
EXTENDED FAMILY IN URHOBOSOCIETY: A CULTURAL NEXUS OF SOLIDARITY AND IDENTITY OF THE NIGER DELTA

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Abstract: *In Urhobo culture, the extended family is a very vital institution. This is because it plays a significant role in shaping individual and communal identity as well as serves as a support base. This paper explores the cultural significance of extended family ties in Urhobo society. It highlights its role in promoting social cohesion, economic cooperation, and emotional support. Through a critical examination of traditional practices and contemporary realities, the study shows how extended family relationships are maintained and negotiated in the face of modernisation and urbanisation. The findings underscore the importance of kinship ties in Urhobo culture, demonstrating how they foster a sense of belonging, responsibility, and collective well-being. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the Urhobo society in general and the importance of extended family in shaping cultural identity and community life in particular.*

Keywords: *Extended Family, Urhobo, Society, cultural, Nexus, solidarity, identity*

Introduction

Traditional Urhobo society was shaped through the extended family cultural system, a norm highly valued, adhered and practiced in many Africa societies. Urhobo is one of the ethnic nationalities known for the practice of the extended family system prior to independence in Nigeria. The extended family system in Urhobo is a kinship-based system that encompasses multiple generations, including parents, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, who share a close relationship and are often connected by blood ties. This system provides a vital support structure, offering emotional, financial, and practical assistance for things like weddings, funerals, and education.

Adinlofu (2009) found that extended family system in Nigeria is a core institution that is cherished because of the numerous benefits it has in the African society. Thus, such practice was encouraged because of the strong tie and bond that it produces in a community. The adoption of the extended family system in Urhobo is one of the cultural values that for generation have been practiced in traditional and communal Urhobo society with success. The impact of the extended family system in Urhobo was a medium of growth and development for families where well to do family members render financial assistance to children of kin brothers and sisters that enabled many children to acquire education and other skill for gainful employment. This would not have been made possible in those days if extended family system was not practiced. Thus, the system acts as a cultural nexus of solidarity and identity in traditional Urhobo society of the Niger Delta as it were in many other parts in Nigeria. It is against this background this paper attempts to examine the impact of extended family as a cultural nexus of solidarity and identity in Urhobo society of the Niger Delta.

Statement of the Problem

The extended family system in Urhobo of the Niger Delta like many parts in Nigeria is currently undergoing significant changes due to the influence of modern lifestyle and Western cultural values. Modernization in Nigeria significantly weakens the traditional extended family system by promoting nuclear family structures due to urbanization, economic pressures, and changing lifestyles. This shift disrupts communal support, fosters individualism, and shifts families' responsibilities, leading to reduced intergenerational ties and a decline in traditional caregiving and social safety nets. While extended families remain important, they are often strained as younger generations seek opportunities in urban centers, leading to a gradual erosion of the extended family's traditional influence and functionality. Scholars in Urhobo cultural studies have not shown concern on the eroding trends and the gradual

disappearance of this Urhobo cultural value that was treasured for many decades in Urhobo society. Due to lack of sufficient literature, it has become difficult to expose the new generation of Urhobo to imbibe the practice of extended family system. Therefore, the question this paper attempts to answer is that: What is the impact of Western cultural values on the practice of extended family in Urhobo society.

Objective of the Study

This paper has as its main objective to investigate the impact of modernization on the practice of extended family that is gradually eroding in most parts of Urhobo society in Nigeria. However, the specific objectives of this paper are to:

- i. examine the Impact of modern marriages on the extended family system in Urhobo;
- ii. explain the family system in traditional Urhobo society; and
- iii. discuss the role of religion on the practice of extended family system in Urhobo.

Methodology

The paper adopted the descriptive research design involving the use of self-Respondent Interview administered on 20 families across the Delta Central Senatorial Districts that is occupied majorly by Urhobo speaking people spaced in eight (8) local government areas of Ethiope East, Ethiope West, Okpe, Sapele, Ughelli South, Ughelli North, Udu and Uvwie. The study used the purposive sampling method involving balloting procedure to arrive at the sampled figure utilized for the investigation. The results of the balloting exercise produced required sampled that were drafted for the interview sessions. The sampled population was used to generate the needed data that assist the study to determine the extent to which the extended family is practiced across Urhobo

The review of related literature was hinged on Bronfenbrenner's 1977 as captured in the study by Olivia Guy-Evans(2025) stating that the ecological systems theory, also known as the bio ecological model, proposes that human development is a complex process influenced by five nested environmental systems: the microsystem (direct influences like family and school), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystemic (indirect influences like parental workplaces), macrosystem (cultural values and institutions), and chronosystem (the dimension of time, including major life events and historical context). The theory emphasizes that individuals and their environments mutually influence each other throughout their lifespan. The immediate environment where a child has direct contact, includes family, school, and friends, and

is considered the most influential level for development. The idea of the theory indicates that the family is an eco-system where children are groomed and developed. The theory aligned favorably with the Urhobo cultural value where the extended family system is predominantly practiced. In contrast to the ideal of this theory is the observed neglect of the family system that is perceivably going into extinction due to cultural infiltration by Western influences.

Impact of modern marriages on the extended family system in Urhobo

Modern marriages have significantly reshaped the extended family system in many parts of Nigeria and Urhobo is not an exception. The effect is seen in how it has shifted the focus from the collective family unit to the individual couple. Similarly, it has also increased emphasis on spousal relationships and the nuclear family unit which has led to both challenges and transformations in relationships with in-laws, family roles, and traditional support system. The extended family structure, where each member had specific roles, was predominant, and marriage was considered permanent, with the father as the head. However, modernization according to the study by Abonor, Ofem, Takim, & Oru (2024) has shifted family dynamics, reduced its economic-productive role and promoted individualism, where personal desires take precedence over family needs. Mate selection is now based on personal preference rather than family interests, and divorce rates have risen. Women increasingly serve as breadwinners, contributing to unstable family structures, rising numbers of street children, mental health issues, and elder neglect. The above experience has grossly affected the importance of the extended family system in some parts of Urhobo land. Marriage and family are key structures in most societies. While the two institutions have historically been closely linked in Urhobo culture, their connection is becoming more complex in modern times.

A family is formed through the agency of marriage. Thus, the family is a fundamental social institution that exists in every society, serving as the primary unit for socialization, emotional support, and economic cooperation. It is typically composed of individuals related by blood, marriage, or legal bonds, but its structure and function vary across cultures and historical periods. According to Lamama and Riedman (2012), the family is where an individual takes their first steps, experiences joy and sorrow, and eventually leaves to face the world. Over time, the nature of the family has evolved significantly due to socio-economic and cultural changes. In traditional Nigerian society, the family was viewed not merely as a nuclear unit consisting of a man, woman, and children but as an extended kinship system that encompassed multiple generations and relatives. This kin-based structure provided a strong support system where responsibilities were shared, and economic resources were pooled for the common good (Eneh et al., 2017). The extended family ensured

social security, education, and the transmission of cultural values and norms across generations. Due to embrace of Western type of marriage system and global influence, the traditional marriage system in Urhobo has been facing attack leading a spiral decline of the cultural held values that encourage the extended family system in present day Urhobo society.

Families System in Traditional Urhobo Society

In traditional Urhobo society, the family system is defined by its extended and patrilineal structure, which is deeply rooted in ancestral reverence and community ties. The family unit is not merely a household but a powerful, interconnected institution that links the living with their ancestors. The extended family is the traditional model in Urhobo society, in stark contrast to the nuclear family pattern, which is viewed as a modern, urban influence. An Urhobo extended family includes parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews, and nieces, all of whom live and care for one another. Ochuko Tonukari, posits that the network of relationships among human beings are remarkably extended and deep. In fact, the words 'family', 'brother', or 'sister', etc. define far more for Urhobo people than what they mean today for the average European or North American. The family for the traditional Urhobo usually includes one's direct parents, grand and great grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles, and aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews. And normally, a child would refer to any of his uncles or aunts as his father or mother, his nephews and nieces as his/her brothers and sisters. People generally do not ask a child his/her personal name.

Rather, a child is identified as a child of so-and-so parents. The extended family system is the model. The molecular family pattern is alien and believed to be inimical to the traditional value of community. Actually, it is only in recent times that the latter system began to surface mainly in urban towns as a result of external influences. The extended family structure is held up to people as model, one in which parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces live together and are cared for by their children, grand-children and other relatives in mutual love and respect. The invisible members of the extended family, especially ancestors and spiritual beings, are powerful and by far superior to human beings. Their reality and presence in the community are duly acknowledged and honored among various people in Urhobo traditional society. Neglect could spell disaster for human beings and the community. The invisible beings are represented by different kinds of symbols like carved objects, shrines and sacred altars. They may also be recalled in personal names given to children, especially in cases where particular ancestors or spirit beings are held to have reincarnated in individual children. The idea of community and humane living are

highly cherished values of Urhobo traditional life. It is this framework upon which the family structure is based in Urhobo society.

The extended family system in Nigeria is important as it provides a strong social safety net, offering significant financial and emotional support, especially during life events like weddings and funerals, or times of crisis. It fosters a strong sense of unity, belonging, and cultural transmission, helping to maintain community cohesion and pass on traditions. The system also provides practical benefits such as shared childcare and care for the elderly, reducing individual burdens and ensuring continuity for younger generation. The extended family system type of family practice is not peculiar to the Urhobo society. The study by Okoli, Ujumadu, Nwaiwu, Alaribe, Alozie, Oko & Okonkwo (2021) revealed that the practice in Igboland has the following advantages:

- i. It helps to foster unity and development in Igbo land – Abia monarch
- ii. Becoming less influential due to changing times – Emenyeonu
- iii. The system is drawing us back, should be discarded – Akwukwuegbu
- iv. It is part of Igbo identity, culture, can't do without it – Don
- v. Igbo will harm themselves more if they abandon it – Anaekwe
- vi. Offers security to members of the family – Igbo leader
- vii. Extended family brings unity in the entire community – Anambra residents

The authors report that the concept of extended family system is a recognized, well known age long practice in Igbo land. It is a practice where many relations, including distant ones, depend on other capable relations for upkeep, education, training, apprenticeship and general survival. It is a practice that has worked in Igbo land for long. It is a sort of multi-generational family. In Igbo culture, the core of the family is the nuclear family: the parents and their children, while additional relatives are considered extended. It is the type of family unit that has multiple relatives other than just the parents and their children living in the same household. Despite what Ndigbo see as a lot of advantages of the extended family system, however with the steady dwindling Nigeria economy, many now doubt the sustainable of the system.

One of the advantages of an extended family system is the kind of security it offers to the members of that family. In an extended family, for example, members believe that they have people on whom they can count on in times of needs and even in times of trouble. One of the occasions on which the system helps a lot as large number comes into play is during funerals, weddings and other major events that require huge money and combined efforts. On occasions like these, the extended family helps in raising money, running the errands and generally in organizing the occasion to ensure it succeeds.

Another advantage of the extended family system is that it brings unity to the entire community. The blood relationship that exists among all the cousins, sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, etc., brings about peace and this peace leads to unity that extends into the larger society. It has also been observed that in times of financial or emotional crisis, the wealthy members of the family render help to other not well to do family members. For instance, if a boy secures admission to study in the university and the biological father is incapable of paying the fees, a member of the extended family easily usually wades in to sponsor such a person. Also, a sister who is about to get married could get assistance in many forms from the members of the extended family to ensure that everything goes smoothly.

The extended family system in Igbo land as well as in Urhobo and other communities in Nigeria, comes to great play when a man dies leaving the children with no inheritance or support. In this case, the uncles and aunties and other members of the extended family could take over and raise the children on behalf of the deceased brother or uncle without the children going through much stress. This cannot be found in a nuclear family system. According to a community leader, Chief Gabriel Emenyonu, the head of Onyema extended family of Umuobasi in Omoho in Anambra State, although extended family is becoming less influential in many Igbo communities due to the changing times, it used to be the pivot for human and capital development in many communities. The family meetings, he said is usually organized during annual festivities are periods when members of the family settle dispute among them, evolve ways of assisting family members in need of assistance and visiting their sisters married out.

Speaking with South East Voice, Emenyonu said:

What is today an extended family for us began sometime in 1962 when the first son of my late brother wanted to travel to the United Kingdom for further studies. Because his biological father could not shoulder the responsibility alone, the entire family contributed to send him abroad. By the time he finished his studies in 1967, the civil war broke out and he remained abroad throughout the period of the war.

In 1970, the family re-established contact with him and he facilitated the process that enabled two other children of his uncles to join him. Those two other young men who travelled in 1972 have also helped other members of the extended family to acquire education abroad. Emenyonu however, observed that one of the disadvantages of the extended family system is that some members tend to manifest

selfish attitude that is inimical to the peaceful coexistence of the unit. For Eze Ndubuisi Nwabeke, the Chairman of the Abia State Council of traditional rulers, the extended family system has helped to foster unity and development in Igbo land and called for the sustenance of the system. The monarch, however, explained that the sustenance of the system depends on the capacity of the individual to extend assistance to both close and distant relations.

The role of Religion on the Practice of Extended Family System in Urhobo

The effective practices of the extended family system in some of parts of Urhobo have been blamed on religion interference on the Urhobo traditional religious system that promote community life and by implication the practice of the extended family system. Religion, through its sacred texts and moral teachings, profoundly shapes the practice of the extended family system by providing a foundation for strong kinship bonds and offering a framework for mutual support, respect for elders, and collective well-being. Different religious traditions offer specific guidance that reinforces the cohesion of the extended family, although the interpretation and practice can vary culturally.

The concept of family in the Bible extends beyond the immediate nuclear family to include a broader network of relatives, often referred to as the extended family. This network plays a significant role in the social, spiritual, and economic life of individuals and communities as depicted in the Scriptures. The extended family serves as a primary source of social and economic support. In the agrarian society of ancient Israel, family members worked together to cultivate land, tend livestock, and manage resources. The Book of Ruth illustrates this support system, where Naomi, a widow, relies on her daughter-in-law Ruth and her kinsman Boaz for sustenance and protection (Ruth 2:1-3). The above example cited indicates that the Bible and the Jewish culture recognize the practice of the extended family as seen in Urhobo communities in Niger Delta, Nigeria. It appears that the advent of Christianity significantly affected the practice of the extended family in Africa where marriage restriction to one wife greatly contributed to the shift from the cultural values of the extended family.

Christianity has profoundly affected Nigeria's extended family system by promoting individualistic values and the nuclear family model, which challenges traditional communal kinship structures. This has led to shifts in family dynamics, with both positive and negative consequences, such as the decline of polygamy and increased marital instability. Traditional Nigerian societies often embraced polygamy, but Christian doctrine strongly promotes monogamy. This has caused tension for converts from polygamous backgrounds, as many churches bar polygamists from

leadership positions. Research indicates that polygamous individuals, particularly women and children, often experience emotional distress and neglect, though some see it as a necessary economic strategy in patriarchal societies.

The Christian emphasis on the marital couple and their children as the core family unit contrasts with the traditional African model, where the extended family is the central institution. This shift promotes individualism over communalism, altering traditional obligations like childcare, which was once a collective responsibility of the extended family. The introduction of Christian values has disrupted traditional power dynamics. In some communities, the influence of traditional leaders and family elders has been reduced, while marital decisions are increasingly made by the couple rather than being arranged by the extended family. Family is one of God's greatest gifts to humanity. It is designed to be a source of love, support, and spiritual growth. While modern culture often focuses on the nuclear family – parents and children – the Bible presents a broader view, emphasizing the importance of extended family in shaping faith, character, and purpose.

Oko (2016) found that there is influence of religion on the marriage and family values in Africa. According to the author, the institution of marriage and family is currently faced with many challenges if not at the verge of total collapse. The study discovered that sanctity of marriage and family values in Africa has been destroyed as a result of numerous problems posed by religion. These interactions between religious sector and the social institutions have resultant effects or influences on the marriage and family values in Africa. According to Sibani (2018), African society is dynamic, experiencing cultural change because of invention, discovery, environment, diffusion, and acculturation. In addition, significant influences have been projected through the Christian missionary enterprise, colonialism, urbanization, and modernity.

Ibrahim (2008) found that the family is an important social institution with fundamental functions in the society. The researcher revealed that the pervasive role of extended family on the lives of people in the society is being degenerating due to the serious fundamental changes it has undergone in many contemporary societies. These changes have been a cause of serious concern on the lives of individuals, groups and entire society which considerably tells more about the future of the family in Nigeria. This claim is further subjected to empirical proof through the report presented on the self-responded interview conducted on twenty families across Delta State.

Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This section of the paper presents the report of the interview conducted using the self-responded questionnaire. The percentage calculation statistics was used to determine the responses of the participants on the question items. The data collected

from the 20 participants on the subject-matter were analyzed which results were used to answer the following research questions in order to achieve the purpose of the study.

Research Question One: What is the impact of modern marriages on the extended family system in Urhobo?

This question seeks to understand the extent to which modern marriages has affected the practice of extended family system in contemporary Urhobo society. Five (5) interview question items were raised to enable the researcher understand whether modern marriages could affect the practice of extended family system in contemporary Urhobo society. Responses on each item were subjected to a rating scale of agreed (50-100%) and disagreed (0-49) respectively. The result is presented on Table 1.1 as follows:

Table 1.1: Analysis of the Level of Agreement on the Impact of Modern Marriage on the Extended Family System in Urhobo Society

S/N	Question Items	Percentage Rating		
		Level of Agreement 50-100%	Level of Disagreement 0-49%	Total Percentage
1.	Modern marriages in Urhobo have led to the weakening of the extended family system	75%	25%	100%
2.	There is a shift from communal support to more individualistic nuclear families	100%	00%	100%
3.	Morden married life has reduced collective well-being of Urhobo	75%	25%	100%
4.	Resolving conflicts through family mediation was the norm in Urhobo	100%	00%	100%
5.	There is departure from traditional values in marriages in Urhobo	100%	00%	100%

Source: Field Survey by the Researcher (2025)

Table 1.1 presents the results on the variable on the level of agreement and disagreement on the impact of modern marriage on the extended family system in Urhobo society, where item 1 obtained the following result: Level of Agreement = 75%

and Level of Disagreement = 25%. This high level of agreement shows that modern marriages in Urhobo have led to the weakening of the extended family system. Item 2 of the interview received the following results of responses where, level of agreement = 100% which implies that there is a shift from communal support to more individualistic nuclear families. The result obtained on item 3 show on the level of agreement (75%) and the level of disagreement (25%) support the view that Modern married life has reduced collective well-being of Urhobo. In item 4, obtained result is as follows: level of agreement (100%) and the level of disagreement (00%), meaning that resolving conflicts through family mediation was the norm in Urhobo traditional society. Obtained result in item 5 show a high level of agreement (100%) proving that there is departure from traditional values in marriages in Urhobo as against what was obtainable in Urhobo traditional society. Thus, the question is answered that modern marriage has negative effect on practice of the extended family system in today Urhobo Society.

Research Question Two: What is the type of family system practiced in traditional Urhobo Society?

It was the objective of this question to explain the family Type that is affecting the practice of the extended family system in modern Urhobo Society. Five (5) interview questions were raised for which the 20 participants responded to. Generated data were used to measure the level of agreement and the level of disagreement on the variable under review. The result is presented on Table 1.2 below:

Table 1.2: Analysis of Family Type Affecting Extended Family System in Urhobo Society

S/N	Question Items	Percentage Rating		
		Level of Agreement 50-100%	Level of Disagreement 0-49%	Total Percentage
1.	Nuclear family is driven by Western culture	95%	05%	100%
2.	Extended family remains strong culturally	20%	80%	100%
3.	The extended family traditional functions are being challenged	90%	10%	100%
4.	The Urhobo extended family system has been weakened	75%	25%	100%

5.	The eco-social security extended family provides has been greatly reduced.	65%	35%	100%
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Source: Field survey by the Researcher (2025)

Table 1.2 presented information on family type affecting extended family system in Urhobo society. Level of Agreement (95%) and Level of Disagreement (05%) being results obtained on item 1 shows that nuclear family is driven by Western culture is seen as one of the factors affecting the practice of extended family system in Urhobo society. Response on item 2 with high level of disagreement at 80% confirmed the fact that extended family remains strong culturally. Obtained result on item 3 at 90% of agreement as against the low level of disagreement at 10% which shows that the extended family traditional system is being challenged by other type of families in modern Urhobo society. The item 4 of the interview results at a level of agreement at 75% and level of disagreement at 25% indicates that The Urhobo extended family system has been weakened. In item 5 with the following result where, the level of agreement is at 65% while the level of disagreement is at 35% revealed that the eco-social security extended family provides has been greatly reduced. Based on the above results it is convenient to answer the question that it is the extended family system that is the type of family that is practiced in traditional Urhobo Society which has been undermined in modern Urhobo society. The result has answered the question that the extended family remained the ideal type of family system that is practiced in Urhobo.

Research Question Three: What is the role of religion on the practice of extended family system in Urhobo?

The objective of this question was to discuss the role of religion on the practice of extended family system in Urhobo. Data on this variable were generated from the 20 sampled figure employed for the interview sections. The result is presented on Table 1.3 as follow:

Table 1.3: Analysis on the Impact of Religion on the Extended Family System in Urhobo Society

S/N	Question Items	Percentage Rating		
		Level of Agreement 50-100%	Level of Disagreement 0-49%	Total Percentage
1.	Religion significantly shaped the Urhobo extended family system	100%	00%	100%
2.	The advent of Christianity influenced the extended family system in Urhobo	95%	05%	100%
3.	Introducing of new moral values like the equality of all humans before God affects the practice of the extended family system in Urhobo	65%	35%	100%
4.	The concept of a universal family is negatively affecting the practice of the extended family system in Urhobo	70%	30%	100%
5.	Suppression of some traditional practices have hindered the practice of the extended family system in Urhobo	90%	10%	100%

Source: Field survey by the Researcher (2025)

Table 1.3 shows the presented results on the level of agreement and level of disagreement on the five (5) interview items. For instance, item 1 obtained a 100% agreement indicating that religion significantly shaped the Urhobo extended family system but not in a positive manner. In item 2, participants agreed at 95% and disagreed at 05% suggesting that the advent of Christianity influenced the practice of extended family system in Urhobo. Item 3 received the following results where the level of agreement is at 65% and level of disagreement is at 35%. This result has affirmed that Introducing of new moral values like the equality of all humans before God affects the practice of the extended family system in Urhobo. The result in item 4 is as follows where the level of agreement is at 70% and the level of disagreement is at 30% meaning that the concept of a universal family is negatively affecting the practice

of the extended family system in Urhobo. On item 5, the level of agreement is at 90% and level of disagreement is at 10%. This result has shown that suppression of some traditional practices has hindered the practice of the extended family system in Urhobo. Drawing from the above result, we are able to answer the question that Western religion has played a negative role on the practice of extended family system in Urhobo.

Findings

Based on simple percentage calculation and content analysis, the study found that:

- i. Modernization has affected the practice of extended family that once thrived in Urhobo.
- ii. The research found that Urhobo has drifted from the extended family system to the practice of a nuclear family system.
- iii. It was found that it has become difficult to recognize extended family members beyond the immediate family of father, mother and children.
- iv. The family support system that existed in an extended family has completely collapsed.

Conclusion

The shift from the extended family system in Urhobo has affected the communal thinking that once characterized Urhobo families and communities where there was a strong support system. Since there is a high embrace in modernization, individualism has become more dominantly practiced as against the communal spirit that was common in Urhobo before independence in Nigeria. Therefore, the paper concludes that due to modernization, extended family system has significantly eroded.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:

- i. Parents should encourage the practice of extended family system. This will ensure that tradition is preserved in Urhobo.
- ii. Family should introduce a yearly get-together involving the extended families for the purpose of a reunion.
- iii. Every family should keep a family tree to preserve the history of the extended families in Urhobo. This will enable unborn children to be acquainted with their extended family.

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