Urhobo Cultural Practice of Brotherhood: A Virtue for Contemporary Christian Theological Education

By

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Abstract

The Urhobo people majorly occupy Delta central geo-political zone of Delta State, Nigeria. They are culturally inclined like other people groups in Nigeria and Africa. One of their cultural practices is called brotherhood, which connotes all-inclusiveness irrespective of social stratum, provided one is of good character. What it means is that whatever that concerns one becomes a family issue and there must be a way out in resolving such an issue as a family. This has led to strong family bond or unity within the family and society, as families also unite in addressing societal issues. However, in some Christian's theological institutions, it seems to be more of words and less of action when it comes to addressing issues that affect one another, which is lending to individualistic way of life that has given birth to self-centeredness and bearing of one's cross alone, in spite of Christian claim of oneness of all in Jesus Christ. This way of life is leading to hatred among some Christian leaders and the led, even in theological institutions in Urhobo land. This study discusses Urhobo cultural practice of brotherhood as a virtue for contemporary Christian theological institutions for livingness. The researcher applies historical and description research methods to execute the study; and recommends that if theological institutions' leaders and led care to practice the Urhobo cultural practice of brotherhood, their foundation of unity will continue to wax strong, which will make more unbelievers to experience Christ on a daily basis.

Keywords: Urhobo; Brotherhood, Theological institutions; Christianity.

Introduction

Each people group in Africa has her own cultural practices of which some may seem to be at variance with another people's group within the Africa continent. However, there are some cultural practices that cut across different people groups in Africa. These include the African world view, concept of family in Africa, and some ethical practices like brotherhood, which is very important to community building or development. The researcher who has a traditional African cultural background and spent some years in different theological institutions in Nigeria came to realize that the concept of brotherhood with its practices is not strong as it ought to be. Thus, un-African and individualistic approaches are used to handle issues in the theological institutions in Africa. As Awoniyi (2014) observes, theological education in West Africa is a direct offspring of Western theological education; clarifying that this means that almost every aspect of theological education in West Africa at the moment is a direct importation from theological education in Europe and North America. Thus, the curriculum, the textbooks, teaching aids, classroom structures and the mode of instruction in terms of language and process have all been implanted from the experimentation of the West.

From the foregoing, it appears that good aspects of African civilization are not inculcated into theological education in Africa. It is not easy to drain Africa from an African and input Western culture, that could be one of the reasons for clashes of opinions and practices in some theological institutions in Africa. As such, human relationships tend towards bad than good with a lot of cliques or factions in the same institutions that are believe to be training grounds for God called ones. This necessitates a scholarly discourse of the Urhobo cultural practice of brotherhood as a virtue for contemporary Christian theological institutions for livingness. The study covers some contemporary theological institutions livingness, the practice of brotherhood in Urhobo culture, needs of inculcating Urhobo cultural practice of brotherhood into theological education, especially in Nigeria.

Contemporary Theological Institutions Livingness

Man as a social being does not live alone; rather, man associates with others. This is one of the reasons for the creation of man as seen in Genesis 1:27 "So God created

man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them". From that onset man began to multiply and there has been need for more structured administrations in different organizations. Theological institutions are one of such organizations with the sole aim of raising or training God called men and women for the purpose of ministry. The institutions are saddled with the responsibility of imparting their lives positively to change their world for Christ's livingness as the early church, which Boer (2003) notes, lived her life in fellowship, worship and mutual help, receiving new members daily.

Conversely, in some contemporary theological institutions livingness appears not to be Christ-like; but in most cases, operations of the institutions are self-centred. As observed by Akinsola (2022), a selfish leader cannot lead effectively. Leaders who try to use their positions as platforms for deriving personal comfort would end up as users and masters of grace. For a leader to make positive difference in the lives of people and the organization he or she must be passionate about their well-being (survival and growth). In responding to Akinsola assertion, most subordinates disrespect their leaders instead of working as a team. This gives birth to different factions within the same institution. This act, affects the progress and development of such institution as insubordination becomes the order. In such livingness, any negativity can easily appear in spite of prayers and spiritual enrichment programmes. Again, this impacts negativism on the students; and maybe escalated in their various parishes or congregations as un-united followers. Thus, the prevailing culture of individualism, instead of brotherhood. This retards progress and development in all ramifications.

Practice of Urhobo Cultural Brotherhood

The Urhobo people majorly live in Delta central geo-political zone of Delta State, Nigeria. They share a common boundary with Ukwuani in Delta North, Isoko, Ijaw and Itsekiri in the South and also with Edo State, Nigeria. Ottuh (2013), in his article 'Pauline Concept of Egeiro, Anastasis and Soma Pneumatikon in an Urhobo church community of Delta State, Nigeria, that the Urhobo are people of Southern Nigeria. Apart from Urhobo language, they speak Pidgin English and their major occupation includes farming and fishing. Apart from farming and fishing, they are also well educated and are inclined with their cultural practices. Culture as defined by Marvin (1993) is the learned socially acquired traditions and life styles

of the members of a society, including their patterned and repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting. The concluding part of his definition "acting" is very important for it is the way a group of people expresses itself within the society. Also, culture in the view of Falako (2017) refers to the cumulative deposit of a group of people, through generations of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, hierarchy, notions of time, possessions and so on, and it is a way of life passed on by communication and by imitation, with implicit patterns, and a programming of the mind, that distinguishes members of one group from another. That is to say, culture is an inherited and a practiced way of life that noe define(s) a people. Again Holt and Wiston (1978) are of the view that culture is a set of shared ideals, value and standards of behavior, and it is the common denominator that makes the actions of individuals intelligible to the group.

In Urhobo land, one of the cultural values of the people is the practice of brotherhood. This is a cherished value among Africa people groups. Brotherhood according to Ayantayo (2009), presupposes being one's brother's keeper, which also involves helping the needy, wayfarers and the poor. It is also visible in kinship, communication and hospitality, where it essentially has to do with recognition and appreciation of every individual. In that submission, the practice of brotherhood in Africa generally and the Urhobos in particular has no segregation; rather, it is all inclusive provided such an individual is of a good character. However, among the Urhobo people, even if an individual is having bad character, such person will be advised to change or corrected in love, that is the reason for a saying in Urhobo language that '*Omo da vwo bot e ise, kahwore no'* which means in English Language, 'if a child should soil his/her hand with feces, such hand will be washed'.

Ayantayo (2009), on the practice of brotherhood in Africa, notes that the practice of brotherhood is a traditional African culture. Whenever there is food to be taken, everyone present is invited to participate even if the food was prepared for fewer numbers of people without envisaging the nature of visitors, it would be a height of incredible bad memory for one to eat anything, however small, without sharing it with anyone else present or at least expressing the intention to do so. In Urhobo land, the people are aware of it, so in preparation of any food, unknown additional visitors' share will be added so that whenever a visitor comes, there will be no

shortage of food since all present will eat to their satisfaction. Thus, the Urhobo people see themselves as one irrespective of ethnic background which is also practiced all over Africa. As Gyekye (1996) puts it, it is implicit in African belief system that all human beings hail from God. Thus, irrespective of racial or ethnic background, all human beings belong to one universal human family; this is the idea of human brotherhood. Hence, a part of the African view of humanity is to recognize all persons as brothers. Thus, in the framework of human relationships in African societies, the word, brother, is used to cover family relationships beyond that among the male children of one man. Brothers includes cousins and other relatives, male and female that linked by blood ties. However, the word is also used in reference to persons between whom there are no blood ties.

In typical Urhobo tradition, some individuals who are not blood related were given a piece of land free to develop and even build their houses neither paying compensation nor taking an oath before seeing one as a brother. This is unlike the observation of Mbiti (1980), who notes that formal oaths are used as another method of establishing and maintaining good human relationships, and there are oaths which bind people mystically together, the best known being the one which creates what is rather loosely referred to as blood-brotherhood. By means of this oath, two people who are not immediately related, go through a virtual which often involves exchanging small amounts of their blood by drinking or rubbing it into each other's body and after that they look upon each other as real blood brothers or sisters, and will behave in that capacity towards each other for the rest of their lives including their families.

Brotherhood in Urhobo culture goes beyond religion and accommodates some other religious faithful such as those in Christianity and Islam. Some of the early churches in Urhobo land were given free land to build upon and such act also is not limited to Urhobo people; it cuts across other people groups in Africa. For example, Oronirar (2013) says that when Bowen the pioneer missionary of the Baptist mission from Southern Baptist Convention of the United States of America, reached Orile Ijaiye (near Ibadan) at the beginning of May, 1852, King Kurumi, haven specially invited Bowen to settle in his town, not only warmly welcomed him to Orile Ijaiye but also generously offered land to him. Kurumi's generosity grew out of Yoruba cultural practice of a brotherhood that has no boundaries or

selection of any ethnic group, since all are human from the same source. The practice of racial discrimination is not known in the practice of brotherhood among the Africans, especially among the Urhobo.

The practice strengthened unity of Urhobo people, which also developed to the formation of Urhobo Progressive Union and other social clubs in and outside Urhobo land. According to Ikime (2006), the progress unions' evolved alongside village and clan councils to serve as forums for the bonding of a cross section of the populace, irrespective of traditional and social status and educational qualification. These were to enable members to think about developmental projects and how to finance them, to serve when necessary as pressure groups; and to forge ethnic unity. Thus, branches of such unions sprang up in diverse parts of Nigeria meant that even Urhobos that are not at home could still contribute their views and means to the development of the Urhobo homeland. The practice of brotherhood gave rise to progress union in Urhobo land and some other places. Still on Urhobo people, social clubs emerged that care for themselves as brothers and sisters. Some of them include Eja Agbonyovwei Social Club, Ataeruo Social Club, and Committee of Friends. These were formed with the sole aim of building up one another. It is compulsory the social gatherings of each member, This enables them to unanimously throw their weight behind him or her financially, morally and otherwise. This act has helped many Urhobos to achieve that which they could not have achieved alone. Among the Idjerhe people of Delta State, Nigeria, an Urhobo clan, indigenes help one another to the extent of contributing reasonable amount of money for one who intends to marry but could not due to financial constraint, in order to put a smile on his face and engage such individual with work so that he can support himself and save him from any form of embarrassment say's Sunday (2024) in an interview. This is the reason in most of the social gatherings members sing songs with the following texts:

Urhoboee-e, Ore re r' vie sa x2
Kokokoogbare, Urhoboee-e
Orerer'viesa
Obo r' urhobojevwenaorho
fajevwetioye-e
Edefamechakpootor' Urboho
Me je war he,

Urhohoee-e, orerer'viesa
Oye ma rhie-e
In English Language, the Urhobo texts mean that:
Urhobo is the land of various kings,
We have come together,
Urhobo, land of various kings,
As I love Urhobo is not the same I love other land,
In my second coming to the world,
I will enter through Urhobo land,
Urhobo is a land of various kings,
Here we come.

The songtexts above does not suggest that Urhobo people do not like other ethnic groups; however, it is a song of commitment to their father's land and to contribute meaningfully to the progress and development of the land. This guides against the betrayal of a brother, no matter the situation, conflicts must be resolved and peace must reign. At the end of the song, the song leader will echo:
Urhobo– o
Others we say
Ovuovo– o
Urboho *me na*
Ovuovo – o

This in English Language mean:
Urhobo – o
Others will respond is one – o

The leader will repeat it again by adding Urhobo that belong to me – o, others will say, it is one – oo. This is the affirmation of oneness or brotherhood by Urboho people with the mind of developing together and to discourage laziness among themselves. One is not only assisted when an individual is celebrating; one is also assisted when sad event occur. For example, the eldest brother of the researcher died in Lagos in 2000 leaving little children behind. The Urhobo people who lived around him, informed others to contribute money for the corpse to be carried to Delta State, Nigeria for burial ceremony. This is a sign of brotherhood. This

sympathy is not limited to Urhobo people alone. In 2021, one of the Northern brethren who lived around Warri, Delta State, Nigeria died, and all the Northern brethren in Warri contributed money for the corpse to be taken home somewhere in the North around Adamawa State, Nigeria, as confirmed by Sani (2025) in an interview.

Brotherhood as a value is also practiced in Islam. According to Omorogbe (2028), that Islamic ethics is centered on God consciousness and universal brotherhood. In Islam, Doi (1982) observes that Prophet Mohammed was raised in tribal Arabia where there was no notion of national unity; thus, the prophet called for the unity and brotherhood of Islam; this is a brotherhood of people bound together by their consciousness of a common faith and moral outlook. The massage of brotherhood can be traced back to the very essence of Islamic ideology, as enshrined in the principle of unity of God (*Tauhid*). This doctrine of unity of God is a dynamic belief, a historic force and a communion with destiny. Islam, therefore, says that all men are God's equal creatures. Thus, the distinctions of colour, race, class or territory are sheer illusions. Men are to be respected for being human beings; not because they are healthy, or powerful, or belong to a certain race, caste or territory. His report on the practice of brotherhood in Islam is also practiced among the Urhobo people. This has brought succumb to many and their families, no wonder that some individuals who lived among the Urhobos are not willing to go to their home land. Also, the researcher is aware of some Urhobo living elsewhere in Africa who were accorded brotherhood; thus, refused to return to their biological home, because it is a general practice in Africa.

Needs for Inculcating Urhobo Cultural Practice of Brotherhood into Theological Education in Nigeria

Theological institutions in Africa are meant to reach God called men and women with biblical, theological, and practical training for church based or church related ministries in Africa and beyond. These called ones are majorly born and brought up in Africa and are well abreast with the culture of their people especially, brotherhood, which is a good virtue of being a brother's keeper in practice; not just in theory as it appears to be a way of livingness in some theological institutions in Africa. Awolalu and Adelumo (1979:) observed that brotherhood enhances the love between man and God; and between man and fellow man, so that the ills of

self-centeredness, envy, prejudice, arrogance and hatred are altogether out of the way. This, in turn, gives rise to harmony between man and man, and between man and God. Thus, man has the sense of seeking not only his own good, but also the good of others and the community in which he lives in. The centre input of the above is the enhancement of the love of God and the love of one's brother. Love is a prominent ethical virtue across major religious in the world including Christianity. If the practice of brotherhood is upheld in theological institutions, unity and love will be practically witnessed by all who care. Thus, it will bring impartation and strengthen the lives of their students, who will transfer it to their members. Again, it will make some individuals to achieve that which they could not achieve by themselves. We are all aware that the cost of education in Nigeria and Africa as a whole is high. When brotherhood culture is inculcated, some students who are indigent will graduate without financial stress because of scholarship put in place by some individuals. Emotionally, students will be balanced in their learning. This will enhance the increase of the called ones responding to their calling and the fulfillment of their dreams in theological training. Thus, the more the students, the lower the financial constraint in the theological institutions. Thus, their staff will be well cared for with all their allowances paid; and even soft loans provided for whoever that needs.

Furthermore, unity and love are embedded in the practice of brotherhood, as students are trained in that direction, as they graduate from theological institutions, the saying that pastors are the enemies of pastors will give way or be reduced to the barest minimum. It will make them to see themselves as co-labourers in the same vineyard, working as a team, fighting the same battle and overcoming together, leading all to Christ. The act of jealousy, envy, backbiting, quarreling, politics of sending away, or transferring unwanted ministers to remote areas for such individual to resign on his or her own, or remain in the same position for nothing good to happen in his or her life and their families will become a thing of the past. More so, staff of theological institutions will see themselves as brothers and sisters and live as such. This will give rise to peace and harmony and they will be good ambassadors of their institutions relating well with those on the field that will reciprocate same to their members; thus, leading them to contribute to the development of their former theological institutions. In this case, livingness within theological institutions and among clergies in the field will be cordial

without any fear of becoming a problem to any person's development, and uplifting one another in brotherly love, which will be translate to members to send same to their environments or their societies as they partner with God for the development of the world.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article discussed the Urhobo cultural practice of brotherhood as a virtue in contemporary Christian theological education for livingness**.** Livingness in some theological institutions in Nigeria in particular seem to be void of cultural practice of brotherhood, and these institutions are cited in African communities that are deep rooted in the practice of brotherhood. In that regards, unity and love among staff seem to be illusion; this affects the institutions, theological educators and students negatively. Hence, there are fruits of hatred, envy, jealously, slanderous and many more among theological education practitioners. The researcher, therefore, recommends that curriculum of theological institutions should be reviewed to include Africa people and culture, where the practice brotherhood in each peoples' group including Urhobo people will be taught. Again, staff of the contemporary theological Institutions should live out the cultural practice of brotherhood and encourage their students to follow their good foot prints of the practice of brotherhood such as the Urhobo method or way. Indeed, it will serve as a virtue in Christian contemporary theological institutions for livingness.

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