

THE STUDY OF THE PHYSIOGNOMIC CULTS IN URHOBOS COSMOLOGY AND THEIR SOCIO-ICONOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION

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Abstract

The Urhobo have specific beliefs about cult for man's wellbeing called physiognomic Cult. These cults are represented by complex artistic iconic objects. The physiognomy cults represent two distinct aspects of man's aggression, progress, strength, and enterprise. These Cults are called the *Iphri* and *Obo* cults. In Urhobo cosmology, shrines are essential in the promotion of an interface between the living and the spiritual beings. These Cults are constructed and placed within individual domains as temples of personal divinity such as *Obo*, *Iphri*, *Edere* or *Oku* and they are also placed among the larger ones, for which special small houses are built, and are usually located at appointed places within or around the village. These icons that were upheld long ago are revered by their descendants as posthumous testaments to their leadership and martial prowess. With the introduction of western education and civilization, many Westerner Scholars have criticized the cults as fetish and barbaric. It becomes necessary to find out if the Urhobo Physiognomic Cult is incompatible with ethics and if it is still relevance among the Urhobo elites. The paper employed the semiotic theory of Umberto Eco which says pictures express the same feelings as spoken words. The objective of this paper is to re-visit the icons of the physiognomy Cult; and their symbolic importance to the Contemporary Urhobo. We were able to find out that among the adherent, the cult still serves the socio-culture relevance in the present Urhobo community.

Keywords: *Iphri*, *Obo*, Iconography and symbolism

Introduction

The Urhobo metaphysical concept of man states that apart from *Erhi* (the soul personality), every human being has some other spiritual entities and most prominent of them are *Oma* the creator divinity: (the spiritual sculpture which build the physical body) and *Obo* the divinity of personal achievement and prosperity or *Iphri* an *icon of controls of an aggressive individual*. These spiritual counterparts, (*Erhi*, *Oma*, and *Obo*) are the vital entities that make up the spiritual aspects of the human double. Each one of them

has major roles to play in the life of man. While *Oma* molds the physical body and ensures that man enjoys good health, *Obo* bestows prosperity on man and *Erhi* declares man's destiny and relates him with God. (Nabofa 1994:85-85). For the Urhobo to enjoy Peace and achieved prosperity in live, the Urhobo established a protective Cults called the Physiognomic Cults which serves as an interface between man and his spiritual double. They appear as an individual owned work of art through the entire spectrum of Urhobo society, from young infant to most senior elder, from subsistence cultivator to village group leader and also as man's achievement cult, as they progress positively in life. These cults were very prominent before the coming of Christianity in Urhobo land. You could find children who are very troublesome and destructive have a little icon around their necks as a protective mechanism. While the adults have a little shrine at the right corner of their living room. During my Ph. D. field work between 2010 and 2012, I noticed that some children whose parents are still adherents of Urhobo traditional Religion wore sure icons round their neck despite the present of Christianity in the land.(1) This research is to find out if Christianity, Education and civilization had any effect on the belief system of the Urhobo. The research is purely historical and qualitative in nature. It helps to document an aspect of Urhobo belief system which is fast dying away.

Urhobo is made up of twenty-two socio-political units and they are found in Delta state of Nigeria. (Otite: 2003:21) According to the 1991 population census, they consist of about over a million people and classified among the ten major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Urhobo people are part of the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. It is a well-known fact that Nigerian is a pluralistic society both in the region and ethnic composition. The Urhobo, therefore, constitute one of the estimated 250 socio-political groups in the federation and while in Delta state, they are one of the largest socio-cultural units that make up the state. (Aweta, A.O, and Igben, JJ. 2003:34)

Geographically, the Urhobo now live in a territory bounded by latitude and (5° , 5°C north and Longitude $5^{\circ}25'$ and $6^{\circ}25'$) east and covering an area of about 3,669 square kilometres. Their neighbours are the Isoko to the Southeast, Itsekiri to the west, Benin to the north, Ijo to the south, and Ukwuani to the northeast (Ibid). However, the historian ObaroIkime grouped the Urhobo into two distinct area zones.

The southern zone, which consists mainly of the territories Of the Ewu (Eghwu) Ewwereni and Uhwerun clans, is flooded during the wet season when the Ewu rivers overflow its banks both as a result of rains and the Niger floods which flow in through the Forcados River and surrounding creeks. The northern zone consisting of the majority of the Urhobo-speaking clans is on comparatively highland and does not suffer from severe flooding. (Ikime, O. 1969: 57-65)

The Urhobo territory consists mainly of evergreen forests, with many palm-trees, which provided the source of oil palm produce. Their other main cash crops are rubber, timber and there are also wide deposits of crude or mineral oil. Their foods crops are cassava, yam, plantain, and cocoyam.

Economically, they are mainly farmers but with few exceptional traders and fishermen, hunters, and others engaged in the tapping of rubber, mining of minerals, and manufacturing of goods.

The territory is covered by swamps, which are drained by a network of rivers and streams. The most important of these are rivers Ethiopie and Thomas, which virtually flow all over Urhobo land and thus the whole area is well watered. The abundance of water may have influenced the people's worldview and their arts because, among the Urhobo, the belief in water divinity are highly predominant and there are lots of artistic representation of the divinities and every aspect of their belief system. (Aweta, A, O. and Igben JJ .2003: 34)

Politically, the Urhobo are made up of twenty-two socio-political groups namely: Abraka, Aragba, Agbarho, Agbon, Arhavwarien, Ephron-Oto, Eghwu, Evioreni, Ewu, Idjerhe, Oghara, Ogor, Okparabe, Okere, Okpe, Olumu, Orogun, Udu, Ughelli, Ughienwe, Umole and Uwhurun. Moreover, the Urhobo are believed to be Edoid-speaking people who claim to have migrated from Bini.. (Ekeh P. 2005)

The physiognomic cult

The word Physiognomy came from a Greek word *physis* meaning "nature" and *gnomon* meaning "judge or interpreter". It is the assessment of a person's character or personality from his or her outer appearance, especially the face. The term can also refer to the general appearance of a person, object, or terrain, without reference to its implied characteristics. It is understood in the past as it meets the contemporary definition of a pseudoscience. In Urhobo land the word is used to address all cults that have to do with man's spiritual double. They believe that every individual has a guidance spirit who controls their activities here on earth. These spirits are responsible for man's wellbeing and every activity here on earth. These spiritual beings are called *Obo* and *Iphri* and their shrines of worship are called the physiognomy cults. There are basically two of such cults in Urhobo land.

Urhobo belief system:

The Urhobo believe that the physical world is very highly influenced by the supernatural, which embraces evil and good forces. Happiness or wellbeing which they refer to as *ufuoma* can only be guaranteed by seeking out what the unknown holds, exorcising the forces of evil and aligning one's life, as it were. Since the Urhobo believe that the affairs of man are controlled by spiritual beings, divination among them is first and foremost concerned with finding out the plans of these beings for man. They divine to ensure that the good plans are not changed while the evil ones are reversed or cancelled. Once this is achieved man will be assured of a state of total well-being (*ufuoma*). Without *Ufuoma*, of course, there can be no happiness. And *ufuoma* touches on every aspect of life; the plans of the Divine (as mentioned above); protection against our earthly enemies, knowing the right thing to do about any situation-including such cases as trying to recover a lost person or piece of property; whether a person is lying or saying the truth, one's success in

life. Indeed, the reasons for which an Urhobo person will go to a diviner are so varied and all-embracing as to defy listing. (Ofuafo:2013:35)

However, divination and sacrifice almost invariably go together, whether in gratitude (for success in life or an existing state of happiness), or in prayer (to have evil plans or revelations or situations reversed), the Urhobo must sacrifice to the power of the divine world. This fact has led some observers to charge that diviners always insist on sacrifice only as a selfish means of feeding themselves (Foss, P. 2005). Nevertheless, the people still believe that divination can reveal the fault and psychologically prepare the sufferer's mind for the solution, while sacrifice administers, so to say, the medicine which effects the cure. Unless sacrificial rites are performed the devotee will not have the peace of mind which is mostly required for a permanent cure. I would like to state here that, not every sacrifice is as a result of having consulted the *epha* priest. In Urhobo land, a sacrifice can follow an unsolicited fortune-telling of some kind at a chance meeting by a person who is not even known to have such powers of clairvoyance and who may not be a practising professional diviner of any kind. Furthermore, a strange message delivered by a devotee of some cult or the other, or even a warning to a close relation of the affected person can lead to sacrificial rites. Such practices abound in Urhobo land: Igbe priests and devotees are fond of delivering such messages even without being consulted. (Ofuafo, 2014: 90)

Secondly, not all consultations of the *epha* priest necessitate subsequent sacrifice. The diviner may say that the relevant problem has been predestined as such it has no remedy; its course is inevitable therefore the victim should accept his fate calmly. The *Obuepha* may also advise that only a "cleansing" ritual is called for. This can take the form of bathing in a particular stream, or a special exorcising ritual in a specific cult in which the client is a member, or some special incision of some kind. The possibilities are quite numerous. Notwithstanding the above opinion, it is a common belief among the Urhobo that most instances of sacrifices result from divination, and in several instances of divination one form of sacrificial rites or the other is prescribed. Whatever rituals that are prescribed, the ultimate aim is to establish and maintain *ufuoma*. The most popular device which the Urhobo uses to ascertain the wishes of the divine is known as *epha*, while the process of divining by *epha* is referred to as *ephaebo* which means consulting *epha*." The cultic functionary is known as *obo r'epha* or *obuepha*, which means "doctor of *epha*" that is, the diviner.

The Cult of Obo

Theologically the *Obo* is a cultic symbol, on which an individual expresses his emotions of joy and frustration. It is also a place where forces of dynamism and individualism, which characterize the Urhobo love to struggle for success in life, are expressed. *Obo* is associated with riches and wealth, individual achievement, and progress. Hence prosperous person is described as someone whose hand loves him (*vweve mam obo*) or my hand has done it for me (*Obo me rukvwe*). It is also believed that it is one's *Obo* that supplies all the things that one needs in life. Thus *Obo* occupies an important place in the life of the Urhobo and that explains why the object is propitiated and venerated.

According to Nabofa, the Urhobo altar of hand takes one common singular form; which is the human hand from the wrist upwards, in most cases showing the five fingers or a sculpted mortal with the hand inside. (1994: 85-95). This singular artwork which is sculpted after consultation with the *Oboepha* (diviner) is placed at the corner of the house and worship by the owner. This iconic symbol referred to as *Obo* (Altar of hand), among the Urhobo is also found in the neighboring communities with whom they share a common boundary such as, the Igbo, Benin, Urhobo, Igala, Ijo, Ishan and Isoko who are mostly occupants of this area. While in Igbo land the most common type is a figure of a man with two ram born-like projections on his head. From investigation, the Urhobo belief that the cult of obo is closely connected or associated with ancestral worship and so many successful men have *obo* in their homes. (See image below)



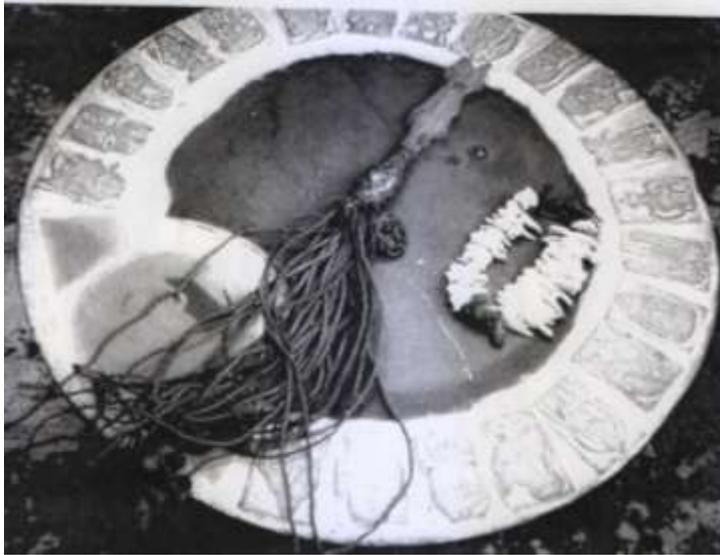
The Altar of Obo in Urhobo land



Ikenga of Igboland

This cultic object is known by different names among these people. It is known as *Ikenga* among the Igbo people, while the Edo calls it *Ikegobo* and the Urhobo *Obo*. (Charles, G. 2007; P.1-71). According to Bradbury, the Edo associated the hand or arms (the right arm is frequently specified) with the prowess, strength, and enterprise of the individual worshipper. (Bradbury, 1973: p.261). It is a positive symbol of wealth and social achievement. Thus its worship, in most cases, symbolizes the overt expression and dramatization of self-congratulation and self-glorification.

The Objects in the Cult of *Obo*



Shrine Set, 1995, Plastocast, no dimensions

Bruce Onobrakpeya in his book *the spirits of the Ascent* gave two different renditions on the concepts of *Obo*; the first is a white wide plate with a horsetail called *ujo* in it and some cowries (*ibigho*) cast in plastocast to represent the concept of *obo* and the second is an *installation* made up of a very wide bronze plate, a horsetail and cowries. According to him:

Obo is a personalized deity, associated with Oma creator divinity. It is also associated with the spiritual hand which guide and guard the physical hand to succeed. It is a symbol of individual achievement and advancement; an act of prowess which is usually rigid and complex. The artwork is my conceptualization of the Obo sculpture. (Onobrakpeya B.)

This is because *Obo* occupies an important position in Urhobo cosmology. Success in business and all achievements in life are associated with *Obo*. *Obo vweyoma* (your hand is good). *Obo yovevwe* (my hand have done it). A person who has been very successful in most of his ventures is usually advised by a diviner or through dreams to set up his altar of hand and venerate it to ensure the continuity of his success. If willing, he would consult an artist to sculpt the symbol he wanted for him for a fee. No one is allowed to sculpt his own *obo*. One basic difference between the Urhobo's *Obo* and Igbo's *Ikenga* is that in Igbo, especially among the Nri religious practice, once the owner of *Ikenga* dies, his *Ikenga* would be smashed and thrown away as Onwuejeogwu once observed: "When

a man dies his Ikenga is spilt into two and thrown outside during his mortuary rites. It then becomes an ordinary wood. The owner has ceased to exist in human form. He has played his role when he was alive. Now he has ceased to have human personality.” (Onwuejeogwu, M.A 1992. P.67-88)

But the reverse is the case among the Urhobo. The altar of the hand is preserved. The belief among the Urhobo is that although the man is dead what he has achieved by dint of his hard work and labor is still there. They are not dead with him. To destroy his altar of hand would symbolize destroying everything that he must have left behind, including his children and thus his mortality. Nabofa added that, *the obo is therefore preserved with the belief that such a person’s spiritual hand will continue to take care of the person’s property.* (Nabofa, M.Y. 1994 P. 95). During the second burial rites the *Obo* is worshipped or venerated along with the ancestor sculpture and it is inherited by his eldest son. The *Obo* cult is not limited to any single hand whether left or right unlike the *Ikenga* cult among the Igbo and *Ikegobocult* among the Edo, which glorified only the right hand. No woman in Urhobo land is allowed to own the cult of *obo* because the Urhobo believed that her success comes from the husband. It therefore means that the cult is exclusively owned by men.

The Cult of Iphri

Among the Urhobo people the *Iphri* icon is an age-old and rooted in the traditions of the age-grade social system (Otite. 2003: 213) and it is one of the most popular wooden sculptures in the Urhobo land. (Foss.2003:66). In Urhobo society, most *iphri* icons are single male figure, sometimes accompanied by two or more supporting figures, sits or stands atop a quadruped whose oversized face is dominated by a complex display of teeth. The body of this beast usually remains plain and unembellished, but assumes a variety of shapes: sometimes a reclining cylinder, sometimes a sphere, sometimes a box. In nearly all examples the abdomen of the central human figure reads as teeth and mouth. The entire form rests on four outward-flaring legs that often have small faces at the knees of the front pair.

Thus, the most fundamental elements of *Iphri* are: a human figure-above tooth-above four legs. Teeth dominate the image. Frontally positioned, they dramatically define its vertical axis and assume a central role both physically and metaphorically. Teeth epitomize aggressive strength. Every other element of the form is orchestrated around the teeth, and depends on them for both its positioning and the very nature of its rendering. There are two types of *Iphri*:

a) Individual Ownership and the Urhobo Personality

In other to understand the meaning and significance of the *iphri* in Urhobo land is to consider the personality of the (*odiphri*,) or *iphri*-owner. This starts from birth. There are different types of infants who are often referred to as a “problem child”; a). *those* who cry constantly, very sickly, or maybe suffering from dysentery, or other chronic childhood ailments, and who in general makes his parents’ lives difficult or even unbearable. In

such circumstances the frustrated parent will approach a diviner (*Obophaliterally* “doctor of divination”) who may diagnose the cause of the misbehaviour as (*O wenvwe queiphriomona*) that is “the child’s *iphri* is hungry and so it is angry” and to appease it, the child must wear a small *iphri icon* around his neck and this is sculpted by an artist. It takes the form of a truncated four-sided pyramid whose square base is incised into it not more than an inch tall, it has a hole drilled through its middle to allow it to be worn around the neck on a string:

b). After infancy (between 7-14 years), other qualities of children are often attributed to an *iphri*-related problem, the most common example being the inability to share food with siblings (*Omowweruru*) or destructive children or aggressive and troublesome. c). In the adult context another classic symptom involves feelings of deep-seated, uncompromising resentment and an unwillingness to forgive petty transgressions or very troublesome and always fighting in public.’

An Urhobo may keep an *iphri* for several reasons. Such as, inheriting social problems from childhood, he may be cantankerous, a constant litigant, one who “likes case too much.” (Perkin, F.2005:78). A man who is always losing things, or who, whether from absentmindedness or sheer bad luck, suffers the misfortune of losing something he values, will serve his *iphri* (i.e., ritually feed it food and drink, with accompanying prayers) to regain what he has lost, and simultaneously to develop the skills necessary to keep himself from losing things again.” Another example of *theodiphri* is the *oboepha*(diviner) who will keep an *iphri* to protect himself against the hostility of unsatisfied clients or competing individuals in the same profession, and to add aggressive and protective strength to the medicinal shrine (*orhan*) through which he cures his patients.

The *iphri* provides the means to control or redirect social improprieties. At the same time, it also provides guidance when skills in litigation are necessary. To the Urhobo, one of the most valuable social virtues is the ability to make a persuasive case, to pursue an argument as thoroughly and convincingly as possible he is referred to as *Otota*(Public Orator). Such abilities reach heights of drama in public and private debate. (*ibid*)

b) Collective Ownership and community

Many of the most artistically ambitious *iphri* is maintained by an extended family, an entire lineage, an entire village, and in exceptional instances an entire village-group. In all such cases the figure in question was originally owned by a single individual, usually a prominent warrior; upon his death his family would continue to serve his *iphri*, both to commemorate him and to continue the protection against aggression that he had afforded them. As time went by, and as lineages expanded with each new generation, more and more families would become incorporated under the *iphri*’s protection and the base of allegiance would spread. Originally the *iphri* would have been located within the warrior’s house, behind a low cloth curtain in a corner of the central room; after his death, it would have stayed there for many generations, being maintained by his sons and grandsons. As the family grew larger, however, the image would have been transferred to the collective meeting hall of the lineage. In subsequent years, some families might lapse

in serving this communal image, whether because of conversion to Christianity, attrition in numbers, or simply because they no longer felt the need for a controller of aggression. In such cases the elders of the town might decide to elevate the iphri once again by moving it to the *ogwanovworho*, or town meeting hall, making it the property not of one lineage but the entire town.

Iconography representation of Iphri

Among the Urhobo, there are mainly two types of *Iphri* Icons. These abstract icons, look like an animal perhaps an elephant with a toothless open mouth as if about to swallow something and a man on top trying to control it. Alternatively, the sculpture which could be represented as a headrest on a trunkless body with the hands holding two figures, signify power to victory by pouring libation. In Urhobo cosmology, the *Iphri* icon circles around the ideas of victory, triumph, or aggressiveness and stubbornness. (Ofuafo and Ubani 2001:58). It could generally be regarded as the god of war or subduing a stubborn deity until success is achieved:



Statue for male aggression (*efiri*)

Western Ijo, Nigeria

Wood, paint

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Matthew T. Mellon Foundation Gift, 1960. (1978.412.404), (cat. 41)

Mythology of physiognomy Cult

The Urhobo believe that a person's accomplishments are guided by a statement made at the moment of birth, when a newborn baby cries out its attaché, or "speaking out." At that moment one is believed to announce to the entire world what one hopes to do or become in life.' If the infant wants to have a balanced but forceful personality, to be an orator as well as a warrior, or to be a successful trader or farmer; he will state that and he

will be guided by a strong *opha*. A man may ask for positive support from his *iphri* to become a brave and powerful fighter. To succeed in the world, he must nourish certain aggressive tendencies, yet must also keep these capacities under control at all times and in all circumstances; here too his *iphri* or *Obo* can help him. The use of an *iphri* is nearly an exclusively male phenomenon. Women are seen as having neither the problem of uncontrollable aggression nor the need for aggressive powers. Like men, they say their *atarhe* (*destiny*) at birth, but as they “speak” they make no statement about *iphri*. As part of his *atarhe*, the infant should announce that he will have a calm, controllable *iphri*, in other words, that he will be able to control his aggressive instincts. An individual who completes his *atarhe* properly, it has been said, will live with “his *iphri* standing quietly at his side”

Symbolic importance of Physiognomic Icons

The word *symbol* comes from the Greek *symbolon*, which means contract, token, insignia, and a means of identification. Parties to a contract, allies, guests, and their host could identify each other with the help of the parts of the *symbolon*. In its original meaning the symbol represented and communicated a coherent greater whole through a part. The part, as a sort of certificate, guaranteed the presence of the whole and, as a concise meaningful formula, indicated the larger context. The symbol is based, therefore, on the principle of complementation. The symbol object, picture, sign, word, and gesture require the association of certain conscious ideas to fully express what is meant by them. To this extent it has both an esoteric and an exoteric, or a veiling and a revealing, function. The discovery of its meaning presupposes a certain amount of active cooperation. As a rule, it is based on the convention of a group that agrees upon its meaning. According to OniguOtite, "Symbols are agents, which are impregnated with messages and with an invitation to conform and to act. When decoded in their social and cultural context, they are found to have both cognitive and emotional meanings." (OtiteOnigu: 1997:33)

The importance of symbolical expression and the pictorial presentation of religious facts and ideas has been confirmed, widened, and deepened both by the study of local cultures and religions and by the comparative study of world religions. Systems of symbols and pictures that are constituted in a certain ordered and determined relationship to the form, content, and intention of presentation are believed to be among the most important means of knowing and expressing religious facts. Such systems also contribute to the maintenance and strengthening of the relationships between human beings and the realm of the sacred or holy (the transcendent, spiritual dimension). The symbol is, in effect, the mediator, presence, and real (or intelligible) representation of the holy in certain conventional and standardized forms.

Physiognomy works of art evoke the aggressive energy essential to the ideal Urhobo male personality. In the old days, *the* owners of these cults were excellent hunters, traders, farmers, and when necessary to defend their families, formidable warriors. They remain well recognized as forceful, dramatic public speakers, or orator.

The physiognomic Cults icons are very symbolic and must be fed. Offerings are presented to them in the morning and at sunset. They must be worshipped every market day: Failure to perform this rite regularly will bring calamity to the owner and the community. While the process of feeding controls and contains aggression, the opposite is also true: the owner can use the image to strengthen his bellicose resources, the dual nature of *cult* helps the individual and the community, and serving them, is often apparent in the same individual. Prayers and songs usually fall into the same category; for example, the *iphri* is praised in terms of its aggressive nature. But an underlying current is also apparent: while the purpose of the *iphri* is to destroy and conquer one's enemies, it also will help one to contain the antisocial problems that arise from excessive hostility, and in the process will teach one the ultimate conquest of one's self.

In the pre-colonial period, it was not unusual for a village-group to maintain simultaneous hostile relationships with most or even all its neighbours. Although acts of overt aggression ended with the advent of colonial rule in the early decades of the twentieth century, "Pax Britannica did not quell antagonisms among village-groups. Indeed, land disputes are very much alive today; the struggles, however, are now fought out in town meetings, courtrooms, and the pages of local media." (Foss, P. 2005: 67). Discussing the history of the Isoko, a neighbouring people closely related to the Urhobo, J. W. Hubbard (1948:) writes about the Isoko people, says that one of the sons of the founder of Ikipidiana "was a noted slave-trade and a worshipper of *ivri* [sic], an *edjo* who was the patron of the slave-raiders." He uses to tell of a great warrior and *odiphri* named Agbahovbe from the town of Iyede, "a champion fighter of enormous physique, and a great slave-trader... he was... a worshipper of the *edjoirivri* [sic]." This verbal art plays a major role in the serving of *iphri*, where its themes centre on the overt violence that stems from an individual's precipitation of the wrath of an *odiphri*. Also, the *iphri* is praised as a prime vehicle for gaining revenge on a transgressor. However, with the advent of Christianity, urbanisation, civilisation, and education, the presence of the cult which once dominate the Urhobo belief system are fast fading away. Issues are now settled in the law court and success in life is attributed to God.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, we could see that the Urhobo cosmology is full of various principalities and powers. These principalities and powers many of which are heinous and malicious make the average Urhobo stands in constant fear. He stands in fear of witches, failure in business, and other maleficent forces. For these reason's he had to have recourse to one principality or the other for aid to counter the evil machination of his enemies. He often relies on a multiplicity of powers and distinct mode of worships or preference or related rites and materials for such observance. This distinctive is probably best typified for presence of full figurine (human sculpture) representing ancestors and *Edjo* in several Urhobo communities Although the *physiognomic* ownership is declining today, but before the coming of Christianity and Colonization of Africa, in a typical Urhobo community or the villages, a warrior or hunter or farmer and successful trader would have maintained one of these cults; even now, a man who has trouble controlling

his temper may keep one, so also s a man who consistently loses property or a small child who is always tempestuous may be given a tiny *iphri* to wear around his neck or waist. Certain men whose businesses are falling, and have too much aggression been said to "need *this Cultic object*. In such case, the Icons may be carved in many different shapes and its size reflects the social stature of its owner. Prayer to the image, and the actual act of feeding the mouth of the *Icons* provide the owner with a more balanced personality.

Physiognomic icons cover all aspects of Urhobo male life, from the troublesome infant, to the departed warrior-hero and, by extension to the entire lineage, to also successful businessman, and farmer. The Cult presents a powerful visual statement of all aspects of male life in Urhobo society. The Cult embodies both positive and negative values, both defensive and offensive aggression. It allows an overly contentious individual to contain his ill will and empowers the warrior to defend his home; The shrines exhibit and demonstrate the extraordinary artistic variety of the artistry genre in Urhobo land, and related works from neighbouring areas such as Isoko and Bini, show its strong artistic links to related styles throughout the Niger Delta.

With the advent of Christianity, Education Urbanisation and Civilisation, the presence of the cults within the society and individual household are fading away. Parents with stubborn and aggressive children take them to churches for deliverance and repentance, claiming that it is the handiwork of the devil or witches instead of consulting The Obopha (Nature Doctor) for solution. In addition, Men, who are not doing well in their business and other endeavours usually linked their failure to external evil forces rather than their *Erhi* (spiritual double). However, among the adherents of the Urhobo traditional religion the believe in the physiognomic Cult is still strong. To them the cults served as an interface between them and their religion. Thus, this work document and integrate an aspect of Urhobo world view into Urhobo contemporary studies.

Reference

Notes:

1. Most of the information contained in this work was obtained during my Ph.D. fieldwork between 2010 and 2012. When I was researching on the Semiotic interpretation of Bruce Onobrakpeya Integration of Urhobo World View in Visual Art forms.

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