

## Urhobo Etymology

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### Abstract

*A discussion of a language's etymology involves an examination of the nature of its words. The knowledge gained from this study helps to indicate the history of its speakers, the contacts they made along the way, and their settlement patterns. That is why a people's language is about the most important aspect of their culture because the language carries their unique identity, philosophy, worldview, knowledge, experience, and reality through the words which have become signifiers of meaning. An oral culture as the Urhobo the language assumes even greater significance as it becomes the repository of the people's indigenous history, knowledge and ontological experience as well as their values, mores, and morals. The Urhobo language is thus a most crucial aspect of Urhobo Studies and its etymology thus needs to be explored in a meaningful discussion of the ethnic group's experience and reality.*

### Introduction

Etymology is used very loosely in this work to refer to the study of the origin and historical development of words in a language, the changes in their form and meaning, and their transmission from one language to the language under discussion. It is usually used to make inferences about the relationship between languages and establish language families. An examination of the nature of words in a language also helps to indicate the history of its speakers, the contacts they made along the way, and their settlement patterns. This is why a people's language is about the most important aspect of their culture because the language carries their unique identity, philosophy, worldview, knowledge, experience, and reality through the words which have become signifiers of meaning. An oral culture as the Urhobo even becomes the repository of the people's indigenous history, knowledge and ontological experience as well as

their values, mores, and morals. The Urhobo language is thus a most crucial aspect of Urhobo Studies and it thus needs to be explored in any discussion of the ethnic group's experience.

In this essay, we intend to look at the origin of some Urhobo words which have become integral to the language. These words have been absorbed so long ago that the average Urhobo speaker may not be aware that they derive from other languages, some of which came in as a result of historical contacts at various points in history. In every known language of the world, new words (neologisms) get absorbed into the language's body of words and they become current. The process of words entering Urhobo language is ongoing such that the language will continue to evolve. It is significant that over the decades, as older speakers die out, some words that used to be spoken would also be lost. Thus, as language evolves, and since language is the most important carrier of culture, both are dynamic.

Before discussing the foreign words that entered Urhobo over decades and centuries, it is important to state that there is an Urhobo language spoken by an autochthonous group that has always been in the present-day Urhobo land. At different stages of history and resulting from contacts other groups came to the same land to live with them and became fused in language and culture; hence the multiplicity of words whose origin this essay intends to trace. In this essay each Urhobo kingdom's or clan's vocabulary complements the vocabularies of other clans to form the entirety of the Urhobo language.

### **Early European Contact and Portuguese Words in Urhobo**

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to enter Urhoboland from historical documentation (Bradbury, Ikime, Alagoa, etc.) for trade. They might have entered Urhobo land in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. They, together with the Spaniards and Iberians, with

languages that are mutually comprehensible, were sailors and so adventurous. They lived and intermingled with local people they came in contact with and even intermarried with them. This contact predated the Atlantic Slave Trade of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Urhobo called the Portuguese “Potokri” and, in fact, for a long time Caucasians were known as Potokri before the modern era when the English came to colonize Nigeria and got their English language adopted as the new country’s official language. Being masters of the oceans, the Portuguese went far in their maritime adventures. Once Vasco da Gama and others passed through the western coasts of Africa, they were familiar with what the coastal and hinterland areas produced that the Portuguese and other Europeans needed and what they could profit from them in trade. Basically, they exchanged their goods which the Urhobo regarded as luxuries for mainly palm oil and kernels. As a result of this contact in trade and with the Portuguese spending long periods among the people, many of their words got absorbed into the Urhobo lexicon with little or no structural changes. We will divide the Portuguese words into three classifications: those for luxury items, Christian religious words, and others.

1. Luxury items: The Urhobo who were waking up to luxuries must have exchanged much for items such as those listed below which the Portuguese were happy to bring to them.

|                |                     |                |         |              |                      |
|----------------|---------------------|----------------|---------|--------------|----------------------|
| <i>Ughojo</i>  | ‘watch, time piece’ | <i>isabato</i> | ‘shoes’ | <i>imeje</i> | ‘table’              |
| <i>ukujere</i> | ‘spoon’             | <i>osete</i>   | ‘plate’ | <i>isama</i> | ‘salmon/canned fish’ |
| <i>oro</i>     | ‘gold’              |                |         |              |                      |

2. Christian religious words: The research on this part is still ongoing so that more words are likely to be discovered from this origin. However, it is a known fact that the Portuguese were also in Benin and the Niger Delta to proselytize Christianity. While one

can see the Christian cross pendant worn by Benin chiefs in bronze and brass works, the influence on Urhobo seems different. The Urhobo word:

*Idẹbolo* ‘devil, evil, bad omen’ derives from the Portuguese *diabolo*, ‘devil’. We wonder what the Urhobo concept of morality was before this word came into the lexicon. Since Christianity saw life as a war between God and Satan, one can see the Devil/Satan taking the negative spectrum of the moral war. It is interesting, as will be noted later in this essay, that the Yoruba god Eshu will assume the same meaning as the devil in Urhobo land. *Idẹbolo* in Urhobo has to do with trouble, seducer, and the features assigned to the Christian devil or Satan, God’s antagonist.

### 3. Others

These are words from Portuguese origin in Urhobo that are not associated with luxuries or Christian religion. They include:

*Ukokodia* ‘coconut’

### **Urhobo and English Adopted Words**

The Portuguese influence was arrested by the colonization of Nigeria by the British and the introduction of their language as the official language of the country. With English adopted as Nigeria’s official language and the coming of modernity, this new contact brought changes to the Urhobo language and these changes are still ongoing. Many of the early words adopted into the language also have to do with luxuries but others have to do with the prolonged contact and modern technology. These words are for things the Urhobo did not produce and apparently did

not have before the contact with the British. We will divide them into non-technological and technological words.

#### 4. Non-technological words

|                |           |                |               |               |                        |
|----------------|-----------|----------------|---------------|---------------|------------------------|
| <i>Igalasi</i> | ‘glass’   | <i>iroba</i>   | ‘rubber’      | <i>ipoda</i>  | ‘powder’               |
| <i>Itisha</i>  | ‘teacher’ | <i>isukuru</i> | ‘school’      | <i>itenọ</i>  | ‘tailor’               |
| <i>Inosu</i>   | nurse     | <i>ifada</i>   | ‘Rev. Father’ | <i>ibrọda</i> | ‘brother (esp. elder)’ |
| <i>Ishoshi</i> | ‘church’  | <i>ipepa</i>   | ‘paper’       | <i>ipolu</i>  | ‘Paul’                 |

#### 5. Technological words

|                  |                        |                 |             |                      |              |
|------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------------|----------------------|--------------|
| <i>Ividio</i>    | video                  | <i>iredio</i>   | radio       | <i>itẹnẹvishiọni</i> | ‘television’ |
| <i>ifonu</i>     | ‘phone’                | <i>arupleni</i> | ‘aeroplane’ | <i>ikọputa</i>       | ‘computer’   |
| <i>Inetiriki</i> | ‘electric/electricity’ | <i>isitasi</i>  | ‘syntax’    | <i>imọfọlọji</i>     | ‘morphology’ |
| <i>imoto</i>     | ‘motor vehicle’        | <i>ifiuzu</i>   | ‘fuse’      | <i>isipana</i>       | ‘spanner’    |

The point is that Urhobo will continue to adopt the Western/English names for new technological inventions since more of such products will flood in in this age of globalization. Also the Urhobo people are consumers of Western products and are compelled to call the products by the names of the makers. However, there is evidence that attempts have also been made to create, rather than borrow, words from source languages. For example, a word like *okuna* ‘ship’ is an attempt to use an Urhobo word to name a product of Western technology from the effect created by it. This is a word formation process used universally by languages. *Oku* means ‘ocean’ or ‘vast waters’ while *na* means ‘be on fire’; *sookuna* could mean the ocean is on fire. It is evident that

*okuna* could have been derived and used to refer to the steam boats/ships of the nineteenth or earlier centuries and whose meaning has been extended to cover large ships and even ocean liners. Other examples include *okọenu* (sky boat) for ‘aircraft’ and *udiomiemię* (sweet drink) for ‘non-alcoholic beverage.’ Whatever the origin, it is the language’s ability to create new words to call new things that has become part of the Urhobo reality.

### **Benin/Edoid Words in Urhobo**

By far the largest source of Urhobo words is the Pan-Edo or Edoid group of languages. This has to be put in perspective of Urhobo people and the other Edoid groups living together as one people before the migration that some versions of folklore attribute to the tyranny of the Ogoiso dynasty against groups that later left the mythical “Aka,” or “Udo,” an area that today covers the Benin area. Among the Edoid words in Urhobo, some are from today’s Bini, Esan (Ishan), Afenmai, Akoko-Edo, and even echoes of some Igala, Igbo and Yoruba words. What we are discussing here is the relationship of words and while there appears to be an Edoid source of the derivation of many words in the Urhobo vocabulary, we are not sure whether others borrowed from Urhobo or Urhobo borrowed from others. Linguistic evidence shows that at some point in history the different Edoid, Igbooid and Yoruboid groups were living together in a spatial setting and speaking the same language. This is why they are classified together into one sub-family of languages called the Benue-Congo languages which is a sub-branch of the Niger-Congo phylum (Bendor-Samuel, Elugbe). Almost all the known southern Nigerian languages belong to the Niger-Congo group, meaning that at a point in history, the different people as we know them today spoke the same language. From an eponymous space, each group of people migrated in different directions, came in contact with other groups, encountered various social and ecological experiences all of which affected their languages and, with time, what used to be

known as dialects of one language evolved to become separate recognizable languages. In the case of the sister languages that make up the Edoid group, they were together as one people with what were regarded as dialects of one language until there was a migration due to the tyranny of Ogo or growth in population. Folklore has it that the different groups of Urhobo migrants from that eponymous space entered Urhobo land, met an autochthonous people and with time got aspects of their “language” immersed in the original language.

Many of the Edoid words in Urhobo derived from Bini can be said to be related to cultic, chieftaincy, and folkloric matters. No Urhobo diviner throws his or her cowries or kola nut lobes without invoking Ominigbo, the legendary Benin diviner who in folklore warned the Oba of the imminent arrival of “white locusts” (British invaders) to the kingdom. It was immediately after he was executed that the British Punitive Force entered Benin for the notorious Benin carnage of 1897. Urhobo diviners invoke his name to attest to the truthfulness of their divination. Closely related to this is *epha* which is the same Bini word *evba* for ‘divination.’ Of course, the tyrannical Bini Ogo is common in Urhobo folklore and there are references and songs ‘*E-e Ogo, Ogo*’ in many folktales.

Many Urhobo chieftaincy/kingship institutions appear modeled on the Benin obaship institution. It is recent history that up to the 1940s, many Urhobo contestants for kingship went to Benin to have the Oba’s blessing. It is not surprising that the *abere* (sword) that is part of the insignia of kingship in Urhobo is a direct appropriation. Also the *ema* dance that the Ughelli royal household dances to on ceremonial occasions is also derived from the Benin monarch’s court.

Other Urhobo vocabulary items relate more to the Pan-Edo or Edoid language groups. There is an Ewu as Okpe in the northern Edo region. Agbon, an Urhobo kingdom, makes meaning only in Bini. However, it is in the numerology that Urhobo and the different groups in what is today Edo State have so much in common. Counting from *ovo*, *ive*, *erha*, *ene*, *iyorin*, *esa*, *ighwren*, *ereren*, *irhirin*, *ihwe*, and so on has close variants in the different groups of Edo State in a Pan-Edo or Edoid language cluster that remains today. Other aspects of Urhobo language are close to Esan in particular and it is possible for a close Urhobo listener to catch snatches of spoken Esan (Ishan).

### **Yoruba, Itsekiri, Igbo and Ijo Words in Urhobo**

As expected from what was said about language classification, Urhobo people have legendary relationship with the Yoruba, Igbo and Ijo as well as Itsekiri and Igala, which are Yoruboid languages. Some Urhobo stretch their history to a passage through Ife but what is more important is that Urhobo folks have for long been migrating to Yoruba land; hence in Urhobo a migrant is said ‘to have gone to Oshogbo.’ Urhobo went to produce palm oil, tap rubber, and make a living in many Yoruba towns and “bushes” and many are still there. It is not surprising therefore that some Yoruba words or names have been absorbed into the Urhobo language. Many of those Urhobo migrants in Yoruba land return home during festivals such as the Udje festivals of the Ughievwen and Udu clans, Ekene of the Agbarha and Edjenu of the Agbon clans respectively, etc. or for important social ceremonies as weddings and burials in particular.

The Urhobo word for devil or trouble is *eshu*, the Yoruba trickster god. Ironically, this god has a totally negative meaning in Urhobo, unlike what it is in Yoruba. Also, the Urhobo *epha* and the Bini *evba* are apparently derived from the Yoruba *Ifa*, perhaps the most



comprehensively documented oral spiritual or cultic text in Africa. Other Yoruba names or words that have entered Urhobo include *ogun* for ‘iron’, a direct Yoruba word for their god of iron, *ikara* ‘bean cake’ from Yoruba *akara*, *ewa* ‘beans’, *ogri* ‘a type of native butter’ and *egusi* ‘melon seeds.’ Some old Urhobo people add *ajakpa*, the Yoruba word for tortoise, to the many names for the animal in Urhobo. Besides, the Urhobo call a fifth generation descendant of a parent *imamasima*, a borrowing from Itsekiri.

Urhobo and Igbo languages share quite a good number of words together. They include *enu* ‘sky’; *ofigbo* ‘palm oil’; *ughegbe* (Urhobo) *ugagbe* (Igbo) ‘mirror/glass’; *opia* ‘machete’; *ejime* ‘twins’; and foods or related words as *ogbono* ‘wild mango seed’, *ukewun* (Urhobo) *ukanwun* ‘native salt’, etc. The linguistic relationship between Urhobo and Ijo is much farther than that between Urhobo and Igbo and Yoruba, although Ijo is also a Niger-Congo language. However, the Urhobo and Ijo people have always lived together in the same coastal region as neighbours and the constant contact inevitably brings about the adoption of words from one language into the other and vice versa. For instance, Urhobo and Ijo share *Iphri/Ivwri* and *Efri*, the god of action. Many Urhobo are called *Odivwri*.

### **A Brief Linguistic Analysis of Foreign Words in Urhobo**

As happens in languages all over the world, Urhobo has borrowed words from languages with which it has been in contact and like every living language, it is a continuous exercise. When these words enter into the language, their sounds and structure are modified to conform with the phonological and morphological structure of Urhobo. A look at all our examples above show that words borrowed from the Western world are most affected. This is because they belong to a different language family (Indo-European) and their sounds, phonological and

morphological structures are quite different from those of the Niger-Congo languages. The first noticeable fact is that every noun in Urhobo begins with a vowel (except those whose initial vowels have been deliberately removed). Therefore, when a new noun enters into Urhobo and does not meet this requirement, a vowel (usually i-) is introduced to correct the anomaly. Thus, all the English words above had to undergo this initial vowel insertion to become acceptable in Urhobo. It should be noted that this requirement does not apply to English words alone. The following words borrowed from Hausa have also undergone the initial vowel insertion: *isuya* ‘roasted beef’, *inama* ‘buffalo’, *ikwilikwili* ‘a product from groundnut’ and several others. Even Urhobo names whose initial vowels have been removed also have undergone the initial vowel insertion before they are used in sentences. For example:

Vona ‘name’                      Ivona dẹ ekpu ‘Vona bought a bag’

Tanure ‘name’                      Me mrẹ Itanure ‘I saw Tanure’

Deniran ‘name’                      Mẹvwẹ ọmọ rẹ Ideniran ‘I am Deniran’s child’

Vowel insertion also occurs in word medial and final positions where the borrowed words do not conform to the structure of Urhobo. In this regard, if the borrowed word contains a consonant cluster, i.e. two or more consonants following each other in a syllable, either a vowel is inserted to break the cluster or one of the consonant sounds is deleted. Thus, words like *isukuru* ‘school’, *iwisiki* ‘whisky’ both have medial vowel insertion to break the consonant clusters in the Urhobo version while *isukuru* also has final vowel insertion because Urhobo requires that all words in the language end with a vowel. Note that there is no medial vowel insertion in words like *ibroda* ‘brother’, *ikrasi* ‘kerosene, class’ because Urhobo has this consonant sequence native to it; examples in words like *ubro* ‘half’, *vřen* ‘get up’, *ugrogro* ‘height’. In words like English

‘single’ /sɪŋɡl/, ‘anthem’ /ʌnθɛm/ and ‘flask’ /flɑːsk/ a consonant is removed and so rendered as [isĩgo], [atɛmu] and [ifrasɪ] respectively. Note that faithfulness to nasality necessitates the nasalization of [i] in [isĩgo] but not the [a] of [atɛmu] since the syllable that contains the nasal consonant in English is in the prefix position which is opaque to nasalization in Urhobo (see Aziza 2002 for more details on nasality in Urhobo).

Our examples also show that sounds which do not exist in the borrowing language are modified to the nearest sound available. Thus, wherever English sounds such as /t, ð, tʃ, dʒ/ occur in words that are borrowed into Urhobo, they are modified to [t, d, ʃ, ʒ] respectively as words such as ‘anthem’, ‘brother’, ‘church’ and ‘judge’ show. In addition, since vowel length is not a significant feature in Urhobo, all long vowels in English loanwords are modified to short vowels as words like ‘teacher’ and ‘flask’ reveal. Besides, all the twelve pure vowels of English are modified to fit into the seven-vowel structure of Urhobo.

## **Conclusion**

Urhobo, as a living language, has an ongoing etymological dynamism and will continue to absorb new words into its lexicon. From the discussion so far, it can be seen that historical, social, religious and spiritual, economic and commercial, and other factors have been and continue to be responsible for the new words coming into the Urhobo language. Modernity, globalization, and the rapid development of technology are accelerating the rate at which Urhobo absorbs new words from outside. No study at this stage of Urhobo etymology can be finite and we hope more studies will be conducted to have a fuller range of the subject. It suffices to say

that Urhobo, like other Edoid languages of the Niger-Congo classification, is a language growing in vocabulary as a result of mainly external forces impinging on the lives of the Urhobo people.

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