

# **Transitioning From Cultural Associations To Political Entities: The Role Of The Urhobo Progress Union In Nigeria's Political Landscape (1930-2023)**

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## **Abstract**

*This article explores the evolution of the Urhobo Progress Union (UPU) from its inception in 1931 as a cultural association to its prominent role as a political actor in Nigeria's complex political landscape. This study through the use of descriptive and analytical historical methods investigates the crucial roles played by the UPU in shaping Nigeria's political landscape since its formation. Initially, a cultural association aimed at promoting Urhobo unity and welfare, the UPU gradually transitioned into a political entity. Its political influence became prominent during Nigeria's post-colonial era, notably advocating for the Midwest Region in 1963 and supporting key political figures. Over the decades since independence, the UPU has championed issues like resource control, federal restructuring, and regional autonomy, aligning with the broader Niger Delta movements. This work provides a comprehensive analysis of the UPU's transition from a sociocultural association to a key player in Nigeria's political system.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Association, Transition, Political Entity, UPU, Ethnicity*

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## **I. Introduction**

A cultural association is an organisation or group that promotes and preserves the cultural heritage, traditions, and values of a community, region, or ethnic group. They also serve as a platform for advocacy, social interaction, and mutual support among people who share a common cultural background or heritage. By fostering a sense of unity based on common identity, community, language, culture, etc. They act as mediums of cultural expression, education, and development, all in the interests of a particular ethnic group in a multicultural or multiethnic society. (Barnes 1975) refers to these associations as 'primary associations' as the basis of their identities and relationships are shared elements like common language and culture.

There was a proliferation of cultural associations in pre-independence Nigeria particularly between 1930 and 1940 (Ikime, 1977). Most of these associations became affiliated with political parties and became tools of political activism to serve regional political interests. According to (Osaghae, 1984) ethnic groups tend to rally around and resort to the formation of pan-ethnic associations which are more political than cultural. To protect

group interests, ethnicity may take an associational form (cultural association). A form of a formal or informal organised interest group that attempts to protect group interest by reacting to competitions from members of other ethnic groups. Cultural associations can be differentiated based on their aims, objectives, and operations. Some are solely political, acting as affiliates of political parties, some are simply sociocultural associations used to promote a group's culture and traditions and others are just social clubs or 'esusu' groups.

The heterogeneous and multiethnic nature of Nigeria has been a problem to the political development of the country. The political structure of pre-independent Nigeria was chaotic and ravaged by intense regional and inter-ethnic tensions. The 1946 Richard's constitution introduced the system of regionalism in Nigeria.

It divided Nigeria into three different regions with significant variations, particularly in size. This laid the foundation of the problem of regional imbalances, increased ethnic tensions, inequality, political party affiliation, etc. The inappropriate political setting introduced by regionalism, further incited ethnocentric ideologies. Political affairs became more regional and carried out along lines of sub-nationalism. The various ethnic groups became firm adherents to regional and ethnic loyalties as an option to protecting their interests and prevent political marginalisation (Ademola, 2014).

Ethnic loyalty is a common phenomenon among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. The appeal to ethnicity and common culture as a symbol of unity and support where ethnic groups and cultural associations cater to the needs of their members, became a common theme in Nigeria during this period (Aluko and Ajani, 2009). Ethnicity in Nigeria became completely politicised. Ethnic identities to a great extent shaped the political practice and outcomes in Nigeria which has further impacted the development of the country (Ochonu, 2014). Ethnicity is associated with "competition, exclusiveness and conflicts in relations among ethnic groups which are members of a political community" (Nnoli, 1998).

The natural inclination of various groups to muster culturally and politically around the three major ethnic groups in the three regions, introduced a tripartite division in the Nigerian political sphere which led to political instability, mobilisation, and affiliations, introduced under conditions like marginalisation and restricted access to political and economic resources (Melson and Wolpe, 1971). To score political points by one region over the other, political parties and cultural associations became viable tools for regional leaders. The shift towards ethnicity for group interests led to politics taking an associational form characterised by formal and informal organised interest groups, cultural associations, etc.

Since the emergence of these cultural associations in the 1930's, there has been an increase in the number and variety of these associations. The Urhobo Progress Union, Igbo State Union, Egbe Omo Oduduwa, Jam'iyyar Mutanen Arewa, Ibibio State Union, Mzough U Tiv etc were amongst the foremost cultural associations formed, each with distinct objectives, methods of operation, and agenda. These associations served as centers for indigenous development, preserving the customs and traditions of particular ethnic groups, creating ethnic awareness and solidarity, etc. Over time, some of these ethnic-based associations transitioned into political entities due to the multiethnic nature, regional imbalance, and heightened ethnic and political tensions in Nigeria which introduced the problem of marginalisation. And bringing members together during elections and other political activities to help determine political status or help in achieving political objectives. (Meillassoux, 1968). They played important roles by serving as centers of political mobilisation, sensitisation, and channels of communication between urban and rural communities by acting as intermediaries between the state and grassroots interests. Through these ways, cultural associations were able to determine and influence the outcomes of political events and activities of government. Associations such as the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, Igbo State Union, UPU etc although cultural, became involved in politics in various ways and levels. The Egbe Omo Oduduwa for instance was a pan Yoruba association formed in 1944 to protect the interests and objectives of the Yoruba people. It had many Yoruba politicians within its ranks due to the heightened nationalism prior to independence. It allegedly

transitioned into the political arm of the Action Group, to enable its members to provide political support to renowned Yoruba politicians and to protect their group and regional interests.

The Igbo State Union in similar circumstances, was formed by elite Igbo nationalists to promote their interests towards anti-colonial nationalism. It aligned with the NCNC to increase the limit of the party's freedom charter, and to portray a formal agenda across Igbo communities. According to (Aro and Ani, 2017), the Igbo political elites utilized the structure, operations, and members of the Igbo State Union to declare and promote their political interests.

The UPU just like the above-mentioned associations, was faced with similar political challenges but UPU has always maintained that it is completely a sociocultural association with no involvement in partisan politics. This therefore serves as a prelude for further inquiries into the affairs of the UPU.

## **II. Formation Of The UPU: Cultural And Social Objectives 1930 - 1940**

The 1930's and 1940's in Nigeria witnessed the accretion of progress unions. By the 1930s, they were subtle indications of the departure of the colonial government from Nigeria. This led to increased nationalism movements by nationalists from various ethnic groups and regions. The Urhobo people at this time, lived as a decentralised group and needed to be consolidated as one.

The UPU was founded in 1931, during this crucial time in Nigeria's political development, characterised by intense nationalism and sub-nationalism. And a period when the Urhobo people were in dire need of a symbol of unity and strength where they could pool resources towards protecting and promoting a common goal and further prevent being marginalised. The union served as a unifying medium. The body for bringing all the Urhobo people together under one umbrella. The union was founded as a result of various agitations which required the unity of the Urhobo people to tackle. Due to the rise of ethnic consciousness and grievances against colonial policies that were not in their interest, a group of Urhobo elites and merchants began meeting in the 1920s in the Western Delta region to discuss common issues and cases of discrimination and injustice against them and to proffer solutions.

The first exploratory meeting leading to the formal inauguration of the UPU according to Chief J.S. Mariere, was held in October 1931 at the residence of Chief Mukoro Mowoe. The union was formally inaugurated on 3rd November 1931 and was called the Urhobo Brotherly Society with Omorohwovo Okoro and Thomas Erukeme elected as the first president and secretary respectively (Ikime, 1977). This was seen as a panacea to the alarming rise of disunity among the Urhobo people. A period Chief Mariere described as "everyone for himself and God for us all" resulting from the clannish leanings of the Urhobo people. Also, the reorganisation of the 1930's which saw the establishment of Native Administrations that were charged with the running and development of the centers where they were established, brought about an increase in ethnic consciousness among the Urhobo people (Onigu, 1982). The administration was run by agents of colonial governments that were non-Urhobo, but mainly Itsekiri natives. It became important for the Urhobo elites to act swiftly to prevent being marginalised especially by their Itsekiri neighbors who at that time were recognised as better educated and qualified than the Urhobos. Therefore, it became one of the major aims of the UPU to maintain a good reputation and promote education in Urhobo land as these would guarantee them better placement in the social and political sectors of the society.

To ensure this, the UPU after its formation engaged in various social and economic development initiatives such as granting scholarships and community developments. It became one of the union's main objectives to promote education and higher learning at all levels in Urhobo lands because the elites recognised the importance and need for acquiring proper education. To this regard, the UPU on initiatives from the Lagos branch at a meeting in 1935, set up a scholarship fund. An idea introduced by Mr Joseph Akpoto Ukutegbe which

saw two Urhobo students M.O. Ejaiye and E.N. Igbo awarded scholarships to study at Fourah Bay College and Cambridge respectively (Salubi, 1965). The UPU also achieved what's considered its greatest contribution to the development of Urhobo land which was the establishment of the Urhobo College in 1948.

The union was also able to create a sense of community among the Urhobo people by eliminating the lack of oneness, unity, and trust. The slogan 'Urhobo Ovuovo' which translates to 'Urhobo is one' was introduced by the founders, to foster unity, the spirit of love, and mutual understanding as a means for pursuing and promoting the collective interests of the Urhobo community (Vanguard, December 5, 2022). The UPU promoted and preserved the culture and traditions of the Urhobo people by active participation in festivals and activities like traditional dances in national celebrations to portray the Urhobo as a dominant cultural group in Nigeria.

The cultural associations formed by the various ethnic groups during the colonial period sought to promote the identities, culture, and sociopolitical interests of their people. They also over time, often laid the foundations for political mobilisation and participation of these groups. A number of these associations as Nigeria moved towards independence, became politically active and performed important roles in regional and national politics. This was similar to the UPU, whose objectives over time became increasingly political. Founded originally as a sociocultural association for preserving the culture and unity of the Urhobo people. However due to the increasing ethnic and political tensions and regional imbalances which increased political animosity between the various ethnic groups, (Suberu, 2001) the UPU surreptitiously expanded its activities towards the political arena.

### **III. UPU's Early Political Involvements: Pre-Independence Era (1950s)**

As Nigeria moved towards independence, there was a growing need for effective political leadership and representation of the various regional ethnic groups particularly when democratic elections were introduced in 1950. Due to the multiethnic nature of the Nigerian polity, and the unusual configuration of the three regions (Otoide, 2003), the political system was characterised by sub-nationalism and an ethnocentric approach to political affairs (Smith, 2009).

The UPU's involvement in political advocacy began during this period. This can be attributed as one of the reasons for the union's foremost objective to promote education among its people, having recognised the importance of education for political purposes in the emerging Nigerian society. Some Urhobo elites and UPU members are of the opinion, that Warri, the 'Home Union' of the UPU was the base where the struggle for nationalism started and that the Urhobo people came together under the auspices of the UPU, to address certain political and administrative challenges. And that the founding fathers of the UPU, operated from a political dimension and not solely cultural, to mobilise the Urhobo people to participate in the political process of the period (YouTube.com/@Urhoboworld/).

As the national politics in Nigeria began leaning towards a regional and ethnic approach, the UPU as well as other cultural associations, started advocating for the political representation of their members. The UPU sought to ensure that the Urhobo people were not marginalised and relegated in the political process of the time particularly in the Western and Eastern regions. The UPU provided support for Urhobo political figures for example, Chief Mukoro Mowoe a prominent Urhobo leader and first president-general of the UPU, who became one of the first Urhobo representatives in the Nigerian Regional Legislative Council. It is also worthy to note that Chief Mukoro Mowoe, was a full-fledged member of the Eastern Urhobo Native Administration in the late 1930's. This served as a preamble to an account of his emergence as a member of Warri Province in the Western (Regional) House of Assembly established by the Richards constitution (Ikime, 1977). He was elected unanimously in 1946 (CSO 26/2, File 11857). Additionally, through the UPU's support for Chief Mowoe and other Urhobo politicians in subsequent years and elections, like Chief Daniel Okumagba who contested and won elections to represent

Warri East Constituency at the Western Regional House of Assembly at Ibadan in the 1959 general elections. And Dr. Frederick Esiri who was elected in 1956 as Chairman of Warri Urban District Council. Both members of the UPU and NCNC (Okumagba, 2014). The UPU began influencing political outcomes by rallying the Urhobo people to support candidates who represented their interests as a group both at regional and national levels. This marked a shift in the UPU's stance from being a purely sociocultural association, to a politically active association. It is important to note that while the UPU rallied for the support of the Urhobo people for Urhobo candidates who were contesting elections against candidates from opposition ethnic groups, it did not impose any candidate on the Urhobo people (Salubi, 2008).

In the 1950's, as Nigeria moved towards independence, the UPU became actively involved in the advocacy for the creation of the Midwest Region. The UPU collaborated with other ethnic groups eg the Ijaw and Western Igbo and the NCNC in this regard, to push for political restructuring and the need for equal representation and resource allocation. This was part of the union's broader political agenda in ensuring minority groups like the Urhobo etc had significant representation in Nigeria, post-independence. This development particularly, was triggered by the aggrandized nationalist political movements in Nigeria, where nationalist elites and regional leaders sought local alliances, to establish regional autonomy. The Action Group, the dominant and governing political party in the Western region, allied with the Itsekiri-based Warri National Union (Okoh, 2016). In a bid to finalise the alliance, the AG under Obafemi Awolowo, granted the request to change the title of the Olu from Olu of Itsekiri to Olu of Warri. This change was met with strong resistance among the non-Itsekiri groups and eventually resulted in a full-blown crisis, that led to the deployment of a large contingent of armed police officers (about 500) for peacekeeping in Warri (Nigeria Daily Times, September 15, 1952). The UPU, Urhobo chiefs, other associations, and local parties of the other ethnic minority in Warri, petitioned the government and Secretary of State for a reversal of the title change, but this was rejected (BNA CO 554/708).

The AG's support of the change in the title of the Olu, was a clear indication of its commitment and alliance with the Itsekiri. This spurred the other ethnic groups in the region particularly the Urhobo, Ijaw and Western Igbos to ally with the AG's opposition party, the NCNC which was more popular in the Eastern provinces. The alliance and mutual opposition by the other ethnic groups to the AG - Itsekiri alliance, paved the way for a separatist movement and calls for a Midwest region just before independence. A call that was strictly opposed by Awolowo's AG.

#### **IV. UPU's Political Role In The Post Independence Era (1960's)**

After independence in 1960, the UPU's role further expanded to include roles as both a sociocultural and political association, adapting to the new political landscape of post colonial Nigeria. While the UPU remained committed to the development of the Urhobo people in all aspects of society, including preservation of their culture and heritage, it increasingly became involved in further political advocacy. To ensure that Urhobo interests were not neglected within the new Nigerian federation. Following independence, the UPU was actively involved in ensuring that the Urhobo people were adequately represented in politics both at national and regional levels. With the creation of the Midwest region in 1963, after severe opposition from the AG, the UPU ensured that Urhobo political candidates were elected into the available political offices in the region. The union supported candidates who had Urhobo interests into positions in various political offices, by influencing the political process through membership support and alignment with political parties like the NCNC before it was dissolved after the military coup in 1966 (Lloyd, 1955). This effort by the UPU ensured that the Urhobo people were no longer politically neglected in the politically Yoruba-dominant Western Region. The UPU for example, mobilised the Urhobo people to support Chief Samuel Jereton Mariere GCON, the first governor of the Midwest region (February 1964 - January 1966) (Guardian, 2004). He was also once elected secretary general of the UPU in 1935

(Guardian, 2002) and was also vocal during the agitation for the creation of the Midwest Region, out of the old Yoruba-dominated Western region. These political mobilisation efforts, helped to secure key governorship positions for the Urhobo people and ensured that their candidates and interests were protected and represented at all levels of state government.

Chief Jereton Mariere was succeeded by Major General David Akpode Ejoor after the 15 January 1966 military coup d'état which ended the first republic. Maj. Gen. Ejoor, turned out to be an accidental political administrator (The Nation, 2019) and also helped to foil the coup and was appointed military governor of the Midwest Region. One of his major contributions to the Urhobo movement was his role in saving the UPU through a political act, from the proscription imposed on all tribal associations in Nigeria after the 1966 coup (Waado.org). He was later elected as president-general of the UPU after his tenure as governor and also after his service in the military had come to an end following the overthrow of General Yakubu Gowon then Head of State, in the 1975 military coup.

Nigeria's first republic was characterised by coup and counter-coup and also by serious political instability, all of which resulted in the Nigerian Civil War (1967 - 1970). During this period, the UPU channeled its focus on preserving the Urhobo unity and protecting their interests amidst the political turmoil and ban on activities of cultural associations by the military regime. However, the Urhobos continued their efforts in preserving political relevance. They were in alliance with leading political figures in the north, who were members of the NPC as well as its long-standing alliance with Zik's NCNC in Eastern Nigeria (Urhobo Historical Society). During the period of military rule (1966 - 1999) with few interregnums, political activities were heavily restricted and were at its lowest point in the history of Nigeria's political development. The UPU during this time, did not engage in direct political activities.

## **V. UPU's Mobilisation In Delta State Politics And Advocacy 1979-2023**

On September 28, 1978, the ban on political activities was lifted by General Olusegun Obasanjo. The National Party of Nigeria, among other new political parties were formed. It was mostly made up of members of the NCNC. Chief Daniel Okumagba, a foremost Urhobo political figure became a member of the NPN and contested in the 1979 gubernatorial elections (Okumagba, 2014). The UPU in regular form, supported Chief Daniel Okumagba's candidacy in the election. Unfortunately, he lost at the polls due to an internal crisis within the ranks of the NPN. Also, the UPU actively supported Chief Felix Ibru's candidacy for governorship in 1991, under the Social Democratic Party (Vanguard, 2022). These are instances to show that the UPU, has been actively involved in the politics of Delta State particularly in gubernatorial elections, since the return of democratic governance. The UPU has played an important role in supporting candidates from Urhobo community in elections, by mobilising the support of the Urhobo electorate in that regard. Other notable contributions are the UPU's backing for Chief James Ibori and Sen. Ovie Omo-Agege, a committed and dedicated member of the UPU in their various political activities.

The union under its various leadership in recent years, has continued to also advocate for federal restructuring and state creation. Olorogun Sen. Felix O. Ibru as President general UPU on 15th December 2009, requested for the creation of an Urhobo state at the Senate Committee on review of the 1999 Nigeria constitution (Urhobo Historical Society). It has also been vocal in its advocacy for issues relating to the Niger Delta region and its development. The UPU constantly advocated for resource control and fiscal federalism- the division of governmental functions and financial allocations among levels of government. In this case, where states in the region would retain a large percentage of their resources while contributing a portion to the federal government. Pertaining to this, the union under its past President general, Olorogun Moses Taiga in 2020, reiterated the union's stance and support for the existing 16-point agenda of the South-South leaders and the Nigerian government

calling for restructuring, resource control, and true federalism (Guardian, 2020). The UPU's advocacy for resource control and restructuring, reflects its commitment to promoting the interests of the Urhobo community and also its evolution from a cultural association to a dominant political actor that continues to influence policy decisions on issues of regional and state autonomy.

## **VI. Intervention In Political Crisis**

In the buildup to the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Delta State, the state faced internal divisions over the selection of a gubernatorial nominee. This resulted in tensions between the different ethnic groups and political parties in the state. The UPU played a mediating role in ensuring unity, particularly within the Urhobo political class. The position of the Urhobo nation in the 2015 general elections was enshrined in what was called the 'Uvwiamughe Declaration' which stated that the union and the Urhobo people's support, goes to the PDP on grounds that the PDP chooses its governorship candidate from the Urhobo nation. But if the party refuses to do this, the union and its supporters would vote for any other political party that gives its candidacy to an Urhobo candidate. The rival APC was chosen as an alternative party to the PDP if the terms of the declaration were not adopted (Vanguard, 2015). The UPU having organised a united front, emphasised the need for an Urhobo candidate in the election. Although the outcome of the declaration was not fruitful in the end, but the UPU's stance and involvement, helped retain a strong political presence in Delta State as the political situation in the state had become increasingly competitive among the various ethnic groups in the state. The UPU's position in this matter, helped position the Urhobo nation as a formidable force in the state's politics and also as a key political force.

However, in subsequent years, the UPU encountered its fair share of internal problems and political disputes. A recent example, is the prelude to the 2023 gubernatorial elections. There was serious controversy over the UPU's decision to endorse Olorogun David Edevbie for the 2023 PDP gubernatorial primaries, over Hon. Sheriff Oborevwori. The UPU at its 90th-anniversary celebration was advised by then-governor Okowa, to reduce the number of Delta Central aspirants for the governorship ticket. The union under Olorogun Moses Taiga, after consultation with various Urhobo stakeholders, endorsed David Edevbie over the other candidates considered to be the best candidate to represent the Urhobo people as it was believed, that a host of other Urhobo candidates, were sponsored by people from opposing groups to disrupt their chances of success. The decision by the union was met by mixed reactions among various Urhobo groups. Groups like the Urhobo Historical Society and Ughelli Descendants Union etc supported the endorsement.

The above examples, shows the important roles and active participation of the UPU in the political development of Urhobo nation and Delta State. What was once referred to as only a sociocultural association, transitioned into an important political voice, whose support could easily change the political outcomes of elections.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The Urhobo Progress Union (UPU) stands as a significant example of how cultural associations in Nigeria transitioned into political entities, shaping the political landscape from the colonial period to the present day. Since its founding in 1931, the UPU evolved from a unifying body aimed at preserving Urhobo identity into a key player in advocating for the political, economic, and social rights of the Urhobo people. This transformation, highlights the broader trend in Nigeria, where ethnic and cultural associations began to take on political roles, especially in the fight for regional representation and autonomy.

Throughout its history, the UPU has maintained a delicate balance between cultural preservation and political activism. While it continues to serve as a cultural body that promotes Urhobo identity, its political role has expanded significantly, especially in Delta State politics. The UPU's endorsement of candidates and

involvement in local governance illustrates how cultural organisations can maintain relevance in modern political contexts. The union's continuous engagement with national issues, such as restructuring and resource control, shows that it remains a vital force in Nigerian politics, advocating not only for the Urhobo people but also contributing to broader national debates on federalism and regional equity. Aligning with the more complex South-south region's advocacy, the union alongside other Niger Delta ethnic groups continually pushed for constitutional reforms. It also aligned with groups such as the Pan Niger Delta Forum (PANDEF) to press home their demands to the government. This alignment highlights the UPU's continued relevance and commitment to advocating for the economic and political rights of the Urhobo people in Delta State and Niger Delta in general.

Through decades of political advocacy, the UPU has championed the cause of the Urhobo people, protecting and promoting their interests as the sole unifying body of the Urhobo nation. This shows the critical role and level of influence associations like the UPU possess in shaping and influencing outcomes of national policy. The UPU's transition from a cultural association into a political actor portrays its adaptability and the growing importance of ethnic-based associations in Nigeria's complex political environment.

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