

# Food Prohibition among the Urhobo Nation: Ethical Consideration

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**Abstract** The practice of food prohibition or food taboo has existed among the various local indigenous sects of the world for several generations. Such practices are usually attached to some myths or beliefs among the practicing population. The myths or beliefs are passed from generation to generation by means of stories, folklores, legends and even religious practices. The Urhobo people are found in the Southern part of Nigeria and they are found in a region that is surrounded by an evergreen forest. The people enjoy a lot of unique delicacies such as “Ukhodo” (yam and unripe plantain dish), starch meals, banga soup (from palm kernel), and oghwevwri soup (made with dried or smoked fish, bush meat, unique spices and oil palm). But then, the people practice some food prohibition with various reason attached to these acts that have various health implications for the local population.

**Keywords:** food prohibition, Urhobo, taboo, beliefs, practice

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## 1. Introduction

Food prohibition is an act of not allowing a pre-determined group of person from eating some kinds of foods. The act of food prohibition exists in all known human societies and they are often meant to protect the practitioners from certain unseen problems.

In the African setting, these acts are usually strongly adhered to and are most often associated with some traditional ancestral worship which religiously serves as the symbol for the forbidden food articles. These practices, by their nature often limits the availability of freely available protein foods to the local communities that are believers and practitioners. Unfortunately, most of the beliefs are targeted at children and women particularly pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers; vulnerable groups that do mostly need these food articles as sources of animal protein.

Food prohibition is an act of not allowing some group of persons from eating some kinds of food articles. These acts may be the total forbidding of the affected persons from ever eating those mentioned food articles, or a partial restriction of those affected persons from eating the listed kind of food articles only for a season or for a specific period of time.

It is a known fact that feeding with adequate food that is rich in all nutrients is necessary in the building and maintenance of the human body. Food provides all the needed energy and nutrients that is needed by the body,

shortage of these nutrients may lead to malnutrition, which is a common type of malnutrition seen in the poor rural societies of the developing and developed world alike [1].

Not only does the poor financial standing of the people of these areas impact negatively on the nutritional status of these children, but also do wrong cultural attitudes towards certain food add to the negative impact that results from these food prohibition and restriction [1].

Unfortunately, most of these practices are not documented but are passed down to generations through oral history, folklores, stories, superstitious beliefs and practices. These acts and beliefs are strongly believed and fearfully adhered to by the practitioners.

The presence of culture and its subsequent effects is seen in virtually every area of the world. And the strict adherence to several cultural practices can be harmful to the general health [2].

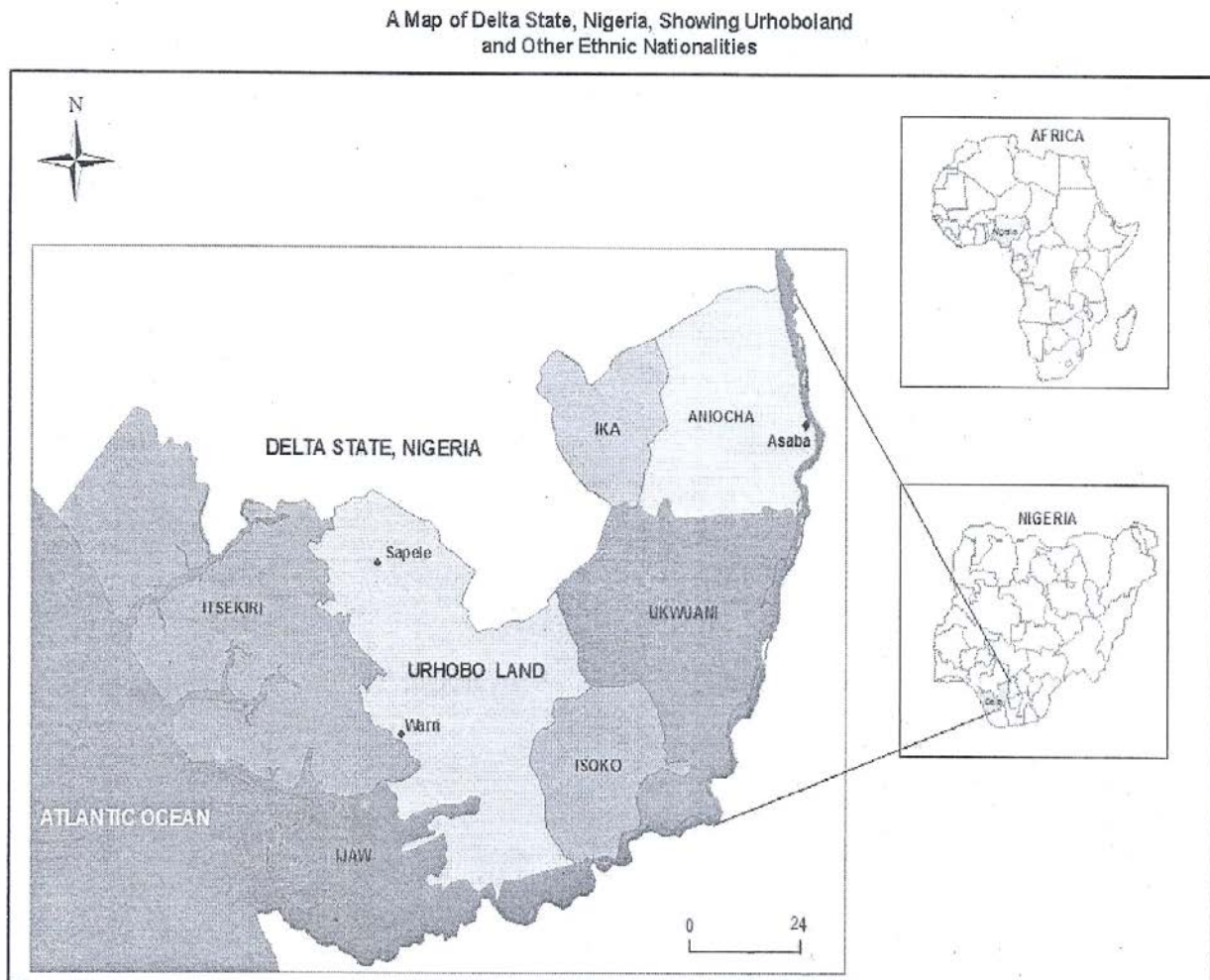
Several practices such as allocating more food to the adult members of the family can potentially be harmful to children in these families.

There are in general two types of food prohibitions. There are those that are permanent and those that are transitory. The permanent ones are mostly those that are due to religious beliefs such as the ban of pork meat among some certain religious groups.

The ones that are usually transient are usually due to certain state or phases of life such as periods of pregnancy or period's soon after delivery or in lactating (breast feeding) mothers [3].

The Urhobo people are found in the Delta State of Nigeria and they are one of the major ethnic groups in the state. The state is named after the Delta region of the

River Niger and it is bordered on its southern part by a 160 kilometer coastline of the Bight of Benin [4,5].



**Figure 1.**

Figure 1 is the map of Delta State, Nigeria showing Urhoboland and other ethnic nationalities [6].

This article attempts to review the practices of food taboos among the Urhobo and suggests scientific approach on how to possibly stop these practices and free these food items for the people to consume.

## 2. Some Food Taboo among the Urhobo

The Urhobo live in the Niger-Delta region of the Southern Nigeria and are well over three million by the 2006 census. They are the largest ethnic group in the Niger-Delta. They live near the River Niger and they are supplied by a large network of streams and rivers. Their communities are also surrounded by an evergreen forest that provides many species of wild animals, edible vegetables and plants all year round [7].

The present review is aimed at finding out the food articles/items that are seen as taboo among the clans of the Urhobo nation of the Niger-delta region of Delta State, Nigeria and to suggest ways of diminishing these beliefs and therefore their effects. Thus, there is a good steady

supply of both animal and plants protein food all year round.

For instance, the people of an area known as Orogun, an Urhobo community in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State located in the Niger-Delta region apparently prohibits the killing and consumption of Iguana Lizard. This species grows to great sizes and because they are not hunted for food, are therefore numerous in the community. They are allowed to go about 'majestically', unmolested and can go into the traditional homes of the people uninhibited. The people call them 'mother' whenever they come across any one of these lizards. They are allowed and even encouraged to pick whatever food items they want both at home and in the farm.

If there is any accidental killing of these big lizards by the community dwellers or if any one of them is run over by a vehicle, the person involved has to spend huge sums of money to conduct an actual burial ceremony for these creatures.

The big lizard is the recognized 'god' or the deity that the indigenous population worships and it is therefore treated as the manifestation of the 'god' of the area. The

animals have never been reported to have harmed any of the indigenous people.

The people of Orogun, a community of the ethnic Urhobo nation must not eat the meat of dog and of Iguana. There was an ancient history of how some bush dogs led some trapped warriors who were engaged in an inter-tribal war out of the battle front to safety. This action was subsequently tied to a deity and the dog as the physical manifestation is still being worshipped. So, all wild dogs and domesticated dogs are not to be killed for meat under any circumstances. The domesticated dogs are treated well by their owners.

In another community, the people are not allowed to hunt wild fowls that abound in their forest and bushes. These fowls are so numerous and lay large quantity of eggs in the forests. But the indigenous population is forbidden from hunting the fowls for meat or to pick their eggs for food.

Legend has it that it was some bush fowls that led some trapped ancient warriors of the community to safety when they would have been massacred by an opposing army. The story has it then that the entire community vowed never to eat these fowls and apparently tied it to the worship of a deity. Here punitive measures has been decreed for anybody who intentionally or unintentionally harms or kills any of these fowls.

Consequently, the fowl have multiplied greatly in the community and a rich source of free protein is been denied the indigenous population and foreigners alike. Even a foreigner who does not even worship the deity of the local population is equally banned from eating the fowl or picking their eggs for food. If he does and he is caught, he is liable to receiving the same or even a more severe punishment than that decreed by long-gone elders of the community. The laws are strict and the people obey them out of fear of some calamities that might befall them if they dare to disobey them.

Also, the great River Ethiope that runs across long part of the Delta State contains several species of fishes. Again, a couple of communities that live along the bank of this large fresh water river will not hunt fish from that river and will not eat the fishes either. Non-indigenes are however free to do both fishing and consumption of the fishes.

This is tied to some worshipping of a deity by the local population. This again aggressively deprives the practicing local communities of a great source of animal protein. Especially affected will be the growing children, pregnant and lactating mothers who would have benefited greatly from this rich source of protein.

Several other mythological stories that had led to diverse food prohibition abound from different localities in the Urhobo Nation of the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria.

Among the indigenous population of Uvwiana Community, the meat of a tortoise is absolutely forbidden for everyone who is a freeborn of the community. This community has a river running through it and this animal thrives and multiples freely around this river. But unfortunately, due to some ancient stories from the past the people living here cannot hunt and eat the meat of this animal.

The stories say that during a particular ancient inter-tribal war, the warriors of this community were trapped by the warriors of the opposing tribe and were just about to

be massacred. Suddenly, according to the story, a big tortoise appeared out of the river and ferried the surrounded warriors to safety across to the other bank. This led to the worship of the tortoise as "mother" by the community up to the present age and shrines erected for this adoration are in almost every household. The tortoise must never be killed nor eaten by any son or daughter of this community.

If by any chance someone breaks this strict taboo, the repercussion is quick to manifest. The offending person apparently comes down with huge pruritic eruptions all over his body. The body becomes rough and scaly. The culprit will need to present himself to the chief priest of the major shrine for cleansing. This usually involves some expensive sacrifices, after which the person recovers totally.

In fact, a popular real-life story occurred in the recent past when a married daughter of the community unknowingly used some firewood that was used to roast a killed tortoise from this community to cook food for her family. She was reported to have broken down with itchy rashes all over her body. It was difficult to associate her problem with the belief of her community since she did not partake of the meat of the slaughtered tortoise nor did she know that the firewood was used to roast the meat.

Eventually, her actual problem was diagnosed and a trip to her village to see the local chief priest was made. After some sacrifices were carried out, she reportedly got well over-time. This story has re-enforced the belief in the ancient custom among the populace and the myth thrives on, and continue to deny the people of a readily available source of protein.

Another such myth and belief is the one from the Ophori community of the Urhobo ethnic nation. Here boys and adult men do not eat snails at all. The ancient story said that again during an inter-tribal war, the warriors from this community were led to safety by some migrating snails. One wonders at what speed those ancient snails were moving that they led warring able-bodied men to safety. But that is the story.

Following this assistance to the warriors, the native people resorted to worshipping snails and prohibited the eating of the meat of snails. This was entrenched by erecting shrines and a priest was installed to oversee the worshipping of snail. There is a strict adherence to this belief and all males of the community will not eat snails under any guise.

Women of all ages are however free to eat the meat of snails. However, a pregnant woman is strictly forbidden from eating the meat of snails. This is because in those days nobody knows the sex of the unborn baby child. The belief is that if the fetus is of the male gender, he will be affected by the repercussion of breaking the taboo even while still in the mother's womb. A female fetus is of course free from any harm.

Even after the delivery of the baby the woman may not be freed immediately from the prohibition except she has given birth to a female child. In that case, she can start to eat snail meat right away, but if it is a male child, she must desist from the snail meat until after she had weaned the baby of breast milk. They believe that the product of the eaten and digested snail meat will be in the breast milk of the mother and if the male baby should be fed from this

milk, he will also be deemed to have broken the taboo and will suffer the consequences.

The consequences of breaking the taboo is said to be the eruption of a severe kind of itchy rashes all over the body. Usually, it is claimed that orthodox medicine will not have any effect on these rashes.

Again, the cure is for the sufferer to present himself to the chief priest of the shrine, who prescribes the method to be used for the cure. Usually, after all the sacrifices have been done, the culprit is said to recover completely.

In the same Ophori community, all male descendants must not eat plantain that comes in twin fingers rather than the usual single finger. In this case, if any male indigene of this particular community should eat such twin-fingered plantain, one of his testicles may retract into his abdomen. Again, if his wife is pregnant and gives birth to a male child, that child will have an undescended testis. Again, a sacrifice to the deity will be needed to release the testis back into its right place and permanently stay there.

Among the Ughelli people of the Urhobo ethnic nation, a particular species of the deer animal is completely forbidden from being hunted and eaten. Again this prohibition is linked to an ancient incident when a popular hunter went to hunt in a very thick forest called Ogele. The story had it that while in the forest, the hunter noticed some movements and was about to shoot when a very beautiful, tall and elegant woman shouted out to the hunter that he should please not shoot at her.

The hunter reportedly was amazed of this discovery and asked the woman what she was doing here in the forest. She was said to have replied that she was coming from the local market and was on her way back to her home.

While all the questioning was going on, the woman reportedly stepped across a rope tied across the bush-path, turned into a beautiful deer and ran away into the bush. The wise hunter returned to that point the following day at about the same time and removed the rope that was still tied across the bush-path. As he expected the elegant woman appeared again, and again the hunter challenged her and she gave the same story of having gone to the market and was on her way back to her home.

She then moved towards where the mystical rope was but alas the hunter had removed it and she could not turn back into the mystical deer. She pleaded but to no avail and the hunter asked her to come home with him and become a wife.

She had no option but to go home with the hunter, but she was said to have reminded the hunter that she knew that he had a wife at home and what and where will he tell the humans at his home that he found her. The hunter reassured her. But at home several questions were thrown at the hunter as to where he found such a beautiful and elegant woman. He was secretly intoxicated with alcoholic drink and he confessed the truth. A law was subsequently passed that nobody from the community should kill or eat deer meat since there was now a bond between the deer in the bush, through the spirit deer now a married woman and the human beings on the land. It is believed that you may unknowingly kill the off-springs of the woman if you kill a deer in the bush. Till date, the married mystery woman must have given birth to several female children who had married and given birth to several children, so her blood-line has spread into the community.

Meanwhile, the deer species in the community has multiplied greatly but nobody dares hunt them for fear of "possibly eating human meat" if one should eat this meat. Thus, the people are losing out on a great and rich source of animal protein due to an old table.

Among the people of Orokpo in Ethiopia East Local Government Area, an Urhobo community of the Urhobo ethnic nation, they do not hunt nor eat the meat of "Awawa", or Lynx which abounds freely in their community. It is said that if any member of the community should eat of the meat of this animal, the person will develop severe and throbbing pains in the part of his body which corresponds to the part of the animal that he ate. So if it is the leg part of the animal that he ate, he will have severe unexplained pain in his legs.

The cure again comes from presenting oneself to the priest of the deity who prescribes for some sacrifices to be performed. Of great importance here is that the indigenes of this community are majorly gifted as traditional bone setters (fracture healers) and they are sought after from far and near for their expertise in treating all kinds of bone fractures. Can their work or occupation explain the development of body pains, rather than the breaking of the taboo of not eating the meat of the forbidden animal?

Meanwhile, the animal has multiplied greatly in and around the community since the indigenous population through their belief system has given them the needed protection from hunters. Nobody, both non-indigenes and indigenes are allowed to hunt these animals. Again, the people are denied a rich source of animal protein because of some mythological beliefs.

All these stories have led to some rich, readily available sources of protein to be prohibited from the local population. To ensure adherence, the prohibitive beliefs were tied to some worship of a deity and the people are frightened with the issues of repercussion if the prohibition is broken.

Again, the cost for the sacrifices that will be made by a person who breaks the taboo is usually exorbitant and this will be a burden on the person who most time is already economically/financially handicapped.

In Olomu Kingdom, crocodile is seen as a god. The people of this community in Ughelli South Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria have for ages been worshipping the crocodile as Inene (Mother). The story goes that the sea animal protects them from deadly opponents and fought supernaturally for them in the ancient days. Till the present day, a shrine known as "Ovwirrho" is dedicated to the worshipping of this deity. The belief is that if any member of the believing community is involved in any accident while on the sea or river, and then call on the name of the deity, that a big log of wood would appear at once and the person will be on top and the log will carry the victim to safety.

If an Olomu person kills a crocodile, it is taken seriously as if the person has murdered a human being. Therefore, the crocodile must be buried like a human being with all the full honours due an actual human being.

It is a strict taboo to kill and eat the meat of a crocodile, and anybody who does so will develop severe rashes all over his body, with severe itching and scratching. No medication works, and the person must perform certain rites. Failure to do so will result into the culprit

developing swollen body and abdomen and death eventually [8].

There are several other taboos that involve vegetables, edible insects and reptiles that need to be elicited and reported. Various communities have various taboos binding on its people and the scientific world need to come into these food prohibitive beliefs and find ways to circumvent them and free them for consumption by the local population.

It is therefore suggested that public health campaigns using billboards, radio jingles and television adverts should be initiated to educate everyone on the dangers of still believing all these myths that encourage denial of cheaply available nutrients to the populace.

The government of the day should also re-discover the use of public health workers who can go into the rural areas and help check on the local population and report back to the office if they record cases of under-nutrition in local children.

Again, the government should empower the local populace by supplying them seedlings for planting and subsidized fertilizers so as to increase their farm harvest.

In developing nations such as ours, malnutrition among children is common. Cultural attitude of our parents/elders towards certain food articles/items may contribute to this problem. These cultural food taboos have been in existence for a long time and they are known to exist in virtually all human communities. They are supposed to protect the practitioners from certain mythological problems.

Food prohibition, prescriptions are restrictions and act of either forbidding or allowing certain food items to certain group of persons. These acts are more often associated with some religious worship of a deity or god in the local worship of the practicing people. These myths are usually supported by several legends, beliefs and stories that have been passed down from generation to generation.

### 3. Effect of Food Proscription

The idea that food proscription can be an aspect of providing specific health remedy has been in existence for generation. There are multitudes of food taboo practices in different part of the world, but because of the huge size of the African Continent and its myriad ethnicity and religious beliefs, there exist different taboos in different places.

Some food items are seen as taboos in one part of the continent but is acceptable and consumed in other part of the continent [9].

In some part of present Edo-Delta region of our nation, children are forbidden from eating meat and eggs because they feel these items are expensive and the children who are reared up eating these food article may have to steal in latter life to be able to maintain the expensive eating habit they acquired at their younger age [10].

Also liver meat must not be given to children because it is believed by the elders that it may cause liver abscess in children if they should eat it [10].

These actions by our elders of not giving these proteins containing food to children can cause poor supply of mineral, vitamins and proteins to these young ones. The

ultimate result will be that, they will have low level of protein in their body and eventually protein energy malnutrition may result [11].

A diet is said to be balanced when it contains the necessary micronutrients in adequate amount, so as to prevent malnutrition [11].

Many religious institutions also have impacted on food taboo mostly due to laws from their holy book and also by their desires to prevent ill-health in their members. In the early days, because of the absence of electricity and refrigerator, food items that were perishable such as eggs, meat were restricted [12].

It has been observed that it is the least privileged people in our society that are mostly affected by these numerous food taboos, and are then stopped from consuming these readily available food items. The people are commonly women, pregnant women, children and the elderly [13,14,15].

Onyesom [11] reported that almost always men always have their share of the family meal first and the women and children are served last. This of-course invariably means that the best part of everything goes to the men while the left-over and chaffs goes to the women and the children [11].

These practices of depriving vulnerable people from eating needed foods have been termed a kind of child neglect or abuse which is not intended to hurt the practitioners but rather they believe that they are doing the right things in protecting those children from falling sick by eating those forbidden foods [16].

The ethical questions then arises; what is the function that these food taboos still play in today's generation with all of our biomedical knowledge? Is it ethically permissible and advisable to prevent certain people from eating certain food during certain stages of their life?

### 4. Conclusion

But then how do we achieve a reversal of these food taboos based on cultural and religious beliefs that are deeply entrenched into the social fabrics of these societies?

People all over the world should be allowed to eat what is available freely and has been proven to be safe. Such instances where bush fowls abounds, yet prohibitive laws would not permit their consumption, should be looked into and people, especially those who want to, can be allowed to feed on them.

The core medical ethics principle of autonomy which says, that a person has the right of self-determination (*voluntas aegrotic suprema lex*) clearly permits us to eat whatever we want as far as it is not harmful to our health [17].

Government departments should encourage local traditional religious priests to lift the bans on these food item, and thus eradicate food prohibitions as harmful traditional practices.

### 5. Recommendations

1. There is need for more in-depth social research using qualitative methods to further understand the socio-cultural context propagating these deleterious practices.

2. Studies should also be done to establish the incidence and prevalence of both childhood and adult malnutrition and related diseases in these communities where protein food prohibitions are prevalent as background justification for the above.

3. All stakeholders: relevant government ministries and agencies, non-governmental organizations, medical unions and associations, churches and religious bodies should partner with one another and work with communities where food taboos are prevalent to elucidate root causes of these practices and proffer solutions for their eradications.

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