In most Urhobo communities these two types of systems are common.

In Nigeria today, security systems carved out from western types are frequently used. This study however, intends to find new ways of integrating the traditional with modern methods of security in order to find lasting solutions to the security lapses evident in the country. Since, the early twenty-first century, Nigeria has continued to experience an increase in security issues.

These security challenges which comprise, Kidnappings, Ethnic Cleansing, Robbery, Terrorist Attacks, Internet Murder, Militancy, Air and Vehicle Disaster just to mention a few, has caused great concern at all levels in the country. Most noticeable are the frequent cases of suicide bombings and cases of ethnic cleansing terrorising the Northern parts of Nigeria. It

must be recalled that on July 9, 2012, residents of Jos Plateau and some rural communities were gripped with fear (Fagbemi et al 2012:22). This was when some notable politicians and well over hundreds of persons were slaughtered to death by suspected Fulani herds men (Fagbemi et al 2012:1-2).

Oladeinde (2012:9) also writes on the use and abuse of the new social medium called internet. Where, in July 22, one Cynthia Osokugu was murdered in cold blood by two young men. In August 9, 2012, a dawn to dusk curfew was imposed in Kogi state as a result of the resurgence connected to a group terrorising the north. Here, about seventeen persons were killed in a church. In Abuja, Yobe, Bauchi just to mention hundreds of Nigerians have been killed on daily basis as a result of a particular sect in the country. These occurrences and many more after, have caused ripples in the Nigerian polity as well as the international scenery.

Yet, no solution seems to be achieved with the security apparatus in operation within the nation. All attempts to arrest the perpetrators have proven abortive.



Figure 1. Map of the Urhobo

It is at this juncture, that the need to incorporate traditional systems of security becomes necessary. Thus, investigation has been carried out in some selected communities in Urhobo land. They are Ovu, Okpara, Igun, Eku, Ogor to mention a few.

## METHODS

Indeed, it has become important to employ certain methods at analyzing some of these security materials particularly the art forms. The methods used at analysing the art forms derived largely from psychoanalysis and iconographic approaches. Other research methods like interviews with traditional practitioners of security from the above mentioned communities was conducted.

Psychoanalysis is a branch of psychology developed by an Austrian born neurologist named Sigmund Freud (Adams, 2011:11). It deals primarily with the unconscious significance of works of art (Adams, 1996:179). It also focuses on the reconstruction of the past to the present (Adams, 2001:11).

Iconography however considers mainly the subject matter (1996:36). Adams (1996:36) claims that the term (iconography) comes from two Greek words, *ekon* meaning "image" and "graphic" meaning writing. In other words, iconography is the way in which an artist writes an image as well as what the image writes (Adams 1996:36). That image writing is simply the story it tells. Iconography focuses more on content over form (Adams 1996:36).

## Definition of Security

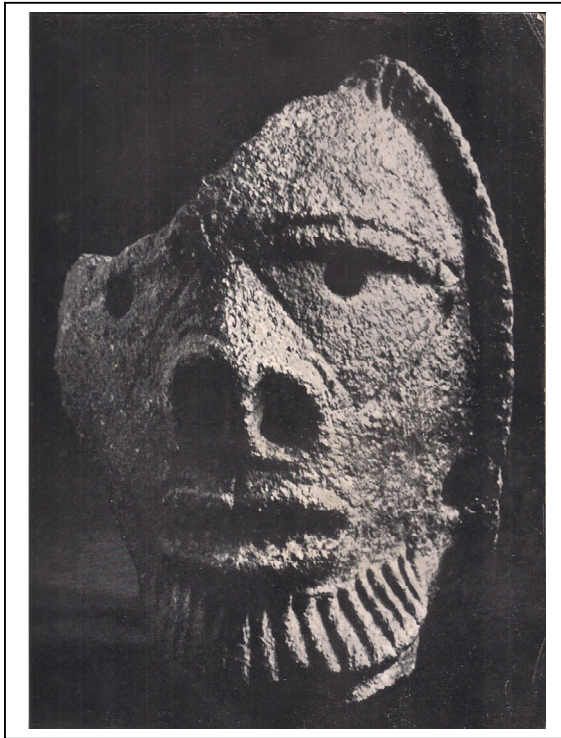
The word security was first used in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Merriam-Webster 2012) and it applies to measures

taken to guard against crime. Security can also be defined as a means or devise designed to guard persons and property against a broad range of hazards, including crime, fire, accidents, espionage, sabotage, subversion and attack (The new encyclopedia, 2010:595). Security is described as the state of being or feeling secured (Oxford Dictionary, 1999:1296). The American heritage dictionary (2009) states that security stands for freedom from risks or danger. Security has to do with measures taken at warding off impending danger or damage or injury (free online dictionary). Now, we know what security is, it becomes pertinent to examine the culture possessing some of these security systems.

## Studies on the Urhobo

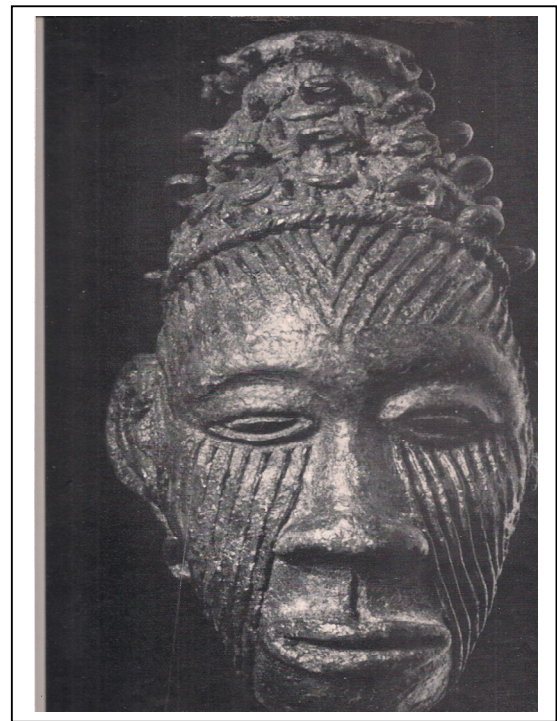
The Urhobo are infact the 6<sup>th</sup> largest ethnic group in the country (Erivwo, 2006:686). They are located in the Western fringe of the Niger Delta in Nigeria (Foss:2004:2) Their neighbours include the Isoko, to the south-east, the Itsekiri to the West, Benin to the North, Ijo to the south and Ndokwa to the North-east (Odokuma 2001:1) of the twenty-three clans of the Urhobo, majority of them trace their origins to Benin. Commonly engraved in the Urhobo culture are Benin-type of political structures as well as kingship patterns and ceremonial regalia's (Odokuma 2001:1) The Urhobo also have security structures that are used to defend their territorial borders.

Quite a considerable amount of work on the arts and cultures of the Urhobo has been published by numerous scholars. They include; Darah, (2004:53) Ekeh, (2006:1); Erivwo (2006:137) Foss (2004:59), Ikime (2006:498), Nabofa (2004:37), Egonwa (1994:88), Ojaide (2004:117), Onobrakpeya (2004:95), Agberia (2003:41-50),



**Figure 2.** Nok Terracotta

Courtesy of Nigerian Images by  
Wiliam Fagg/Herbert list



**Figure 3.** Igbo-Ukwu

Courtesy of Nigerian Images by  
Wiliam Fagg/Herbert list

Diakparomre (2003:31-40), Odokuma (2001:7), Odokuma (2006:90-10), Odokuma (2008:58-68), Odokuma (2009:17:29) and many more. However, not much attention has been given to areas relating to the integration of security in modern structures.

Darah (2004:53), for instance, opines that religious institutions both communal and private constitute the arsenal of forces and meta-physical agencies that ensure safety protection and well being. Ekeh (2006:1) looks at imperialism in Nigeria historiography and the nature and outline of Urhobo history, Eriwwo (2006:137) is more interested in the beginnings of Christianity in Urhobo-land and Western Nigeria. Foss (2004:59) continues to examine the full range of creativity in Urhobo land. Nabofa (2004:37) studies the manner in which religious beliefs and practices are maintained in visual imagery. Egonwa (1994:88) sees similarities in the motifs between the Ogharefe and Benin mud sculptural styles. Ikime (2006:498) is more interested in relations between Isoko and Urhobo groups. Ojaide (2004:117) describes in Urhobo poetry the richness of Urhobo folklore. Onobrakpeya (2004:95) tells of experiences he encountered with colour symbolism in Urhobo land. Agberia (2003:41-50) highlights one of the exuberant ritual ceremonies of Urhobo cultural practices popularly referred to as Opha. Diakpanomre (2003:31-40) explains the surface decoration to context in Urhobo sculpture, Odokuma (2001:1) writes on influences on cultures like the Urhobo, Isoko, Western Igbo, Esan, Northern Edo,

Western Ijo and Itsekiri. Odokuma (2006:90-110) also suggests the likely source of the terracotta head found in Edjekota, Urhobo land. Odokuma (2008:58-68) even look at the structures and functions of some Urhobo wood sculpture. Odokuma (2009:17-29) attempts to explain the visual language of some Urhobo art forms of the Niger Delta.

Most of the scholars have looked at diverse areas of importance in Urhobo culture, but not much is done on security issues particularly as regard, the need to integrate or combine traditional Urhobo systems with modern types. This study however intends to do that. Since, the cultural systems as well as their material culture in form of figures in wood show these security outfits. The researcher intends to offer suggestions on emergence of these two systems and eventual adoption of it by the nation.

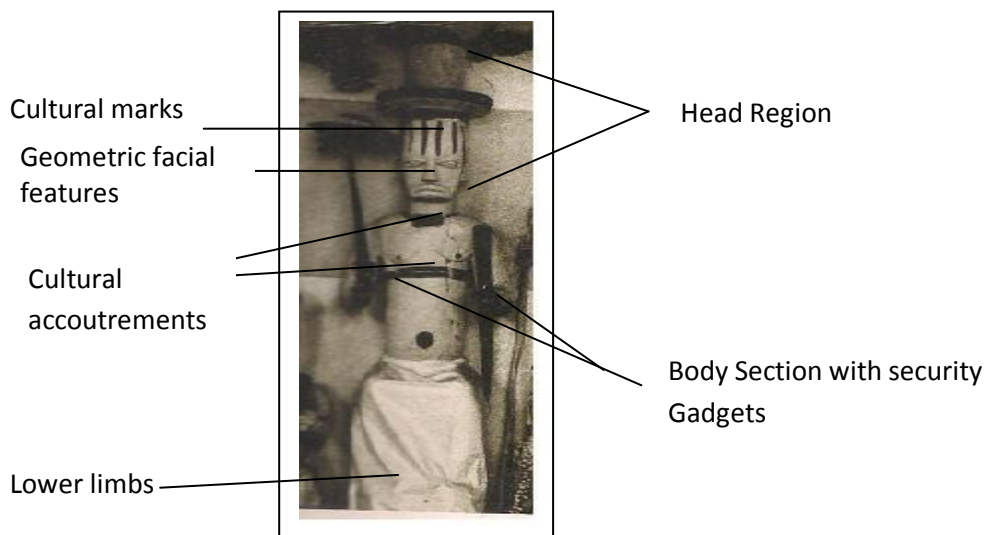
### **Nature of Urhobo Wood Sculpture and Its Security Implications**

The Urhobo wood sculptures dates back to centuries ago. However, the most common medium, which is wood, cannot last for beyond a century or two. It is indeed obvious that the structure of these pieces lie in antiquity. Just like the Nok terracotta and Igbo-Ukwu pieces in (figure 2 and 3).

The first piece of Urhobo origin dated to the early nineteenth century was formally associated with the



**Figure 4.** Ovughere Tableau  
 Courtesy of Perkins Ross Where Gods and Mortals Meet Continuity and renewal in Urhobo Art



**Figure 5.** analysis of an Ovughere figure  
 Courtesy of Perkins Ross  
 Where Gods and Mortals Meet  
 Continuity and renewal in Urhobo Art

Jukun ethnic group (Foss 2004:33).

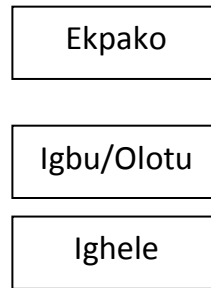
However, Urhobo works reveal some social codes, histories and religious ideologies of the people. They can also be described as an embodiment of the peoples' language and systems. Unlike what is frequently perceived by modern people, these pieces are not idolatry as they represent the full essence and early beginnings of the Urhobo people.

For instance, a critical examination of this *Ovughere* tableau which depicts more than six figures with military paraphernalia is worthy to be studied. This assemblage from Ovu Inland in Ethiopia East represents security. Each figure performs different functions. Security is indeed the main attribute of this tableau. The collective name given to all the figures is [*Iko*] which means messengers.

A close look at figure 4. shows a male figure which is centrally positioned. He is regarded as the founding father of Ovu, "*Ovughere*" himself. However, all the figures appear to be attributes of *Ovughere*. For instance, if an indigene is in trouble and he or she calls out to *Ovughere* for assistance it is *Uwuorokor* that would appear. The sound of the cry of the person in distress may sound like this;

- Ovughere o!* - The protector of the entrance of Ovu
- Ojana o!* - We are helpless
- Ya rhe re hore* - Come and fight
- Ohore nana* - This fight
- Kevwe* - for me

The figure next to the central figure is *Oboredjo* (doctor) it is he that possesses the power of healing as well as war. Next to this figure, is *Omoboba* (small child) often



**Table 1.** The structure of Ovu security council

positioned along side *Oboredjo*. He is consulted in the treatment of fertility issues. Then next to *Omoboba* is *Iko* [messenger of *Ovughere*]. Although all the figures are referred to as *Iko* [messengers] this particular figures function is to run on errand to different parts of the world. So far an indigene is in danger or there is a distress call on *Ovughere*, *Iko* would be sent to rescue him or her. Next to *Iko* are two female figure referred to as *Ovughere's* wives. They are also messengers. At the left end of the side is *Okro*. *Okro* is the flute blower who informs the community of impending danger or good coming to the environment. All these figures represent the various aspects of the *Ovughere* tableau. They are one of the physical manifestation responsible for the security of the town. *Ovughere* can be described as a force and these figures represent attributes of this force.

The structure of the Urhobo figure can be divided into three parts. The head, region, body and lower limbs. Of the three parts the most expressive is the head. It carries the ethos of the peoples society. On the head are coiffures, Cultural marks and the geometric treatment of the facial features. The body carried some of the security paraphernalia. The cutlass, club and cultural accoutrement are items held or worn on the figures for security. Even the arrangement indicates a form of security.

The half sitting and half standing postures of Urhobo arts suggest a kind of motion. It may be a security motion of readiness or alertness in times of danger or just another gesticulation process. In Urhobo culture, women also play a major role in terms of security, hence amongst the tableau are two women regarded as messengers [*Iko*]. These figures reveal not only the apparatus of security but the spiritual essence of it. The montage displays objects used in controlling security breaches within and outside, the society. It must however be noted that the systems of security does not lie only on these figures, but also on stratified methods etched into the social structures of these societies.

### Some Security Institutions among the Urhobo

Traditionally, the purpose of security is for the maintenance of peace and for the protection of lives and

properties (Tuoyo). In some Urhobo communities the word security may be called *Otorerhere* (security) depending on the Urhobo dialect. This institution consist of organized men groups who volunteer to protect their environment. The process is said to be performed in both small and large communities. For example in Ovu, young able bodied men known as (*Ighele*) form the first level of the force (Igberhi). Then followed by the *Igbus/Olotus* who represent the traditional solders. Finally, we have the *Ekpakos* or elders which constitute the supreme council.

If there happens to be any forceful penetration of foreigners, or criminals the *Ighele* (youths) and *Olotu* (soldiers) act as communal soldiers. For these groups to perform, advice needs to be taken from the *Ekpako* (elders). Hence, the Urhobo have a saying that;  
 ... *Ekpako Oye mire orho*  
 (which means that it is the decision of the elders that makes it happens).

### Processes

In case of any security dispute between communities or indigenes within a community, certain steps are initially taken. For instance, the community would endeavor to ensure peace at all levels. But if the peace process fails then, tougher security measures would be administered.

A meeting would then be convened at the elders council which consists of the *Ekpako* (elders). This meeting is assembled to discuss the pending crisis in the community. It is at this level, that decisions are made. If to confront the enemy or not is taken. If the option of confrontation is adopted certain deities would be appeased. As in the case of *Ovu*, *Eto*, *Oniorho* and *Erhiere* would be appeased.

*Eto* is a war deity which protects the people at all circumstances. Thus, it is often said in Ovu;

*Eto o riu ughru* which is translated to mean that it knows no boundaries.

*Oniorho* is another deity carried by a menopause woman on her back to "*Okpregede*". If the load carried by the woman falls from her back, it means it is negative. That is something is wrong, but if she successfully carries it, the result is positive. This means the community is assured of success.

*Erhiere* which is the *Ovurughere* is located at the entrance of the town. Its main responsibility is to protect the town.

Eyagomare the Ovu chief priest believes strongly in prayers. He claims that in spite of all these above mentioned processes the key to protection of lives and property is prayer. They also have security concoctions injected into the bodies of persons associated with security issues. So apart from the security council another institution within the society exists. It is the spiritual council, led by the priests, princesses, princes and other members. *Eyagomare* claims he has sleepless nights to ensure the spiritual security of the land. He the (priest) and his prayer warriors (*irere*) who are gifted in diverse areas ensure the safety of lives and property through prayers. The spirit of the air (*Aziza*) and land (*Ogun*) both protect all atmospheric levels of the earth.

### Manifestation of Security Deities

Attempts on two occasions to kidnap and use some people for rituals was fuelled in *Oviore in Ovu* Inland in June 2012. The arrests of these persons were attributed to their deities responsible for security. It must however be noted that the security of an indigene transcends his/her locality. It includes those living overseas. In case evidence of approaching war is acknowledged, one would hear sounds like this coming from the *Egba* shrine.

*Ofovwe o... War*

*Ofovwe o... War*

*Ofovwe o... War*

So the people must be prepared for any attack. A security deity responsible for animal theft exists in Urhobo land. In Ovu area, it is called *Osioruru* that is, it makes an offender blind and sometimes seen sitting with the animal.

If one is approaching the town with an evil charm, "*Okwobe*" will nullify the power of the charm. A living example occurred when some years ago a man came into the town with the intention of killing another man. As he (the charmed man) entered the town, he witnessed a flash of lightening which was followed by a voice which told him to turn back. He did not yield to this threat, as he progressed further, a stronger lightening just in front of him flashed and ordered him to retreat. This he did.

*In 1979, an Ovu priestess had a dream of blood in the town. The shrine directed that oil be poured through Ovu to Ekpan to forestall any bad occurrence. Then, that Eto should be planted in all territorial borders of Ovu sub clan. This was done before the elections. During the elections for the first republic, Ethiopie East recorded massive bloodshed. Not a drop of blood was shed in Ovu according to Igberhi.*

### Spiritual State of the Priest

that in order for all the security systems to operate

successfully, the priest must be without blemish. He It is the peoples belief must be clean within and outside, if not the spirits would not commune with him. For it is the spirits that inform the priest of what or what not to do.

### Western Security Council and System

Most of what is described as modern today in Nigeria, is derived from the west. They have their own Security Council and system. The Security Council, is made up of the cabinet of the United Nations members. Initially, they were eleven members but in 1965 it was expanded to fifteen of whom five were permanent members (Britain, China, France, Russia and United States) (Iain Mclean and Alistair 2003:482). The Security Council responsibility is primarily to maintain international peace and security.

Their duty is also to settle disputes of non-United Nations member states. If the security council feels that the threat to peace is shaky and there is a failure to perform obligations, the council may call on members of the United Nations to apply diplomatic or economic sanctions (The New Encyclopedia Britannica 2010:596) If all these actions fail, then the council may take military action against the offending nation by air, sea and land forces acting for the United Nations (The New Encyclopedia Britannica 2010:596). The West, use a wide range of security devices, they include; lie detectors, ultrasonic waves, listening and recording devices, camera, closed circuit television, one way mirrors and perimeter fencing, just to mention a few.

### Integrating Traditional and Modern Systems

The question of integration is not new as several other concepts and methods have in the past been combined with traditional elements. Looking at the Western concept of security, from its security council all the way to its gadgets, one would agree that there is nothing actually new under the sun. Although of cause, when it comes to weaponry and devices, they are ahead. However, other spiritual methods can also be employed like those in traditional Nigeria. The concept of a security council already exists in traditional levels. Security forces are already in place at traditional levels as well as security devices. The only difference is that western approach seems to be more modernized than the traditional.

Both systems show a close relationship possibly in the distance past. The entire structure and objective of their security systems are almost similar. Even their devices are not seriously different, while the western types a physically seen the traditional is spiritually derived. However, the traditional form of security includes all members of the community, it employs, alertness, watchfulness and security consciousness. The integration

sought should be in a way that persons in the rural areas as well as urban would benefit significantly from it.

Elements of traditional belief practices in their communities can be injected into the Nigerian modern security structures. For example incorporating images of these cultures deity into security devices like padlocks, chains and even gates. Traditional colours like red and white can be introduced into some security organizations. Some of these colours can be worn by security agents, or even painted on some security devices, to instill fear into the minds of citizens. The Paleolithic belief systems are still greatly on the minds of most Nigerians. Some traditional security personnel's like the Igbus can also be injected into some of the security forces. Thus, merging our traditional practices with modern ones.

## CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is evident that elements from the Urhobo culture as regards security can be used side by side with modern methods. Elements can also be used to complement modern structures. The use of traditional methods is not new, take for example the art and science of embalming which originated in Egypt over 3,000 years ago is still in use till today. Security of course is as old as man, so if certain security elements are isolated and merged with modern types in Nigeria the security challenges experienced in Nigeria would become a thing of the past. Thus, it has become necessary to look inwards at tackling security issues in Nigeria. We must begin to acknowledge the fact that our traditional methods are still psychologically feared more than the modern types. The government should also adopt communal policing at rural, state and urban centres. Such outfits should be integrated into their political powers. Everyone should endeavour to be security conscious right from his or her home, to avoid all forms of infiltrations.

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## Interviewees

- Chief Igberhi Joseph, Local historian Ovu, Inland, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> July and on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, 2012.
- Chief Utuoyo Peter, Chief Priest of Omwe River, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2012.
- Eyagomare Jacob, Chief Priest of Ovughere shrine, Ovu Inland.3<sup>rd</sup> July 2012.
- Okpako Ovie, Indigene from Okpara, 2008.
- Mr. Anidi, age 70, Taxi Driver, interview June 29,2012.

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