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Intergroup Relations in Southeast Nigeria: Uburu and Her Neighbours Experience, 1800-1960

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Abstract: This paper examines the pre-colonial and colonial Uburu relations with her neighbours. Uburu and her neighbouring communities established economic, political and socio-cultural contacts since the pre-colonial era and has sustained it. These intergroup relations are often peaceful and occasionally confrontational and violent. The researcher used primary and secondary sources to generate the required data mainly from oral interview, intelligence reports, books, journals, articles among others. The researcher also adopted the multi-disciplinary approach to further enrich the available historical data. The major findings of the study revealed that Uburu and her neighbours established strong economic relations, socio-cultural exchanges and borrowings, marriage ties, political affinities which impacted immensely in promoting intergroup relations between them. The Aro secretly encouraged rivalry between Uburu and her neighbours from which they profited, Uburu fought virtually with all her neighbouring communities, except Isu community, because they are brothers. The study further revealed that Uburu people never lived in isolation, there was a pre-colonial and colonial market called Nkwuroto Uburu which attracted people from far and near for trade and commerce. Uburu market was a famous and happening place, one of the centers of trade east of the Niger in the pre-colonial and colonial era. Slave trade, trade on salt, cows, camels, horses, cowries and other agricultural commodities made Uburu market a melting point for eastern commercial activities. The mutual and harmonious interdependence continued even during occasional outbreak of hostilities or confrontational relationships. The paper recommended that Uburu and her neighbours in modern times should learn from the lessons of the past so as to establish peaceful and harmonious relations which is a panacea for sustainable development. The paper concluded that the mutual, harmonious and in most cases confrontational relationships between Uburu and her neighbours impacted on their overall existence.

Citation: Okpara, C. B. A. Intergroup Relations in Southeast Nigeria: Uburu and Her Neighbours Experience, 1800-1960. American Journal of Social and Humanitarian Research 2025, 6(10), 2436-2442.

Received: 15th Sept 2025

Revised: 30th Sept 2025

Accepted: 15th Oct 2025

Published: 27th Oct 2025



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Keywords: Intergroup Relations, Uburu, Neighbours, Southeast, Warfare

1. Introduction

Uburu is an ancient community in Ohaozara L.G.A of Ebonyi state. Uburu occupies a strategic position in the then Afikpo Division and later old Ohoazara as well as the present Ohoazara Local Government area. The mention of the name Uburu scares other neighbouring communities not because they are aggressors with expansionist ideas, but because they possess the ability to rise in unity to defend their freedom and promote justice and fairness. The immediate neighbours of Uburu includes: Okposi, Okpanku, Oduma, Onicha, Mpu, Nkerefi, Isu and Akeze. These were the people with whom the Uburu interacted with in different area of human endeavors, including trade, wars, peace,

intermarriages, cultural exchanges in the pre - colonial and colonial eras. Ude opined that; Uburu is endowed with inestimable natural resources, fertile land for agriculture, Esu River which transverses the land and hosts the reputable Salt Lake that helped the entire Igbos in surviving the effect of the civil war[1],[2],[3].

These blessings attracted the hostility of some of the neighbouring communities like Okposi, Onicha, Nkerefi, Ohafia-Oduma and Okpaku, who formed allied force and fought Uburu in one day with the intention to annihilate her. Uburu came out victorious in the decisive war, though with monumental loss of lives and properties. According to Akpa "The day Uburu was attacked by her neighbours was "Nkwo" and so it was renamed "Nkpokoronkwo" while Uburu was renamed "Adu Nshiegbé". Of all the factors that promoted intergroup relations between Uburu and her neighbours, trade was the most important. Uburu had a market which was a beehive of activities. The market played a major role in attracting missionary hospital (Presbyterian Hospital Uburu) as far back as 1912, when such hospitals were very few in Nigeria[4,5,6].

Ross maintained that: Uburu market was a melting point of eastern commercial activities where people flowed in from all over Nigeria for different types of trade. Confrontational relationships also constituted a factor of contact between Uburu and her neighbors, but they were not endemic. Material, cultural exchanges and intermarriages also promoted peaceful and harmonious relationship between Uburu and her neighbors. Again, the Uburu Salt Lake, an enigma of lake whose water is more of liquid salt played another major role in attracting people from far and near to Uburu. Women dominated the activities of the Salt Lake.

Conceptual Clarification

The concept of intergroup relations is one of the recent themes in African historiography and a very important theme of historical studies all over the world. To Sheriff and Sheriff intergroup relation is a state of friendship or hostility, cooperation or competition, dominance or subordination, alliance or enmity, peace or war between two or more groups and their respective members.

Afigbo in his analysis of the Igbo and their neighbours, opined that "intergroup relations presuppose contact and interaction between groups each of which had an identity, to make some inputs into the relationship, in short, each of which has some scope and area of autonomous actions" Lohor defined intergroup relations as the interaction which takes place between members of different groups and societies who came in contact with one another. On the other hand, neighbours simply mean people who live near each other. Thus, physical proximity represents the basic defining feature of the concept of 'neighbours'. Nwobueze defined intergroup relations as the totality of human relations and techniques and the mechanisms for managing conflict and boundaries in any giving society[7,8,9].

Intergroup relations as a study focuses essentially on the series of methods, strategies or approaches to the understanding of separate group dynamics, of diffusing tension between different groups and creating or building bridges across ships, or directly promoting harmony.

Uburu and her Neighbours Relations

Uburu as an autonomous community covers a vast area that is approximately 155 square kilometers in size. Sitting on the range of planes on the southern axis of Ebonyi State, it is bounded to the North by Isu, Onicha and Nkerefi, in the South by Okpanku and Akaeze, East by Okposi and Ugwulangwu, West by Mpu and Oduma. Uburu was the headquarters of old Ohaozara and is still the present quarters of the present Ohaozara L.G.A. Uburu as a community is made up of fourteen (14) villages and each came from different parts of Igbo land. They are; Umunaga, Amenu, Umuoduigbo, Umuanum,

Umuanoketa, Amegu, Mgbom, Umuagwuoke, Uhuaba, Ogwu, Umuobuna, Umuchima, Urobo and Ihenu.

To Odii, there is no record of exact date of settlement of the fourteen villages of Uburu since the settlement of each of the fourteen villages occurred over a long period of time. Hamilton opines that the fourteen village which makeup Uburu community migrated into this new land of salt from different communities in Igbo land to settle in this area discovered by an Agwu Agbor hunter. The study is not on Uburu history (origin and migrations) but on intergroup relations and therefore the history of Uburu should not consume much of our time as such is readily available. Uburu has long years of intergroup relations with her neighbours: Isu, Onicha, Nkeref, Okpanku, Akaeze, Okposi, Ukwulungwu, Mpu and Oduma.

Afigbo States that the importance of contacts between people and cultures as a stimulus to human development is widely recognized. From time immemorial, Uburu and her neighbours interacted with each other in diverse forms for mutual and complementary benefits. The interactions between Uburu and her neighbours manifested in commerce and trade, marriages, religious interaction, cultural contacts, politics and occasionally in conflict situations[10,11,12].

Trade Relations

The economic ascendancy which Uburu people attained in pre-colonial days was undoubtedly a consequence of their role as middlemen of the trade in slaves for the internal as well as for the Trans-Atlantic trade. To Ngene, there is considerable evidence that during the slave trade and before trade in oil replaced trade in slaves, Uburu people were among the "economic dictators" of the hinter land. Uburu and her neighbouring communities traded in varying capacities. As farmers, they exchanged farm products on the bases of comparative advantage. They both complemented each other. Uburu women dominated trading activities and the Salt industry. They traded goods like Salt, palm products, rice, yam, vegetables, pepper, Garri (cassava flakes) horses and later slaves.

Uburu market was a famous and happening place, one of the centers of trade east of the Niger in the 19th and 20th centuries. Uburu market attracted traders from far and near to Uburu. Ude opined that traders from neighbouring communities came to Uburu market with articles of trade like slaves, cows, camels, horses, cowries and other agricultural commodities which made Uburu a melting port for eastern commercial activities. Akpa revealed that commodities brought to Uburu market from different parts of Nigeria and Camerouns at that material time are goats, cattle, sheep, horses, donkeys, different farm produce, cowries and of course salt produced and sold by Uburu women. Odii posits that Uburu market exposed many Uburu indigenes to trade in other urban centres from where customers float to Uburu too.

The market no doubt helped in no small measure to expose Uburu to the outside world. It also increased their economic status, by the services rendered to visiting traders. At the abolition of trans-Atlantic slave trade, export of salt from Uburu still gave the town a steady source of wealth. The pivotal role that the market played in attracting other developmental facilities to Uburu and promoted intergroup relations cannot be overemphasized.

The Presbyterian Joint Hospital Uburu and Intergroup Relations

The busy nature of Uburu market attracted Dr. John Hitchcock to Uburu and further strengthened his decision to pitch his tent in Uburu out of other towns and communities he surveyed for mission advance on the order of the mission council. Hitchcock stated in Ross "I sat down watching in amazement the crowds that streamed from all sides to Uburu market. I was told that some of the people had travelled so much as five days to come there" this was what led to the establishment of the Presbyterian joint hospital (PJH) in 1913. The hospital in Uburu attracted people from far and near to Uburu and promoted

intergroup relations. The hospital served Uburu and her neighbours at a time when such facilities were not common at all.

Agwu argued that because of the hospital in Uburu, Uburu became a rallying point of other communities. They did not just access health facilities, but benefited from light of the gospel and educational opportunity alongside the hospital. Presbyterian joint hospital Uburu promoted mutual and harmonious relations between Uburu and her neighbouring communities and rendered social, academic and spiritual services to Uburu and her neighbours at a time when such services were very rare.

Inter-Marriages and Intergroup Relations

Marriage is another important traditional institution that speaks volume on the extent at which an average Uburu man regards his nativity. In the true Igbo culture, marriage involves family, nuclear and extended kinsmen, including kits and kins. Akpa stressed that, intergroup marriages which occurred between Uburu and her neighbours in the process of contact and interaction is a vital factor in linking and binding society together at any level of intergroup relations. Intergroup marriages between Uburu and her neighbours help to cement harmonious relationship. Afigbo opined that those marriages have been used to strike alliance between the Igbo and the Bini, Idoma, Ibibio, etc. The marriages between Uburu and her neighbours brought love, co-operation, togetherness, peace, inter-dependence and promoted mutual cum harmonious intergroup relations. It is pertinent to posit that sour marriages impacted negatively on the relationship between Uburu and her neighbours from pre-colonial times to present[13,14,15].

Religious Relations

Afigbo stressed that in pre-colonial Igboland, Nri agents and diviners were known for their ritual and religious role, while Aro people with their oracle Ibini Ukpabi became famous for trade as well as for the resolution of intractable disputes and spiritual quests. Prior to the advent of Christian Religion in Uburu, the people worshipped Arushi (deities) of different kings and names. These deities were reputed to be as powerful as exposing deep secrets and making barren women to conceive as well as impotent men potent.

To Obasi people from neighbouring villages kept on patronizing the shines and deities in Uburu as far as Arochukwu. Clients from far and near, who came for solutions to their problems strengthened their relations with Uburu and their different communities. Uburu daughters that married outsiders were said to have influenced their husbands and husband's communities to visit Ngene Ukwenu deity in search of psychic help and relief, which strengthened diplomatic ties and promoted peace, love, unity and progress between Uburu, her neighbours and in-laws.

Ngene Ukwenu deity is located in a forest at Ogwu Uburu. This shrine is famous and reputed for protection and favor. It drew clients from all parts of Nigeria and beyond. The fame and number of clients spread to the extent of having association of their own, christened "Umunweze" that is (sons of Nweze). Uburu continued in this typical African religion which had its errors and limitations especially with regards to killing of twins and children that came out with legs from the womb, until 1912 when John Hitchcock introduced Christianity which led to the establishment of the Church of Scotland mission (Presbyterian Church), Roman Catholic Church, Faith tabernacle later joined. These churches brought people together. People from neighboring communities came to Uburu and Uburu people travelled to neighbouring communities for church programs like crusades, vigils, conferences etc. This impacted positively on intergroup relations between Uburu and her neighbours.

Politics and Intergroup Relations

The political structure put in place by the colonial government which ushered Nigeria into independence in 1960 also promoted intergroup relations between Uburu and her neighbours. Uburu became part of the old Ogoja Province and later part of Afikpo

Division. Although the relationship between Uburu, Afikpo and her other neighbours during this period was cordial which provided Uburu with Warrant Chiefs and District Officer (DO) who worked in synergy with the local Chiefs and village heads. It created an era of political domination, marginalization, discrimination and subjugation, through the creature of government institutions such as court, police and prisons. Uburu people had another platform to relate with her neighbouring communities which promoted greater participation in colonial politics and intergroup relations.

Uburu Salt Lake and Intergroup Relations

According to Ude “the early settlers in Uburu were predominantly hunters, wine tappers and farmers. At the course of their hunting expeditions, one Oke from Ogwu Uburu stumbled into a lake and decided to quench his thirst. The first lap to the water greeted him with a taste of saltiness, surprised at the development; we repeated the process only to discover that the water before him was salt water. This study is not on the origin of the Salt Lake, but on intergroup relations between Uburu and her neighbors. Therefore, the origin of the Uburu Salt Lake should not consume much of our time as such is readily available. Women dominated Salt activities in the Uburu Salt industry. The Salt Lake has been of great economic importance to Uburu community. Akpa argued that the Salt Lake attracted tourists from within and outside Nigeria which impacted positively on intergroup relations. Massive crowds of people from neighbouring communities were said to have travelled to Uburu in search of the village’s renowned salt and gun powder. This promoted mutual and harmonious interdependence and intergroup relations.

The Salt industry made pre-colonial and colonial Uburu famous and attracted people from far and near to the community. Isich opines that slaves from Ohuhu called “Ovulabo” were carried to Uburu where they were sacrificed to the brine. Uburu Salt Lake impacted positively on trade relations, mutual and harmonious relationship between Uburu and her neighbouring communities.

Intergroup Conflicts

Uburu and her neighbours’ relations, like all human relations, had their period of peaceful and harmonious co-existence as well as moments of bitterness, frustrations and conflicts. Obasi stressed that when Uburu business class developed strong trading ties with the Aro, another aggressive and ubiquitous merchant class in Igboland, the mutual relationship and harmonious co-existence between Uburu and her neighbours began to collapse.

The factors responsible for disagreement between Uburu and her neighbours included, land disputes, jealousy, failed alliance, sour marriages and indiscriminate raiding for slaves during the era of slave trade. These factors attracted the hostility of some of the neighbouring communities like Okposi, Onicha, Nkerefi, Ohafia-Oduma and Okpanku, who formed allied force and fought Uburu in one day with the intention to annihilate her. Uburu came out victorious in the decisive war, though with monumental loss of lives and properties. The very day was “Nkwo” and so it was renamed “Nkpokoronkwo”. The Uburu and her six neighbours’s war impacted negatively on the intergroup relation between Uburu and her neighbours.

The abolition of slave trade and subsequent introduction of the so-called legitimate trade (palm oil trade) with its intensity in 1850; Uburu and her neighbour’s relations took a new dimension. The palm oil trade marked the beginning of robust intergroup relations in the 19th and 20thcenturies built on the gains and lessons of the previous contacts.

Socio-Cultural Relations

Culture is the sum total of the ways of life of a people. It provides the basics of social belief, social conduct and aspirations which govern human endeavor and conduct. Culture is the totality of social institutions, codes of conduct, moral and aesthetic forms and values which determine and shape the life style of a given people. Ude posits that culture is

expressed in visual arts, religious life, philosophical ideas, materials, ceremonies, dances and social rites of the people. Annual celebrations and festivals, materialistic aspiration and seasonal farming are all expressions of modern or traditional culture. Among those customs, traditions, modes of dressing and festivals stand out in Uburu and her neighbours' relations. Material and cultural borrowing helps to promote mutual intergroup relations. Agwu opined that in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, Salt makers in Uburu normally bought a special dish called "Njagba from Agba town in present Enugu state, which they used in the filtration process in the Salt industry. They also exchanged cultural basket with their other neighbours which impacted positively on trade and intergroup relations between Uburu, Agba and her other neighbors. Agba people and other neighbouring communities bought Uburu Salt, palm products and other agricultural products.

2. Conclusion

This study is a bold attempt to examine the relationships between Uburu and her neighbours in the pre-colonial and colonial times. Evidence from the study tends to show that there was a pre-colonial market called Nkwurotu Uburu which attracted people from far and near for trade and commerce, which promoted mutual, harmonious and in most cases confrontational relationships between Uburu and her neighbouring communities that impacted on their overall existence. Furthermore, the study has demonstrated to a great extent that Uburu and her neighbours never lived in isolation. They depended on each other and interacted on the bases of comparative advantage and interest, which promoted intergroup relations. The study also revealed that women dominated Salt business, took active part in slave trade, horse business and agricultural products which constituted major items of trade that facilitated exchanged of goods and promoted intergroup relations between Uburu and her neighbours. Finally, the study recommended that Uburu and her neighbours in modern time should learn from the gains and lessons of the past as to establish mutual and harmonious relationships which is a panacea for sustainable development.

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