

Cultural Sentinels: Ọkọkọ Society's Watchdog Role in Conflict Resolution and Cultural Preservation in Umuahia Community

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Received July 21, 2023; Accepted October 8, 2023; Published: January 25, 2024

Abstract

Purpose of the Study: This study investigates the diverse roles of the Ọkọkọ Society in Umuahia, Nigeria, particularly its use of Igbo language and cultural practices in conflict resolution and cultural preservation, challenging the conventional view of the society as merely a secret male cult. **Methodology:** The study employs qualitative, ethnographic methodologies including in-depth interviews, FGDs, and non-participant observations in Umuahia, supplemented by scholarly literature, with analysis grounded in hermeneutics, semiotics, and conflict management theories to emphasize the role of language and culture in the Ọkọkọ Society's practices. **Main Findings:** The research uncovers the crucial role of the Ọkọkọ Society in Umuahia as a guardian of peace and cultural sentinel. Key findings include the society's use of Igbo proverbs and semiotics (e.g., ọmụ palm frond, uhie drum) in conflict mediation, and the societal respect and trust they command. The society's conflict resolution role extends beyond mere mediation, effectively acting as an appellate court within the community, especially in land disputes. The study also highlights society's role in preserving and enforcing cultural norms and practices. **Applications of this Study:** This research has practical implications for understanding indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in African communities. It offers insights for policymakers and social workers in designing culturally sensitive conflict management strategies. Additionally, it contributes to preserving the cultural heritage of the Igbo people by documenting traditional practices and societal structures. **Novelty/Originality of this Study:** This study is original in its comprehensive examination of the Ọkọkọ Society, linking Igbo language and culture with conflict management practices. It fills a significant gap in academic research by shedding light on the societal and cultural dynamics within the Umuahia community, thus providing a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between language, culture, and social governance in an African context.

Keywords: Conflict Management; Cultural Preservation; Igbo Language; Ọkọkọ Society

Introduction

The Ọkọkọ Society, integral to the Igbo community in Umuahia, Nigeria, represents a unique social phenomenon that intertwines traditional governance, conflict resolution, and cultural preservation. Despite its significant role, there has been a notable gap in academic research regarding its broader societal functions, especially in the context of modern challenges. This gap presents a compelling need to explore the society's influence beyond the commonly perceived notion of a secret male cult. The societal dynamics and the mechanisms employed by the Ọkọkọ in maintaining social order and cultural integrity, particularly through the use of symbols such as the ọmụ and uhie, are under-represented in existing literature.

Previous research on rituals encompasses a wide array of discussions and theorizing about the nature, classification, and motivations behind these practices (Strathern, 2017).

Scholars from diverse disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, history, religion, and psychology, have contributed rich insights into the study of rituals (Hoffmann, 2013; Strathern, 2017). Key areas of focus have been evolutionary studies on religious rituals, clinical and health research using rituals, and the pragmatics of ritual in human interaction (Fischer, 2021; Gruenwald, 2020; Kádár & House, 2020). Interdisciplinary studies have further explored rituals' effects on the human body and brain, such as enhancing courage, effecting healing, and generating group cohesion (Davis-Floyd & Laughlin, 2022). The study of rituals has provided significant insights into religious practices across different cultures and traditions (Hoffmann, 2013).

In this context, previous studies on the Ọkọkọ Society have predominantly focused on its secret and ritualistic aspects, often neglecting its practical roles in conflict management and cultural mediation. This research aims to extend the conversation by building on the foundations laid by seminal anthropological and sociological studies of traditional African societies, such as those by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 2017). It seeks to provide a contemporary examination of the Ọkọkọ Society's role within the Igbo community, aiming to bridge the gap between traditional cultural practices and the evolving needs of modern society. This study contributes to the broader discourse on rituals by highlighting the practical applications and societal impacts of the Ọkọkọ Society's practices, thus enriching our understanding of their significance in various contexts.

The primary objective of this research is to explore the multifaceted role of the Ọkọkọ Society in Umuahia. It aims to understand how the society functions as a guardian of the community, employing traditional symbols and practices (rituals) for conflict resolution and societal governance. This study intends to shed light on the societal significance of the Ọkọkọ's symbols, the interplay of language and culture in their practices, and their impact on maintaining social order and cultural heritage.

This research primarily focuses on investigating the diverse roles of the Ọkọkọ Society in Umuahia, delving into how it serves as a guardian and stabilizing force within the community. The study aims to unravel the societal functionality of the Ọkọkọ Society, particularly in terms of its use of traditional symbols and rituals in managing conflicts and governing societal norms. The objective is to highlight the significance of the Ọkọkọ's symbols within the community, examining the dynamic interaction between language and culture in their practices. Additionally, this research seeks to understand the impact of these practices on the preservation of social order and cultural heritage in Umuahia, offering a comprehensive view of the Ọkọkọ Society's contribution to the fabric of the community.

Building on the foundational objective of this research, the significance of the study lies in elucidating the vital role of Igbo language and culture in the lives of the people in Umuahia. The utilization of language is a key element in conflict management among the Igbo. For instance, during conflict resolution sessions, traditional practices such as the breaking of kola nuts and pouring libations to the ancestors are performed, wherein the use of the Igbo language, particularly idioms and proverbs by elders, plays a central role. These elders often act as mediators in conflicts, demonstrating the deep intertwining of language and cultural practices in maintaining peace and order.

This work is framed around three cardinal concepts: hermeneutics, language-culture dynamics, and conflict management. Hermeneutics involves the context analysis of oral or written speech, aiming to understand the nuances of communication and the multiplicity of meanings in language. It aligns with Chomsky's (Chomsky, 2002) view of language, which considers both social and psychological aspects—culture and human

behavior and interactions. In this context, language and culture are seen as symbiotic, with each influencing and shaping the other. Conflict management, as described by Lund (Lund, 1997) and Raczmany (Raczmany, 1998), is a process involving third-party intervention in disputes to reduce violence and destruction, aiming for a peaceful resolution or ceasefire.

The Ọkọkọ Society employs various symbols in its social engagements to uphold peace and justice. As Danesi (Danesi, 2004) notes, signs and symbols in a culture, such as colors, gestures, and objects, carry meanings beyond their literal interpretation, serving as tools for communication and representation. The use of gongs, bells, and drums, as highlighted by Sebeok (Sebeok, 2001), are examples of such communicative tools in the Ọkọkọ Society.

Prior literature has often overlooked the synergy between Igbo language and culture with the Ọkọkọ's conflict management practices. While some studies have focused solely on the language and culture or on the society's operations, there has been a gap in linking these aspects. The Ọkọkọ Society, known for its social and spiritual practices and primarily open to men, plays a critical role in community conflict resolution, particularly in land disputes. This study aims to delve into these social aspects, rather than the society's more secretive spiritual activities, which are esoteric and nocturnal in nature. By exploring the Ọkọkọ Society's use of language and symbolism in its public, exoteric activities, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of its role in the Igbo community of Umuahia.

Research Methods

1. Research Design

The methodology of this study was anchored in qualitative research, utilizing an ethnographic approach to capture the intricate dynamics of the Umuahia community's experience, feelings, and interpretations in their natural setting. This approach was essential to grasp the nuanced interactions within the community, especially in the context of conflict resolution. Primary data were collected through a combination of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and non-participant observations. These methods were particularly chosen to foster a deeper understanding of the subjects in their own linguistic and cultural milieu. The interviews and discussions were conducted in the Igbo language, aligning with the ethnographic commitment to engage with participants in their native language.

The research was conducted in Umuahia, the capital city of Abia State in Nigeria, which comprises two Local Government Areas. The study focused on four clans - Ibeku, Ọhụhụ, Ụbakala, and Olokoro - where the Ọkọkọ society is active, excluding Umuopara due to its discontinued practice of Ọkọkọ. The population of Umuahia, based on the 2006 census, provided a broad backdrop for the study. The study population included around 8,000 Ọkọkọ society members across these clans, with each clan contributing a substantial number of participants. Twelve full-fledged Ọkọkọ members from these clans were selected for in-depth interviews, and four focus group discussions were conducted, one in each clan, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the Ọkọkọ society's role in the community.

Purposive sampling, as outlined by Etikan (2016), was employed to select participants who best fit the study objectives, focusing on villages with active Ọkọkọ sessions. This method allowed for targeted data collection from relevant sources. The

researcher developed and utilized specific instruments for data collection, including observation schedules and guides for both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, all crafted in the Igbo language. This approach enhanced the authenticity of the data and was consistent with the ethnographic nature of the study. The researcher's direct involvement in data collection, especially in observing Ọkọnkọ panel sessions, ensured the validity and reliability of the gathered information. Data analysis was conducted using interpretive techniques, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the Ọkọnkọ society's application of proverbs and semiotic symbols in conflict resolution and social justice administration within the Umuahia community.

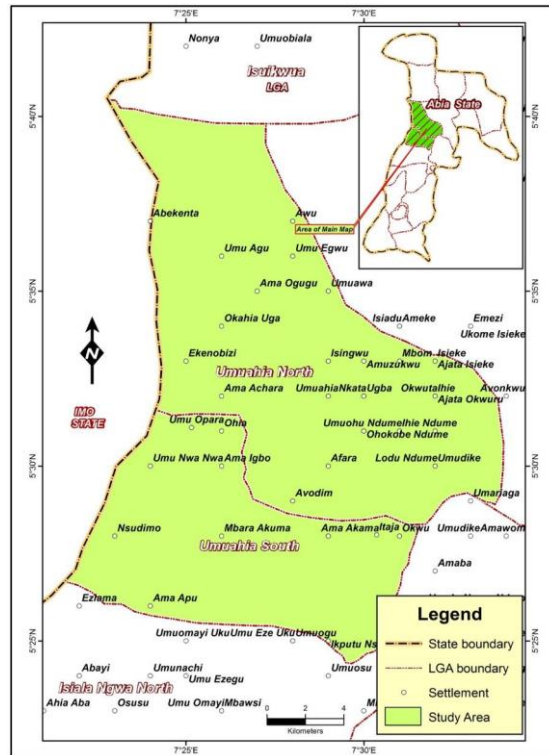


Figure 1 Map of Umuahia North and South

Results and Discussions

1. Ọkọnkọ as a Guardian of Umuahia Community

The role of the Ọkọnkọ Society in the Umuahia community is profoundly analogous to that of a vigilant watchdog, a characterization consistently reflected in the views expressed by interviewees and focus group participants. This metaphor, akin to the contemporary role of the police force, encapsulates the society's proactive and authoritative stance in conflict resolution and societal governance. Mazi David Okebaram Unuegbu (Focus Group Discussions, August 2021) from Ibeku clan articulated this perception, stating, "In Igbo culture, Igbo uses Ọkọnkọ to control the society. It is like the traditional and cultural government." This viewpoint is further reinforced by Mazi

Harrison Onyeama (Focus Group Discussions, August 2021) from Ohuhu clan, who reflects on the historical prominence of the Ọkọnkọ, predating colonial influences.

The role of the Ọkọnkọ extends beyond mere societal control; it is imbued with a sense of guardianship and communal protection. As Mazi Ukaegbu from Olokoro (Focus Group Discussions, August 2021) clan describes, the Ọkọnkọ is likened to a militant group, emphasizing its role in personal development and community protection. This perspective suggests the society's commitment to fostering a dependable and resilient community. Furthermore, Mazi Nwabunze Enyidedeye (Focus Group Discussions, August 2021) from Olokoro clan draws a parallel between the Ọkọnkọ and an unarmed police force, stating, "Ọkọnkọ is the police. It polices the community. It does not use guns. Its gun is the ọmụ." This analogy highlights the society's reliance on cultural symbols rather than physical force, underpinning their effectiveness in maintaining order and respect within the community.

The researcher's non-participant observations corroborate these assertions, revealing that the Ọkọnkọ's interventions in conflicts were sought not only by its members but also by those outside the society. The emphasis on justice, irrespective of membership status, underscores the society's inclusive approach to conflict resolution and its integral role in upholding societal norms and values. This approach reaffirms the Ọkọnkọ's status as a custodian of justice and a pivotal entity in the social and cultural fabric of the Umuahia community.

The concept of the Ọkọnkọ Society as a 'watchdog' is not just a local metaphor but aligns with broader anthropological theories of social control and governance. According to E.E. Evans-Pritchard's seminal work on African societies (Evans-Pritchard, 1940), traditional structures often fulfill roles similar to modern governmental institutions, albeit through culturally specific mechanisms. The Ọkọnkọ's use of the ọmụ as a symbol of authority and conflict mediation can be seen as an embodiment of what Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1973) referred to as a "cultural system." Geertz argues that such symbols serve as powerful mechanisms for conveying and reinforcing social norms and values. This aligns with the insights of Mazi Nwabunze Enyidedeye (Focus Group Discussions, August 2021), who highlights the non-violent yet authoritative nature of the Ọkọnkọ's approach to community policing. The reliance on cultural symbols over physical force signifies a deeper understanding of power dynamics within the Igbo society, resonating with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989), where authority is maintained more through cultural and symbolic capital than through brute force.

2. Vigilance and Protection: How Ọkọnkọ Polices the Society

The emblems of the Ọkọnkọ Society, the ọmụ (palm frond) and *uhie* (wooden musical instrument), play a pivotal role in the society's approach to vigilance and protection within the Umuahia community. These symbols are not just mere artifacts but are deeply embedded in the societal functions and cultural practices of the Ọkọnkọ. As articulated by Mazi David Okebaram Onuegbu (Focus Group Discussions, August 2021) from Ibeku clan, "Ọmụ Ọkọnkọ is hung on the land to show that there should be a judgment to determine who actually owns the land," indicating its role in conflict resolution and property disputes. Similarly, Mazi Obinna Orji, also from Ibeku clan, underscores its authority, noting that "When ọmụ is hung, nobody can enter the property again till the ọmụ is removed by Ọkọnkọ." These perspectives showcase the ọmụ as a symbol of authority, peace, and injunction within the community.

The semiotic significance of the ọmụ extends beyond physical representation; it

conveys deeper cultural meanings and societal values. Mazi Harrison Onyeama (Focus Group Discussions, August 2021) from Ohuhu clan and Mazi Alozie Ukaegbu (Focus Group Discussions, August 2021) from Olokoro clan highlight its connotations of peace and authority in Igbo culture. This cultural symbolism aligns with Michael Tomasello's view (Tomasello, 2003) on the psychological impact of cultural elements in communication. Furthermore, the enduring significance of *omụ* amidst changes over time and technology resonates with Harry Hoijer's observations (Hoijer, 1964) on cultural beliefs and values. The consistency in its symbolic value within the *Okonko* Society and the broader Igbo culture suggests a strong cultural resilience and continuity.

The *Okonko* Society's use of *omụ* and *uhie* transcends mere symbolic representation, echoing Geertz's (Geertz, 1973) concept of 'cultural systems' where symbols are central to societal understanding and control. The semiotic role of these emblems in the Igbo community aligns with the ideas of Saussure (1998) on the nature of signs in society, where symbols acquire meaning within the cultural context. The *omụ* and *uhie* are not just objects but are imbued with cultural significance that dictates behavior and societal expectations. This intertwining of cultural symbols and social governance reflects Bourdieu's (Bourdieu, 1989) theory of symbolic power, where authority is exercised through cultural understanding and acceptance. The *Okonko*'s reliance on these symbols for dispute resolution and societal control illustrates how traditional African societies have developed their systems of governance, heavily relying on cultural norms and values rather than formal legal frameworks. This indigenous approach, deeply rooted in cultural identity, offers an effective and community-centric alternative to more conventional law enforcement methods, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of traditional systems in maintaining social order and harmony.

Moreover, the enduring relevance of the *Okonko*'s practices in modern times resonates with the observations of Harry Hoijer (Hoijer, 1964) on the persistence of cultural values despite technological advancements. The continued significance of *omụ* and *uhie* within the Igbo community suggests a strong cultural continuity, defying the often presumed erosion of traditional practices in the face of modernization. This persistence reinforces Edward T. Hall's (1959) perspective on the silent language of culture, where cultural practices and symbols communicate norms and values more effectively than explicit verbal instructions. The *Okonko* Society's approach embodies this silent language, efficiently conveying and enforcing societal rules and expectations. Thus, their practices offer insightful perspectives into the functioning of indigenous African societies and contribute to a broader understanding of how traditional institutions and cultural symbols can effectively manage and resolve conflicts within a community, maintaining social cohesion and cultural integrity.

In the *Okonko* Society, it becomes evident that the society's symbols, particularly the *omụ*, are not mere physical artifacts but are deeply interwoven into the fabric of Igbo cultural identity and governance. The reverence and significance accorded to the *omụ* in the *Okonko* Society mirror the roles of sacred texts like the Bible in Christianity and the Qur'an in Islam, serving as cornerstones of cultural and spiritual guidance. This analogy underscores the profound cultural resonance of the *omụ* within the Igbo community, echoing Tomasello's (2003) perspective on the psychological impact of cultural elements. The unique meaning and importance of the *omụ* in the Igbo cultural context support Kovecses' (2002) assertion that cultural perceptions vary significantly across different societies due to diverse mental imageries and experiences. Interestingly, despite the rapid changes brought about by time and technology, as noted by Hoijer (1964, p. 457), the cultural perceptions and values associated with the *omụ* within the *Okonko* Society and

the wider Igbo community have remained steadfast. This enduring significance not only highlights the resilience of traditional symbols in the face of modernization but also emphasizes the crucial role such symbols play in maintaining cultural continuity, identity, and societal cohesion. Trust and Respect: The Foundation of Ọkọnkọ's Authority in Conflict Resolution

Ọkọnkọ serves as Appellant Court when conflict management fails at *ama ala* level. The *ama ala* (the adult males of the kindred) constitute the hamlet of a village. A village can constitute numerous hamlets. In turn, villages constitute a clan. In effect, a clan constitutes several hamlets depending on how many each of the villages has. Conflict management in a given hamlet is the responsibility of the *ama ala* people. They are called upon culturally to share the lands of families among the male children. If the children headed by the *opara* (first son) share the lands themselves, it might cause conflict. So culturally from generations past, the *ama ala* are consulted by the *opara* on behalf of himself and his younger brothers to come and administer the sharing of the lands. They cook and entertain the *ama ala* for their service. The food must be the local soup, *okazi* and *fufu* and *iba*.

Ama ala are influential in the goings on of the hamlets and villages. They are responsible for the sanitation of the community. They ensure that paths to the farms and streams are constantly cleared by the adult males. The married women have the duty of sweeping the *ama* (the open ground where they meet and play on weekly basis. They also weed the *ama*'s surroundings for burials, during New Yam Festival, Christmas, and on the day when a traditional wedding is to take place.

a) The Role of Semiotic Symbols in Umuahia's Social Life



Figure 2 The Power and Significance of Ọmu (Palm Frond) as an Emblem

In Semiotic Figure 2, the *Omu* is perceived as a mere palm frond by the average person. However, within the Ọkọnkọ society, the *Omu* takes on a multifaceted role, symbolizing physical, legal, and spiritual aspects. It serves as the flag of the Ọkọnkọ society, commanding respect, honor, and reverence akin to national flags. The *Omu* embodies peace and authority, yet it invokes fear when an Ọkọnkọ member places it on any land, tree, or object involved in a dispute. While women, children, and non-members of the Ọkọnkọ society can use the *Omu* casually, such as wrapping local food with its leaves, it is exclusively used by the Ọkọnkọ members to denote peace and authority. Violation of the ọmu's sanctity, regardless of the violator's social status, is met with strict repercussions, highlighting its significant and revered place in the society.



Figure 3 Uhie and Other Drums: Communication and Cultural Identity

In Semiotic Figure 3, the *Uhie*, adorned with a palm frond, alongside six other musical instruments, represents a crucial element of the Ọkọnkọ society. The *Uhie*, a distinctive wooden drum, forms an emblematic pair with the *Omu* in the society. Its significance as a symbol of communication is profound; the unique sound of the *Uhie* serves as a call, summoning Ọkọnkọ members to gather for meetings, especially during emergencies. The resonating beats of the *Uhie* hold a specific purpose, indicating the necessity of convening at a designated location.

The other drums, each with their distinct sounds, are employed for special occasions involving Ọkọnkọ members. These drums play a pivotal role in cultural ceremonies, notably in the final burial rites of an elderly Ọkọnkọ member. During such events, they are played in the market square, where masquerades emerge to dance and entertain the audience, including women and children. In essence, the *Uhie* and these other drums transcend mere musical instruments; they are integral to 'communication' within the Ọkọnkọ society, serving as a medium for conveying messages and celebrating significant cultural moments.



Figure 4 Uha Soup and Ugirisi Plant- Symbolisms of Longevity and Sacredness

Semiotic Figure 4 delves into the cultural significance of the *Uha* tree and *Ugirisi* plant, emblematic of longevity and sacredness within Igbo tradition. The *Uha* tree is renowned for its remarkable resilience and ability to regenerate. Even as it ages and its

leaves wither, it soon rejuvenates, sprouting fresh and vibrant leaves. This enduring vitality symbolizes long life, a value deeply esteemed in Igbo culture. The *Uha* soup, derived from this tree, is not only a staple in the Igbo diet but is also revered for its medicinal properties and its association with longevity. This reverence extends beyond its nutritional value, as the soup becomes a symbol reflecting the general Igbo reverence for enduring life and vitality.

Furthermore, the *Uha* tree's typical proximity to shrines in Igbo communities underscores its sacredness. Its resilience and perpetual renewal are viewed as a metaphor for life's continuity and the cyclical nature of existence. The tree's persistence, even in the face of apparent decline, resonates deeply with the Igbo worldview, symbolizing hope, renewal, and the sacredness of life. In this context, the *Uha* tree and the soup derived from it transcend their physical forms, embodying significant cultural and spiritual values within the Igbo community.



Figure 5 Ugirisi (or Okoronko) symbolising sacredness and protection

Semiotic Figure 5 explores the symbolic significance of the *Ugirisi* (or Okoronko) plant in Igbo culture, representing sacredness and protection. This plant is commonly found in shrines and along the borders between lands, where it serves as a natural demarcation, akin to a beacon in contemporary contexts. Its presence in these locations is not merely coincidental but is imbued with deep cultural meaning. The *Ugirisi* plant is revered as a sacred entity, particularly in areas of spiritual significance such as shrines, where it contributes to the sanctity of the space.

Additionally, the role of the *Ugirisi* in marking land boundaries holds profound importance in the Igbo community. It functions as a symbol of truth and justice, delineating where one person's land ends and another's begins. This natural boundary marker is so respected that altering or moving the *Ugirisi* plant is considered a taboo, especially when it demarcates lands owned by siblings or different communities. This taboo underscores the plant's role in maintaining harmony and order within the community, ensuring respect for property rights and preventing disputes over land ownership. In this regard, the *Ugirisi* (or Okoronko) transcends its physical form,

embodying principles of truth, respect for boundaries, and the sacred duty to protect the land and community harmony.

b) Other Miscellaneous Symbolisms



Figure 6 Okpu Egwurugwu (Igbo traditional cap)

Figure 6 presents the *Okpu Egwurugwu*, an integral element of Igbo attire, exemplifying completeness and identity within the Igbo culture. In a photograph taken in 2015, the researcher is seen alongside Mazi Nnabuike Orji from Olokoro, both donning the *Okpu Egwurugwu*. This traditional Igbo cap is not merely a piece of clothing but a symbol of cultural identity and pride. It is particularly significant for members of the *Okonko* society, who regard it as an essential part of their attire for various social and cultural events.

The *Okpu Egwurugwu* plays a vital role in distinguishing *Okonko* members, especially during important communal activities such as conflict resolution meetings, land inspections, and funeral services. Its presence signifies the wearer's affiliation with the *Okonko* society and embodies a sense of unity and solidarity among its members. The cap's significance goes beyond its physical appearance; it is a marker of social status and a symbol of belonging to the esteemed *Okonko* group. The requirement for *Okonko* members to wear this cap at significant events underscores its importance in maintaining the traditions and customs of the Igbo community, further solidifying the *Okpu Egwurugwu* as a symbol of cultural identity and cohesion within the society.

Oba, *Abuba Ugo* (Eagle's Feather), and *Oji Igbo* (Igbo Kola Nut) are significant elements in Igbo culture, each carrying deep symbolic meanings and serving distinct purposes within the community.

The *Oba* is a unique, deep cup crafted from the oba tuber, highly favored by elders for drinking during meetings and special occasions within the *Okonko* society. This cup symbolizes naturalness, unity, and trust - fundamental values in Igbo social interactions. Its durability, evident in its resistance to breakage when dropped, further underscores these qualities, making the *Oba* a revered item in Igbo cultural practices.

Abuba Ugo, or the Eagle's feather, holds a place of honor in Igbo culture. When adorned in one's cap, it represents more than just a feather; it's a synecdoche for the entire eagle, symbolizing honor, greatness, integrity, and the pinnacle of achievement. This symbolism reflects the high regard for the eagle in many cultures as a symbol of strength and majesty. In Igbo society, wearing the *Abuba Ugo* is a statement of one's stature and character.

The *Ọji Igbo*, or the Igbo kola nut, is a central element in Igbo culture and traditions. Revered as a covenantal symbol, the Ọji Igbo is integral to various ceremonial practices, including traditional marriages, sacrifices, and the ọfọ practice. Unlike ordinary kola nuts, the Ọji Igbo is traditionally broken with bare hands, signifying direct and unmediated contact with cultural heritage. The number of lobes or parts in a kola nut holds significant symbolism; more lobes indicate greater auspiciousness for the occasion. This practice underscores the kola nut's role as a communicator of cultural values, beliefs, and social unity within the Igbo community.

3. The Interplay of Language and Culture in Ọkọnkọ's Social Role

The responses this researcher got from the respondents during the interviews and the Focus Group Discussions about Igbo language tend to align with the position of Hudson (1980, pp. 103–105), Yule (1996, p. 247) and Alston (1998, p. 60) in the literature review which argue that the language and culture determines the way a people think and see reality.

In discussing this finding which is a bit abstract in nature, three phenomena have been looked into namely, Ọkọnkọ generally as a society whose presence is a guideline to the people, *Ekpẹ* dance, normally staged during the people's New Yam Festival and lastly, the *Ọkwụkwụ* phenomenon viewed as a spiritual means of preventing conflicts between the living and their ancestors.

Ọkọnkọ Society is seen as a culture and religion in itself. It represents the people's language and culture. Because they speak the language of the people and protect their culture inbuilt in the Igbo language, the people naturally trust them in discharging justice for the community. If the people did not trust Ọkọnkọ as a cultural institution, they would not be sticking to their social values and norms.

Based on these attributes of the Ọkọnkọ society, they were on several occasions described by their members as 'a religion', 'a society's watchdog', 'a government', a defender of the oppressed' and so forth. Some indigenes who were Ọkọnkọ members, but denounced the cult due to their churches' pressure still did not see anything wrong with Ọkọnkọ. They saw Ọkọnkọ as a watchdog. They would not want to be mentioned.

The non-participant observations undertaken by this researcher revealed that those who did not belong to Ọkọnkọ for reasons best known to them do not say evil against them. If they do, why did they take their cases to them? The people's thinking and reality of the existence and acceptance of Ọkọnkọ's social duties, especially that of conflict management could be pinned on the fact that the society is a metaphor of Igbo language and culture.

That in every conflict management the Umuahia people depend on their language and culture is one of the findings from the fieldwork. This particular finding was primarily informed by the series of non-participant observations this researcher undertook in Olokoro. It was evident that the Igbo language helped in the smooth communication between the Ọkọnkọ panelists and the people who came for one conflict to another. From the start to the end of each of the sessions observed at Olokoro Civic Hall, the culture of the people was exhibited clearly using Igbo language. For instance, the chairman never spoke a word in English. He greeted the people in their Olokoro dialect, and when any of the panelists or the conflicting parties, or the witnesses asked a question or made an utterance in English, he, the chairman would politely but firmly said, '*Ọkọnkọ anaghi anu okwubekeyi*', which literally means 'Ọkọnkọ does not understand the English language'.

When witnesses gave their statements, when the defendants and plaintiffs spoke,

Ọkọnkọ panelists addressed some of them that were elderly with the Umuahia's cultural prefix of *De* (for a man), and *Da* (for a woman).

At the land inspection at ItuOlokoro, the *igoqfo* exercise followed the cultural norm. The Ọkọnkọ chairman placing his right hand on the piece of land uttered 'powerful' words in Igbo language. No single English word was heard. The passion with which he personified the land was only indicative of the respect the Igbo have for the land. He called:

'*Ala*', (O land)

'*Ala*', (O land)

'*Ala*', (O land)

(As he called on the land, he looked so serious, shaking his head while every other looked on, silent.)

'*Kugbuo*' (kill, land he mentioned the defendant)

'*Kugbuo*' (kill, land he mentioned the plaintiff)

'*Kugbuo*' (kill, land he mentioned the witnesses)

He urged *Ala* to kill even any Ọkọnkọ member that would compromise. *Ala* is both physical and spiritual in Igbo worldview. Physically, it is the land in which the people build and farm. However, *Ala* is also a spiritual being, the earth goddess which Achebe (2009, p. 109) describes as 'mother and judge'. In other words, the *Ala* is capable of protecting the people and at the same time punish as a judge does.

When giving the final verdict, he started with common Igbo proverb, '*Ugo eberule na ngbagbu.*' With the proverb, which means that 'the eagle has perched for the hunter to kill it,' the single proverb spoke much better language than one hundred sentences either in Igbo or English language. All their findings were clearly stated in Igbo. No single English word.

It was discovered that when the final verdict was given, both the winners and the losers kept silent. Before the chairman said the final verdict proverb, he smiled, and smiled again after the proverb, swinging his head from left to right and vice versa. But while giving their findings amidst the silent hall, he was as sober as the judge he was.

The last words he, the Ọkọnkọ chairman made was a rhetorical question:

Ndi Ọkọnkọ, ifenkuru, obukwaifeanyikweketeruooo?

Ọkọnkọ people, what I said, was it what we agreed?

The response from the fellow panelists was:

Eeee!

As they responded in unison, they all filed out of the hall, and straight to their respective homes.

Yet another finding is that proverbs are the people's instrument for passing complex messages and giving final verdict. Barley's (1972) definition suits the finding being discussed about proverbs. Barley said that a proverb is '... a standard statement of moral or categorical imperatives in fixed metaphorical paradigmatic form...'. This single finding also goes a long way in supporting Madu (1996, p. 189) belief that a proverb is 'condensed wisdom drawn from experience'. Drawing from the analyses given to the proverbs the respondents alluded to, it is obvious that proverbs are the people's preferred language for passing complex messages or information. On the other hand, proverbs are employed for final verdicts after conflict management sessions.

In the FGD held at Ndume Ibeku, Mazi Okebaram Onuegbu to an extent agreed with

Mazi Okebugo from Ubakala clan on the opinion of laconic nature of proverbs. He said: Proverbs are used to solve conflicts much faster. Proverbs summarize volumes of thought in a few words.

In another FGD at Afugiri Ọhụhụ, the following three members of the group defined proverbs in few words. For Mazi Harrison Onyema, he said, 'The final verdict is normally in proverbs.' On the opinion of Mazi Uchechi Ichite, he said, 'There is a way a proverb can be used to correct a person. It is didactic.' Mazi Young Ukauwa supported Mazi Onyema and went a bit further retrospectively as par the relevance of proverbs in the olden days: 'The Igbo people use proverbs to give verdicts. Ancient Ọkọnkọ people used proverbs to teach younger ones how to judge. The use of proverbs implies wisdom and brevity.'

The third FGD in Ipupe Ụbakala also had members saying that proverbs are invaluable, as well as good for brevity. 'Proverbs in Igbo are invaluable' was Mazi Engr Chibuike Enwerekowe's assessment while Mazi Ukairu Irokwe said, 'We use proverbs to conceal secrets.' The third contributor added, 'The use of proverbs is for economy of words.'

In FGD at Okwu Olokoru, the members focused more on interpretations of proverbs they themselves raised than engaging in definitions. However, Mazi Ajomiwe Ekeleme, in the course of arguing with his colleagues defined proverbs in two short sentences in his argument that a proverb could have more than a single meaning or interpretation. He said, 'Proverbs are ambivalent. They are two sided sharpened sword.'

Agreed, a proverb is a metaphor whose meaning could differ depending on the situations on ground. This implies that a user of a particular proverb must be mindful of the situation before using it. This is because using a proverb wrongly as it was argued above could cause more harm than good in peace situations. The proverbs highlighted in this study are peace-prone proverbs, i.e., proverbs used to foster peace and justice. Some proverbs trigger conflicts and crises, some create enmity while some encourage rebellion.

With the above extract from Isichei (1977, pp. 92–93), it is no surprising that this researcher could not see a trace of the Ọkọnkọ society in Umuopara forty-three years after the interview was granted. The irony of the present situation is that Umuopara is the cultural 'first son' which in Igbo means 'opara' of the people of Umuahia. In the absence of Ọkọnkọ Society in this clan, the few that were spoken to said they resort to Magistrate courts when the *ama ala* fail to control order on the community.

4. Discussion

This research reveals that the Ọkọnkọ Society functions significantly as both guardian and mediator within the Umuahia community, utilizing symbolism and linguistic practices to maintain social harmony and resolve conflicts. Symbols such as the ọmụ and uhie, along with the use of the Igbo language and proverbs, are crucial in executing social and justice functions, demonstrating the deep interconnection between tradition, language, and community governance.

The research on the Ọkọnkọ Society in Umuahia offers an insightful contrast to the broader narrative of the declining influence of traditional institutions in conflict resolution across Nigeria, as noted in previous studies (Victoria, 2018). Unlike the trend where westernization and political dynamics undermine the roles of such institutions (Victoria, 2018), the Ọkọnkọ Society exemplifies resilience and adaptability. Its effective use of symbolism, linguistic practices, and the profound integration of traditional values within

its operational framework highlights a distinct scenario where traditional mechanisms robustly support community governance and conflict mediation. This case underscores the variability and potential resilience of traditional institutions in maintaining their relevance and effectiveness in the face of modern challenges and societal transformations.

The situation in Umuahia contrasts with the unsuccessful attempts to integrate traditional and Western adjudicatory systems in Ghana (Aasoglenang et al., 2023), yet it echoes the persistent symbiotic relationship found in other contexts (Lamidi & Olaleye, 2023). The effectiveness of the *Ọkọnkọ* Society also aligns with observations (Yusuf & Shittu, 2022) on the critical role of African traditional religion in conflict resolution, emphasizing the spiritual authority and binding nature of traditional practices. Despite the challenges faced by traditional institutions in managing contemporary conflicts, as seen in the herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria (Omotola, 2023), the enduring relevance of these institutions (Omotola, 2023) in Umuahia reflects their potential to contribute meaningfully to societal harmony and conflict management. This scenario highlights the importance of recognizing and leveraging the cultural authority of traditional institutions within the socio-political framework to enhance their integration and effectiveness in contemporary governance and conflict resolution processes.

The implications of this research underscore the critical role that traditional institutions like the *Ọkọnkọ* Society can play in informing contemporary governance and conflict resolution methodologies. Studies have consistently shown that these traditional bodies can complement and rectify the deficiencies observed in modern conflict resolution mechanisms, offering a symbiotic relationship with formal or state institutions to effectively address disputes (Issifu & Bukari, 2022; Lamidi & Olaleye, 2023). Particularly in the realm of non-state conflicts, traditional mechanisms have demonstrated remarkable efficacy, especially when bolstered by state support, illustrating their capacity to foster social harmony and resolve disputes within and across cultural divides (Stobbe, 2015). Nonetheless, the potential politicization and commercialization of these traditional entities pose significant challenges that must be navigated to harness their full capabilities in conflict management (Omotola, 2023). Ultimately, by integrating traditional and indigenous conflict resolution systems into the broader spectrum of governance, we can tap into a reservoir of unique perspectives and methodologies that enrich contemporary practices (Ezeani et al., 2023).

The findings of this study are crucial for understanding the significant insights that traditional institutions like the *Ọkọnkọ* Society can provide in the realms of contemporary governance and conflict resolution. Recognizing and incorporating traditional mechanisms within the formal legal framework can enhance our approach to justice and governance, offering solutions that are more holistic and deeply rooted in local culture. This not only enriches the variety of tools available for conflict resolution but also ensures that solutions are culturally sensitive and sustainable.

The outcomes of this research stem from the rich cultural and traditional heritage of the Igbo, where symbolism and language play pivotal roles in the social structure and governance. The resilience and adaptability demonstrated by institutions like the *Ọkọnkọ* highlight the importance of culture and community-based solutions in addressing social challenges and conflicts, offering an alternative to more homogeneous and top-down approaches. This underscores the necessity of integrating traditional wisdom and practices into contemporary conflict resolution strategies to ensure they are comprehensive and respectful of cultural nuances.

The next steps should involve fostering dialogue between formal legal systems and traditional institutions, identifying ways in which these systems can complement each

other. Further research is needed to explore how this integration can be effectively implemented across different cultural contexts. Moreover, there should be an emphasis on education and awareness regarding the value and practices of traditional institutions, ensuring that this knowledge is appreciated and preserved for future generations. This approach not only promotes a deeper understanding of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms but also encourages a more inclusive and diverse framework for governance and justice.

Conclusion

The most striking finding of this research lies in the revelation that the Ọkọnkọ Society, traditionally viewed as a secretive cult, plays a far more significant role in the social fabric of Umuahia than previously understood. Contrary to the limited view of their function, it turns out that the society is deeply involved in conflict resolution and community governance, utilizing a rich tapestry of cultural symbols and linguistic practices. The societal use of Igbo language, proverbs, and symbols like ọmụ and uhie not only for ritualistic purposes but also as tools in practical and democratic dispute resolution, underscores a sophisticated system of traditional governance.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a nuanced understanding of the interplay between traditional practices and contemporary societal needs. By applying concepts of hermeneutics and symbolic power, the research offers a new perspective on the function of traditional societies in modern African communities. It challenges the conventional perceptions of secret societies and highlights the adaptability and relevance of traditional cultural mechanisms in current times. The methodological approach, combining ethnographic techniques with theoretical analysis, offers a comprehensive view of how traditional societies like the Ọkọnkọ can effectively contribute to conflict resolution and social cohesion.

One limitation of this research is its focus on a single community, Umuahia, which may not fully represent the diversity within other Igbo societies or similar African communities. Additionally, the study primarily explored the public, exoteric aspects of the Ọkọnkọ Society, leaving the more secretive, esoteric practices less examined. Future research could expand to include multiple Igbo communities or even other African societies with similar traditional structures, to provide a more holistic understanding. Moreover, a deeper exploration into the secretive aspects of the Ọkọnkọ Society, while respecting cultural sensitivities, could offer further insights into the complex interplay between the public and private facets of traditional societies.

Acknowledgments

This article is based on 2015 field work by this researcher for his doctoral thesis. The 12 in-depth interviews, 4 focus group discussions and series of non-participant observations were undertaken in four clans of Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria. These clans include, Ibeku, Ohuhu, Ubakala, and Olokoru respectively. All the respondents both in the interviews and FGDs were Ọkọnkọ members from the four clans. No trace of the society is found in the fifth clan of Umuahia, Umuopara.

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