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'ONE VAGINA KILLS THE PENIS': EXPLORING URHOBO AND ISOKO ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLYGAMY

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Abstract

This study examines the attitudes of the Urhobo and Isoko people towards polygamy, with a focus on the cultural significance of the proverb, 'Ohoro Ọvo hwe osho', literally one virgin kills the penis. This phrase, rooted in traditional mythology, suggests that a man's habitual sexual encounter with only one woman can lead to the devastating consequence of non-erection. This research investigates how this belief influences Urhobo and Isoko attitudes towards promiscuity in general and polygamy in particular, including their perceptions of marital fidelity, sexual purity, and male virility. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews and focus groups, this study provides insights into the complex cultural dynamics underlying Urhobo and Isoko attitudes towards sexual promiscuity.

Keywords: Urhobo, Isoko, polygamy, proverb, sexuality, male virility, marital fidelity, cultural attitudes, promiscuity, indigenous belief

1. Introduction

The title of this article was carefully chosen to match the nickname of the celebrant, Prof. Elo Ibagere. When hailed with 'ohoro Ọvo', that is, sex with only one woman, he would respond with 'o hwe osho riérierié' (it totally kills the penis). This fascinating proverb, part of the rich cultural heritage of the Urhobo and Isoko people of the Delta region of Nigeria, has been passed down through generations: *One vagina kills the penis*. This enigmatic phrase, steeped in traditional mythology and symbolism, alludes to the belief that a man's sexual encounter with a single woman causes non erection of the penis. Beyond its literal interpretation, this proverb offers a unique window into the complex attitudes of the Urhobo and Isoko men

towards sexual intercourse with many women, both polygamous and monogamous practices that have been an integral part of their cultural identity for centuries.

This study seeks to explore the cultural significance of the proverb; *One vagina kills the penis* and its influence on Urhobo and Isoko attitudes towards marrying more than one wife. By examining the intersections of culture, mythology, and social norms, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex factors that shape Urhobo and Isoko perceptions of marital fidelity, sexual purity, and male virility.

The Urhobo and Isoko people are two ethnic groups residing in the Delta region of Nigeria. With a shared history and cultural heritage, they have developed unique traditions, customs, and values that shape their understanding of the world. In Urhobo and Isoko societies, polygamy is not only tolerated but also celebrated as a symbol of wealth, status, and masculinity. Men with multiple wives are often revered as pillars of the community, and their ability to provide for their families is seen as a testament to their strength and virility. However, this cultural practice is not without its complexities and contradictions. The proverb, *One vagina kills the penis* offers a glimpse into the intricate web of beliefs and values that underpin Urhobo and Isoko attitudes towards polygamy. This phrase, which may seem cryptic to outsiders, is rooted in a deep-seated cultural anxiety about the dangers of unchecked female sexuality (Houston, 2025). This belief has significant implications for Urhobo and Isoko attitudes towards polygamy, as it creates a complex dynamic of power, desire, and danger. On one hand, men are encouraged to seek out multiple wives as a symbol of their status and masculinity. On the other hand, they are also warned about the dangers of female sexuality, which can be both alluring and deadly.

2. Related Literature

The proverb, **One vagina kills the penis** is a striking expression embedded in Urhobo and Isoko oral traditions, functioning as both a cultural metaphor and a justification for polygynous marriage. Similar to other African sexual proverbs, such as the Nigerian pidgin version "One toto dey kill prick," it conveys the belief that one woman cannot adequately satisfy a man's sexual needs, thereby legitimising multiple marital and sexual partnerships for men (Elliott & Umberson, 2008). In Urhobo and Isoko societies, this saying reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes that position male sexual entitlement as natural and culturally sanctioned. In traditional Urhobo society, polygyny is not only permitted but also valorised (Mark & Etaoghene, 2025). Men are free to marry multiple wives and maintain concubines (*osen*) without social stigma, whereas women's sexual conduct is tightly controlled. A married woman found guilty of infidelity may face ancestral wrath (Eriwin), public humiliation, and ritual cleansing. By contrast, men's extramarital affairs are generally tolerated, provided they do not involve another man's wife. These gendered double standards illustrate a wider patriarchal framework in which male authority over marriage, sexuality, and household decision-making is embedded in cultural and spiritual norms (Piper et al., 2020, Weber & Bermingham, 2003). The Isoko, culturally and linguistically related to the Urhobo, uphold similar values. Although there is limited published research focusing exclusively on Isoko perspectives, available anthropological accounts point to parallel understandings of marriage, sexuality, and gendered moral expectations.

Recent ethnographic work on Urhobo women's experiences reinforces that male dominance continues to define marital relations. As documented in the work of Iturriaga and Saguy (2017), women in polygynous households often have limited agency in marital decision-making, with cultural narratives strongly favouring the man's right to multiple wives. Social media commentary and local discourse suggest that the proverb remains a living part of everyday conversation, often invoked by men to defend polygyny as a marker of cultural identity and male virility.

Although empirical studies directly examining this proverb are scarce, broader African scholarship offers relevant context. Research on polygyny in West and Central Africa identifies it as part of a "value system" linked to social status, economic networks, and community stability (Adedini & Odimegwu, 2017; Mayer et al., 2025; Climent & Sween, 1971; Lesthaeghe, 2023) At the same time, large-scale studies have found correlations between high community polygyny rates and increased intimate partner violence, especially where women have reduced bargaining power (Mayer et al., 2025). Psychosocial studies across polygynous contexts also report that women, especially first wives, tend to experience lower self-esteem, greater marital dissatisfaction, and heightened stress compared to women in monogamous unions (Al-Krenawi & Kanat-Maymon, 2017).

Despite these insights, there is a clear gap in the literature. Peer-reviewed research has yet to analyse how the proverb **One vagina kills the penis** specifically shapes sexual ethics, marital choices, and gender relations within Urhobo and Isoko communities. The existing evidence comes mainly from broader ethnographic overviews, cultural commentary, and comparative regional studies. There is a pressing need for in-depth qualitative research, such as oral-history projects and ethnographic interviews, to document how different generations interpret the proverb, and whether younger, urban, or Christian-influenced populations are challenging or reinterpreting its meaning. Quantitative surveys comparing urban and rural attitudes, as well as psychological studies on women's wellbeing in polygynous versus monogamous households, would also provide valuable data.

In sum, the proverb **One vagina kills the penis** remains emblematic of the patriarchal structures sustaining polygyny in Urhobo and Isoko societies. It encapsulates a worldview in which male sexual plurality is legitimised while female fidelity is strictly enforced, reinforcing long-standing gender inequalities. While broader African studies illuminate the social and psychological consequences of polygyny, targeted research in Delta State is still required to capture the full cultural, interpersonal, and emotional dimensions of this enduring belief.

3. Data Presentation and Data Analysis

- i. Urhobo proverb: *Ohoro ọvo hwe osho*
Isoko proverb: *Uvio ọvo re kpo oyo*
Translation: One vagina kills the penis

Several men interviewed reported improved performance in various aspects when having sex with someone other than their spouse, often citing encounters with another woman. Specifically, they claimed to have increased stamina and endurance, allowing for multiple sex rounds with a new partner, whereas they typically only had the energy for a single round with

their wives at home. The decreased libido could be attributed to over-familiarity, suggesting that the comfort and routine of a long-term relationship may contribute to a decline in passion and energy. Engaging in intimate activities outside of the primary relationship may potentially increase stamina and help boost libido, as the novelty and excitement of a new connection can stimulate sexual desire and performance. Historically, men in polygamous relationships often appeared more content and performed better in their daily lives, possibly due to the shared responsibilities and rotating roles among their partners, which may have helped distribute workload and emotional support.

Furthermore, some polygamous men also maintained relationships with concubines, which not only added complexity to their domestic schedules but also seemingly sustained their sexual vitality. The cultural heritage of the Urhobo and Isoko people has often been challenged by Western civilisation and Christianity, which have promoted monogamous marriage and, in the process, undermined the traditional polygynous practices and values of these communities. The men interviewed shared a common perspective that one wife is not enough for an Urhobo or Isoko man, suggesting that their cultural and traditional values emphasise the importance of having multiple wives/partners. The Urhobo and Isoko men interviewed highlighted several benefits of polygynous marriages, which are specific to the cultural and social context of the Urhobo and Isoko people. The advantages include enhanced economic stability through shared financial responsibilities and increased household income; emotional support and companionship among wives, reducing the burden on each individual; shared domestic and childcare responsibilities, allowing for more efficient household management; increased social status and prestige within their communities; preservation of cultural and traditional practices; potential for greater sexual satisfaction and variety; and expanded family ties and social connections through multiple wives' families.

ii.	Urhobo proverb:	<i>Osho ọvo oyen yovwin kẹ aye</i>
	Isoko proverb:	<i>Oyo ọvo sheyọ kẹ aye</i>
	Translation:	One penis is good for the woman

Interestingly, both Urhobo and Isoko men and women interviewed shared a common belief that women should maintain fidelity in their marriages, with a strong emphasis on monogamous commitment and loyalty to their spouse. The Urhobo and Isoko women are renowned for their fidelity in marriage, largely due to the severe social and cultural repercussions associated with infidelity, which serve as a strong deterrent. There is a strong belief that adultery committed by a married woman can have severe consequences. According to traditional beliefs, if a married woman engages in infidelity, she may fall ill and potentially die. Additionally, her children may also suffer dire consequences, including sickness and death. Furthermore, if the husband is aware of his wife's infidelity and fails to address the issue or benefits from the adulterous relationship, he may also face fatal consequences.

In Urhobo and Isoko cultures, adultery is viewed as a serious offense that undermines the sanctity of marriage and family values. Interestingly, there is a notable double standard: married men are often permitted to engage in relationships with single women, whereas married women are strictly forbidden from engaging in relationships with either single or married men. The law is very firm on the womenfolk. In Urhobo and Isoko cultures, married women are expected to maintain transparency in their interactions with men. They are required

to inform their husbands if they receive gifts from other men, ensuring openness and trust in their relationships. There are strict boundaries surrounding interactions between married women and other men. Physical contact, such as touching or hugging, is considered inappropriate, and even verbal praise or compliments from another man are generally frowned upon.

iii. Urhobo proverb: *Oshare ọ rọvwọn aye ọvo, ṡrhare*
Isoko proverb: *Qza no vwo aye ọvo oma ha ọboba*
Translation: A man with one wife is a bachelor

In Urhobo and Isoko cultures, polygamy is a symbol of wealth and masculinity. A man with only one wife is considered a bachelor, while wealthy men are often measured by the number of wives and sometimes children they have. In contrast, polygamy is less common among poorer individuals. Furthermore, to be eligible for a chieftaincy title, a man is expected to have built a house, demonstrated responsibility, and have multiple wives or concubines. Interestingly, a new trend has emerged in Isoko and parts of Urhobo land, wherein young men now take pride in marrying two or three wives at the same time, embracing polygamy as a symbol of status and masculinity. Unfortunately, in this cultural context, men who are unable to marry multiple wives simultaneously often face ridicule and mockery from their peers within the same age group, adding social pressure to conform to this emerging trend. The Isoko people, and parts of the Urhobo, have wholeheartedly adopted a proverb that reflects their cultural values: *Oshare ọ rọvwọn aye ọvo, ṡrhare*, 'A man with one wife is a bachelor.' This saying underscores the importance of polygamy in their society, where having multiple wives is often seen as a symbol of masculinity, wealth, and status.

iv. Urhobo proverb: *Oshare rẹ o vwo ọhọ ọvo ọ rọvwọn aye ọvo unuékọ vwo jẹ phia*
Isoko proverb: *Qza no vwo arezeghẹ ọvo ọ reyo aye ọvo kere eme su be jo*
Translation: A man of one sense should marry one wife to avoid quarrels

Recognising that not everyone is capable of supporting multiple partners, the Urhobo and Isoko people offer pragmatic advice: a man with limited means or patience should marry only one wife to avoid conflicts and ensure harmony in the household. Given the potential challenges and stresses that come with polygamy, it is often advised that only men with great emotional resilience and patience should consider having multiple wives. Those who are more emotionally sensitive or less equipped to handle conflict may therefore find it wise to opt for monogamy. In every society, there is a natural diversity of social classes and roles. As the saying goes, "Not everyone can be rich." Even in public gatherings, there is an understanding that some individuals will take on more humble roles, such as serving drinks or performing tasks like slaughtering animals, while others will assume leadership positions. This social dynamic acknowledges and respects the varying contributions and statuses of people within a community.

Although some men believe that monogamy can have negative effects on their health and marrying only one wife may kill their penises, they may not have the financial means to support multiple wives instead of ohoro ọvo, which is often seen as a way of sharpening their penis and also elevate their economic and social egos.

4. Summary

The proverb, **One vagina kills the penis** reflects a deep-rooted cultural belief in Urhobo and Isoko societies that a single female partner is insufficient to satisfy male sexual needs, thereby legitimising polygyny. In these communities, men are socially permitted to marry multiple wives and keep concubines without stigma, while women are strictly required to remain sexually faithful. Female infidelity is heavily sanctioned through social shame, ritual cleansing, and beliefs in ancestral punishment, whereas male extramarital relations are generally tolerated unless they involve another man's wife. Both Urhobo and Isoko marital traditions operate within a patriarchal framework that prioritises male authority and sexual plurality while restricting women's agency. Although Isoko-specific scholarship is limited, available evidence shows strong cultural parallels between the two groups. Recent ethnographic research highlights the persistence of male-dominated decision-making and the cultural framing of polygamy as a sign of male virility and status. Comparative studies from other West African contexts show that polygynous unions are often associated with reduced marital satisfaction, lower self-esteem, and higher stress for women—especially first wives—while also correlating with reduced female autonomy and, in some cases, increased intimate partner violence. However, little peer-reviewed research directly examines how this specific proverb shapes contemporary Urhobo or Isoko gender norms, leaving a gap for future ethnographic, survey-based, and psychosocial studies.

5. Conclusions

The proverb, **One vagina kills the penis** encapsulates and reinforces a patriarchal worldview in Urhobo and Isoko societies that legitimises polygyny as a male prerogative while strictly regulating female sexuality. It serves not only as a cultural metaphor but also as a moral rationale sustaining gendered double standards in marriage and sexual conduct. Despite the social and economic transformations brought by Christianity, urbanisation, and modern education, these norms remain deeply embedded, with many men still framing polygyny as an expression of cultural identity and masculine status. However, emerging evidence from broader African contexts suggests that such marital systems often have adverse psychosocial impacts on women, limiting their agency and contributing to marital dissatisfaction and inequality. Addressing these issues requires more targeted, culturally grounded research into how such proverbs influence attitudes today, as well as open dialogue within communities to question and potentially reform entrenched gender norms.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that targeted interventions be introduced to address the entrenched gender norms reinforced by the proverb, "*One vagina kills the penis*." Firstly, gender-sensitive education should be promoted at both formal and informal levels, integrating discussions on equality, marital rights, and the socio-cultural implications of proverbs into school curricula and community sensitisation programs. Such education can help challenge harmful stereotypes and reduce gender-based double standards in marriage.

It is also important to encourage intergenerational dialogue, creating spaces where elders, youth, men, and women can critically examine the meaning and contemporary relevance of such proverbs. These forums can serve as a bridge between tradition and modern values, fostering more equitable marital practices. In addition, legal and policy frameworks should be strengthened to ensure that women's rights are protected against discriminatory practices legitimised by cultural justifications for polygyny.

Women's economic empowerment is another key priority. Expanding access to skills training, microfinance opportunities, and entrepreneurship programs will enhance women's financial independence and bargaining power within marriage. Faith-based leaders, traditional rulers, and cultural custodians should also be engaged to reinterpret or phase out harmful proverbs, replacing them with narratives that promote mutual respect and marital harmony. Finally, there is a need for further research to explore how proverbs like "*One vagina kills the penis*" influence attitudes toward polygamy in Urhobo and Isoko communities today. Ethnographic, survey-based, and psychosocial studies could reveal generational, religious, and urban-rural differences in perception, providing a stronger evidence base for culturally sensitive interventions.

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