

# Sculptural Formalization of Social Stratification in Urhobo, Delta State, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *This study was carried out to examine the sculptural formalization of social stratification in Urhobo. Sample sizes of 160 respondents were randomly selected from the socio-political units Abraka, Agbaraha-Otor, Agbon, Egwu, Evreni, Oghara, Okpara, Orogun, Ughelli and Ughewrun. Data were analyzed using sculptural elements as mass, space, line plane, movement, scale and colours. Various cultural and social heritage associated with Urhobo, related to this research were employed for sculptural rendition. Inclusive are social status, dressing, scarification, ceremonial activities and some Urhobo traditional symbols. Studio presentation is directed to visually document various social cultural heritage formalization of social stratification in Urhobo. These were presented in naturalistic and stylized works, two and three dimensional composition. The study concludes that sculptors have not attempted to sculpt monumental and compositional forms reflecting social stratification in Urhobo.*

**Keywords:** Sculpture, socialization, socio-political, Urhobo and Nigeria

## 1. Introduction

Social stratification as a phenomenon exists among men. It varies across ethnic groups; it is salient among certain groups and not salient in others. Social stratification is “a differentiation among men according to such categories as wealth, position and power” (Barber, 22). The awareness of differentiation among men in such categories as mentioned above, could be formalized into sculptural forms and images.

In every social group, there exist some levels of social characterization among members of such group. Over the years, men have recognized the difference between the rich and poor, the powerful and powerless among others. The differentiation of men according to wealth, position and power has ranked into various strata in the society in which they belong. However, various social groups have different attributes for measuring the make-up of social strata within the society.

According to Parson as cited by Barber (ibid), the importance of the evaluation of occupational roles is fundamental for all class of social stratification. Similarly, in every society, men are evaluated by their fellow men on a number of different structural bases. This could be perceived in term of functional significance of their jobs (what is now called occupation prestige), power to control others for both common and individual goals, membership in some family or ethnic body, religion and vital purity among others. Status in relations to human stratification is a recognized position a person occupies relative to others. It can be linked to variables such as; ability to solve dispute, ownership of land, number of animals acquired, wages or salary. In this case the role you are expected to play determines your status. For example, a woman gains the status of motherhood when she gives birth. With that status she derives the role of nurturing, educating and guiding her children.

Social stratification can be considered on the basis of ascribed and achieved, formal and informal; religion, sex, ethnicity, educational attainment and others (Ekong, 152). The criteria vary with the ethnic groups. Social status is thus an hierarchy arrangement based upon material resources, power, human welfare, education, symbolic attributes among others. The Urhobo social structure is anchored on the age-grade (*Otu*) (*Itu*) system. This is the foundation of socio-political mobilization among the Urhobos. Structurally, *Otu* is built upon date of birth profiles and sex. “it is a most effective socio-territorial unit of operation by its members in the street, though the *Otu* also occurs and functions at the ward and town levels (Otite: 210). From polity to polity, 3 the number of *Itu* differs. There are at least three grade formed for male and females. *Otu-emo* (boys up to fifteen years), *Otu-Uvwie* (fifteen to forty-five years) and *Otu-Ekpako* (forty-five years and above) structure the male grade. The female on the other hand consists of *Otu-Emete* (young girls or maidens), *Otu-Eghweya* (guild of married women) and *Otu-Emetogbe* (women who have returned from matrimonial homes). Each grade has a head (*Okpako*) and a spokes-person (*Otota*) (Darah: 149). *Okpako-Orere* the oldest surviving male is ranked above all the *Itu* and their respective leaders. Politically he is regarded as a supreme authority of the community and ascension to his succession is on the principle of gerontocracy.

In past traditional societies, the issue of social stratification in terms of status was prevalent and recognized by all. However, in recent times, this all important social values seems to loose its importance to western culture. The fears of extinction of the Urhobo culture as a result of alien values and life style have necessitated the formalization of social stratification in the study area.

## 2. Objective of the Study

The study focuses specially on the following objective with the intention to formalize them into sculptural

representations for social stratification system in the study area.

- (i) To identify various social statuses that exists in Urhobo.
- (ii) To identify the classes of the social strata that exists in the study area.
- (iii) To identify the various symbols/paraphernalia associated with existing social strata.

### 3. Research Methodology

The Urhobo are located in the Niger Delta within latitude 60 and 50 North and the Equator and longitudes 50. 40 and 60 25" as of the Meridian of Greenwich, in the Delta State of Nigeria (Ojo: 77). Their immediate neighbours are the Itsekiri to the West, the Bini to the North, the Ijaw to the South and the Ukwuani (Kwale and Aboh) to the North and East by the Isoko (Otite: 9,10). The Urhobo territory consists mainly of evergreen forest with many oil palm trees which provides the source of oil palm produce for which the Urhobo derive high level of indigenous technology. The area is also covered by a network of streams and rivers whose volume of water and flow are directly connected with two climatic seasons (ibid). The Urhobo territory is made up of twenty-two socio-political units. These include; Ogor, Ughelli, Agbarha-Otor, Orogun, Idjerhe, Oghara, Olomu, Ughewerun, Agbon, Uvwie, Ephron-Oto, Okpe, Avweake (Abraka), Eghwu, Okpara, Ewvreni, Udu, Ugiewwe, Agbarho, Ughele.

Urhie, Agbarha-Ame and Okere (Otite :208). Culturally and linguistically the Urhobo are related to the Igbo, The Bini and to some extent the Yoruba (Eriwwo: 86). The customary practice among the Urhobo of patrilineal inheritance, age-grade social stratification are reasons for individual to accept that they are decent from a common ancestry.

The population of the study is all the indigenes of the Urhobo and various social groups among the Urhobo. Purposeful random sampling technique was employed to draw the population for the study. 160 respondents was drawn from ten (10) socio-political units; Abraka, Agbarha-Otor, Agbon, Eghwu, Ewvreni, Oghara, Okpara, Orogun, Ughelli and Ughewerun. Sixteen (16) respondents was randomly selected from each of the ten (10) units and total of one hundred and sixty (160) respondents formed the sample size. Data were collection using a well structured questionnaire, interview schedule with key informants and focus group discussion.

#### 3.1 Media Exploration

The approach to this research also includes practical studio work. Sketches and photographs of various cultural stratification paraphernalia in Urhobo were made. All practical studio work was concluded in year 2003 and is cited in the Delta State University, Abraka. This served as modeling aids in the studio production of various sculptures reflecting social stratification among the Urhobo.

#### 3.2 Materials for Sculptural Exploration

The fundamental mediums employed to execute various sculptural representation are: cement; polyester resin (fibre

mat, catalyst and accelerator); plaster of paris (silica and resin-silipopresin); clay; synthetic fibre; paint (black, white, laterite/tile red, gold, varnish, etc); metal and bamboo.

#### 3.3 Presentation and Descriptions of Works

Forms and images of social stratification among the Urhobo were investigated by employing the various social stratum signifiers provided new artistic languages. Such register include design elements that are applicable to sculpture such as mass, space, line, plane, movement, scale and hue. Various relevant cultural and social heritage icons associated with the Urhobo were employed for sculptural rendition. Inclusive are social status signifiers such as dressing, scarification, ceremonial cultural/occupational activities and some Urhobo traditional symbols.

The studio sculptural presentation is directed to visually document various social and cultural heritage-forms and images of social stratification among the Urhobo. These were 5 presented in naturalistic and stylized forms in two and three dimensional compositional formats. Sequential to modeling, molding, casting and employment of materials for sculptural rendition, the presentation and descriptions of work are a follows;

Title: Okpaku Pe Egware Orere (Elder on his way to village assembly)

Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel; Size: Height 0.905m, Breadth = 0.010m

The form presented here is a relief format stylized naturalistic cast, representing an elder on his way to the village meeting to discuss issues concerning the village, hearing and deciding civil cases et cetera and profer solution and mete punishment on offenders and criminals. The solid forms with geometric shapes – planes and lines expressing the climax of aging are expressed.

The figure of a very old man seen trodding on his way to *Ogua Orere* (town hall) clothed with wrapper on his waist and flung over his right shoulder with staff supporting his arched body. A bag which holds all he employs during the meeting is seen hanging over his left shoulder and supported with left hand by his side. On his head is a hat with feather called *Ugo*. In the background are seen two *aberen* (royal swords). Odie as cited by Erukanure(: 26), states “our elders used stick or wood carved into shapes, which served as *aberen* or royal swords for the ruling class”.

Title: Igbu (Warrior); Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel; Medium: Fibre glass, feather and metal;

Size: Length = 0.568m, Height = 0.815m

Belligerency is expressed in the composition representing *Igbu* (warrior) a stratum which was engaged in combating criminal acts in the society. The relief exhibits *Igbu's* wielding matchets, while dancing, chanting, leaping and running amok. The central figure is clad with a headgear of feathers, small calabashes are hung around the neck and several attached on his waist to a kilt-like garment. The upper body is bare around the arm is “*Ibiabor*” (hand band). The calabashes forms the hand and leg bands are repositories for fetish protective preparations employed by these social stratum among the Urhobo. The other two

figures are seen with exposed upper body and clothed with a cloth like garment around the waist. The figure on the right of the centre has small calabashes one hung around the neck and another attached to the right of his loin garment. His machet is firmly gripped directed downwards.

The third personality is seen leaping upwards with an upward stretched arm holding a machet directed upwards, the other arm is directed towards the mouth as if to project his war cry. Attached to his loin garment are small calabashes. A mixed media presentation through the use of solid forms with geometries naturalistically rendered reflecting aesthetic features of a festival ceremony during which this stratum demonstrates their bravery and process of exterminating their foes.

Title: Ovie Su Ewho Leh (The king rules his subjects);  
Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel  
Medium: Fibre glass resin; Size: Length = 0.560m, Height = 0.868m

This is a relief presentation of symbols of social stratification found within the Urhobo strata. It is semi-abstract in rendition, employing solid forms to indicate the geometric planes of the *Ovie's* crown, chiefs cape and the *echibe* (loin garment) of an *Oberokpa* while curves for beaded crown, beads and ornaments are fashioned into *Aberen*. Uppermost of the composition is the *Ovie's* beaded crown a symbol of authority, seated on a column of neck beads. "Beads have often served as standard values for the measurement of wealth among the Urhobo people" (Erukanure: 25). These are arranged on shoulder cape forms which are employed by chiefs. Hung around are the *Aghigho's* (neck beads for chiefs). Below is an *echibe* symbol with a bead hanging from the shoulder cape form resting upon the crotch.

Title: Ovie Kida Agbara (The king on his throne); Artist:  
Isiboge Emmanuel; Medium: Fibre glass/synthetic fibre;  
Size: Length = 0.535m, Height = 0.790m

The employment of solid forms of geometric shapes aesthetically fashioned into line, plane and colour presents the image of the number one figure among the Urhobo social strata. The relief depicts the *Ovie* majestically seated upon his throne. Staring divinely and mystically upon his kingdom as a leader sent from God, after his accession involving complex rites and ceremonies becomes a symbol of his kingdom and his royal predecessors. His Royal Highness (HRH) is seen on beaded crown upon his head, facial expression suggest confidence and absolute control of the kingdom. Rows of neck beads from the chin to the shoulder are exhibited on the neck with wrists beads around his wrists. His clothing is a long sleeve shirt which is employed in tying George wrapper.

Hanging from the neck is the longest neckwear that hangs slightly below the waistline when on seat, with a large coral bead serving as if a locket. Held in his right hand is an *Ujo* (horse tail). Anho as cited by Erukanure (:25) states, "this is mainly used by wealthy chiefs, since it is not commonly seen. It is got from a valuable animal for its use for warfare

and a fast means of communication from one place to another. It is a symbol of importance and nobility".

Title: Otota Ve Ekakuro Wo Nene (Spokesman and chiefs procession)

Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel; Medium: Fibre glass feather and synthetic fibre;

Size: Length = 0.590m, Height = 0.920m

This relief expresses a solemn ceremonial procession of *Otota Ve Ekakuro Wo Nene* (spokesman and chiefs following) during the ceremony to mark the official proclamation of the death of an *Ovie* (King). A mixed media presentation with planes, linear construction of forms, treated solid with geometries revealing aesthetic quality of street procession during the official proclamation of a deceased *Ovie*. In the center and foremost is the figure of the *Otota* is seen taking solemn gait with the *Ekakuro* attending. They are clothed with head gears, some with *Ugo* (feather) other with decorative rope, long sleeve shirt, wrapper and short cape like material hanging from shoulder to the chest. At the base of the neck are beads for chiefs (*Ivie and Aghigho*). Also, *Ivie* are worn on their wrists. The *Otota* holds in his right hand *Ubiokpo* (walking stick) and *Ujo* (horse tail) in his left hand with a pair of *Isobato* (shoes) on his feet. Similarly *Ubiokpo* are held by the *Ekakuro*.

Title: Omote (Maiden); Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel; Medium:  
Auto body filler; Size: Length = 0.255m, Breadth = 0.221m,  
Height = 0.4320m

*Omote* (Maiden) depicts in the social strata among females in Urhobo that is not betrothed and generally circumcised into puberty, about the age of 14 and found to have matured to be married. A three dimensional mixed media work rendered in solid form of geometric shapes manipulated into planes, line and colour depicts the form of aesthetically modelled damsel. The bust is stylized with head resting on an elongated neck with several folds as ripples on water, decked with *Ivie* (coral beads) depicting wealth among the people. She wears plaited hair of nine strands done with thread. She exhibits radiance of Urhobo beauty as expressed by tilted upward oval face with the neck rested on a circular base with a step down effect. At the side of the eyes are three scarification marks namely *Aworogho* employed for identification among the Urhobo. *Omote* stares confidently and intelligently in readiness to undertake her domestic chores.

Title: Opha (Bride); Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel; Medium:  
Polyester resin/silica

Size: Length = 0.135m, Breadth = 0.950m; Height = 0.320m

*Opha*, a three dimensional sculpture representing a bride. "The concept of Opha in Urhobo land is beauty" (Agberia, 47). He further states, "physical attributes of a beautiful maiden include very well developed breasts which have to be balanced with equally prominent hind sides. On top of this 'S' shape toro stands rings of flesh. The mass of body is carried by a pair of strong, straight and equally full legs. From this type of generously formed structure, the Opha is expected to grow bigger and fuller as she matures into motherhood. This is referred to as the „matron“ look. "By this character the body should show evidence that it has been well fed, the belly has to show that many children can be



nurtured in it by exhibiting folds of flesh acquired through constant expansion during pregnancies (Nwoko: 4)".

*Qpha* is an aspect of Urhobo word that means a woman undergoing circumcision rite performed when she comes of age or betrothed and is put in a family way. In the past, an *Qpha* or *Qmoteyawo* rite was one of the greatest honour to young woman by her parent or her spouse. *Qpha* is an aspect of Urhobo culture that is fading away and diligently must be revisited. The figure above represent pregnant *Qpha*, stands upright with left arm by her side and the right projecting forward holding an umbrella probably a gift given to her. She is clothed in wrapper on waist and exposed torso revealing feminine curves of shoulders, bust and protruding pregnancy.

Title: Oberokpa (Palm fruit harvester); Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel; Medium: Mixed media (Resin, plaster of paris, wire, metal and natural fibre) Size: Length = 0.385m, Breadth = 0.132m, Height = 0.340m. The form presented here is *Oberokpa*, an Urhobo man transporting several bunches of palm fruit from the farm where he has made his harvest. *Oberokpa*, a tall man with machet in right hand, is clothed with *echibe* (cloth tied on waist) and passed in-between his crotch and tucked in at the back to conceal and protect his manhood during activities. He balances on left shoulder on an *Urhekpe* (a bow shaped stick) with four bunches of palm fruit. Stylistically, a naturalistic mixed media execution employing solid forms of geometric shape line and hue symbolize dignity in labour of the energetic industrious Urhobo man.

Title: Ewvaro Re Ovie (The face of the king); Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel; Medium: Thixotropic (Plaster of paris / polyester resin); Size: Length = 0.290m Breadth = 0.260m Height = 0.385m  
Location: Delta State University, Abraka

The focus is particularly on the *Ovie's* crown and ornamental beads as paraphernalia of the monarch. A solid conical form tapering upward expressed with geometrical lines, space and planes. The symbolic figure represents the *Ovie* aesthetically dressed ornamentally with crown and beads. A large cavity is seen at the front of the form narrowing towards the back as an exit which allows visibility through the form suggesting transparency and fairness of the *Ovie*. The inner walls of the form and behind are perforated textural effect suggesting the royal robes of the monarch. This effect also was employed in varying the textural surface treatment. Around the symbol of the *Ovie* are various neck beads, *Ivie*, *Aghigho* aesthetically arranged expressing his wealth and royalty.

Title: Oyinkor (Town crier); Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel; Medium: Mixed media (Mortar, metal and cowries) Size: Length = 0.874m Breadth = 0.570m = Height = 1.460m;  
*Oyinkor* in the Urhobo social strata is an appointee by the town authorities otherwise known as *Aghwogho*. This is executed in African traditional style bearing the imprints of African art in terms of style and symbolism. The figure stands with bent knees, long cylindrical trunk with protruding navel and conical head. The left arm is stretched before him holding a metal instrument with which he beats

the gong before addressing the people with the message from the town authorities. The head is tilted upward and mouth is opened revealing cowries as teeth, which symbolizes a source of income generation for the person – *Qyinkor*. The eyes nose and ears are stylized.

Title: Omoshare Where Otafe Raye (Boy sweeps outside); Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel  
Medium: Mortar and metal; Size: Length = 0.800m, Breadth = 0.595m, Height = 1.46m;  
This three-dimensional representation depicts a social group among the Urhobo strata which includes boys of six (6) or eight (8) years and adolescence ranging from 15 to 20 years of age. *Omoshare Where Otafe Raye*, possess the characteristic of traditional African sculpture it stands with shorts legs astride, with long cylindrical trunk and protruding navel. Held in his hands is an out-door broom with which he employs to sweep the compound/street in the morning. The head is elongated and rectangular in shape. The eyes, nose, ears and mouth are stylized with an extended sweeping jaw. The pose expresses youthful agility and exuberance.

Title: Oshare Re Urhobo (Urhobo man); Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel;  
Medium: Mortar, metal and synthetic fibre; Size: Length = 1.50m, Breadth = 2.67m, Height = 532  
Location: Delta State University, Abraka  
A three dimensional in and out study of certain paraphernalia of the Urhobo man was conducted. The composition consists of several forms namely *Ivie* bright red in colour, *Adjudu* circular in shape, *Ubiokpo* generally a part and parcel of dressing and *Erhue*, the absence of which makes an Urhobo man's dressing incomplete. These forms are harmoniously arranged creating an aesthetic effect upon each other. "All through history the surfaces of sculpture are varied in quality and character. There have been surfaces that are smoothened to very high degree while others have been deliberately and systematically textural. Others still, have been randomly hacked and scratched. The surface of sculpture has also derived character from pigmentation either by the application of colour of the acquisition of same through the process of ageing. The conscious application of extraneous material to the surface of sculpture also imbues it with character and expressiveness" (Diakparomre: 31). *Oshare Urhobo* was treated in polychrome to achieve just aesthetic effect, since it is noted that colour can be employed to enhance emphasis and control patterns similarly as the manipulation of forms will do.

Title: Okobaru Re Orosue (The leader and the led); Artist: Isiboge Emmanuel  
Medium: Mixed media; Size: Length = 1.40m, Breadth = 1.15m, Height = 3.46m; Date: 2006  
Location: Delta State University, Abraka

A three dimensional sculptural in and out presentation depicts hierarchical arrangement of the leader and subjects. A crown decorated with beads is mounted upon a girdle or loin attire in the form of men's brief pant namely *echibe* worn for labour. Neckwear of decorative beads is piled up as around the neck peculiar to monarchs. At the base are three magnified beads adorned by monarchs and chiefs. Following

and flowing down are two other beads, one circular in formation. The other is oblong bearing a larger bead at the centre as pendant.

The *echibe* form the base on which the crown and beads rest signifying the support of the leadership by society. On the left hand side beside the crown is a flywhisk employed by the monarch, nobles and honourables in the society expressing nobility. Standing upright and resting on the right hand side of the *echibe*, is a large curved cutlass depicting the working class and expressing dignity in labour among the society. The pedestal and inner part of the crown is decorated with Urhobo stratification facial marks namely *Amiëro*, *Akpusi*, *Ibërebru* and *Irhiawoho* which is employed to stratify an Urhobo from a non-Urhobo.

#### 4. Significance of Hues Employed

Hue of a colour is its basic colour identity, it is defined when it is named. Colours have influence upon the emotions of man. These result by direct action of colours on the nerves of the 15 eyes. The Urhobo are known for the brilliancy of their hue choice. Their colour scheme is dominated by red and yellow. The following are the significance of hues employed on the polychrome sculpture.

- **Red (Laterite/Tile Red):** A warm hue, it signifies gaiety and sense of friendliness it also suggest excitement, purity belligerence, fear and danger.
- **White:** This is associated with the concept of protection. It is a protective hue to individuals and general community. It also signifies peace and happiness. Among Urhobo folklores and myths, spirit beings are related as white in appearance.
- **Black:** This is used in association with the phenomenon that gives gloom to the individual or the whole community; it is a symbol of mourning and death. However black also generally signified beauty, physical fitness and power.
- **Gold Dust:** This hue signifies prosperity, wealth and splendour.

#### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that Social stratification in Urhobo is guided by social values and norms. There have not been comprehensive analyses to enlighten the people apart from a few authors. Sculpt monumental and compositional forms reflects roles and responsibilities among the Urhobos'. For the above reason, it is important that art historians, appreciators, teachers and practicing artists should be encouraged to study, document visually and literarily social stratification among the Urhobo, so as to preserve our social heritage. Furthermore, institutions offering Fine Arts should encourage students to explore the possibilities inherent in the combination of various mediums in executing works. Finally, sculptural formalization of social stratification in Urhobo is very wide and complex. Students of Fine Arts should be encouraged to carry on further investigation into various aspect not yet covered in this work and other aspects of Urhobo culture.

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