

Oral Traditions, Storytelling, Performance, and Indigenous Diplomatic Practices among the Epie and their Neighbours

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Abstract

This study examines Oral Traditions, Storytelling, Performance, and Indigenous Diplomatic Practices among the Epie and their Neighbours as mechanisms for fostering inter-group relations in the Central Niger Delta. While existing scholarship has largely treated oral traditions as cultural expressions, this research argues that they also function as indigenous diplomatic instruments for peace-making, alliance formation, conflict resolution, and social cohesion. The study adopts Symbolic Interactionism Theory, which explains how shared symbols, narratives, rituals, and performances shape social meanings and collective relationships among communities. Two thematic foci guide the analysis: oral traditions and storytelling as instruments of indigenous diplomacy and alliance-building, and performance practices as mechanisms for conflict resolution and social cohesion among the Epie and neighbouring groups. Drawing on oral historical evidence and inter-disciplinary literatures, the study reveals that folktales, proverbs, songs, festivals, and ritual performances served as channels for transmitting diplomatic values, negotiating disputes, reinforcing mutual obligations, and sustaining peaceful coexistence. The study contributes to knowledge by expanding the understanding of diplomacy beyond formal statecraft to include indigenous communicative practices embedded in local cultures. It concludes that Epie oral traditions remain valuable resources for community peacebuilding and recommends their preservation and integration into contemporary conflict-management initiatives.

Keywords: Oral Traditions, Indigenous Diplomacy, Storytelling, Conflict Resolution.

1. Introduction

Oral traditions constitute one of the most significant ways through which African societies preserve historical memories, communicate social values, transmit cultural knowledge, and maintain relations among individuals and communities. Before the widespread adoption of written records, African societies depended largely on oral forms such as folktales, proverbs, myths, songs, praise poetry, rituals, and performances as mechanisms for preserving collective experiences and regulating social life (Finnegan, 2012). Oral traditions were not merely entertainment forms; they served as instruments of education, political communication, moral instruction, and social negotiation within indigenous communities.

Among the Epie people of present-day Bayelsa State in the Central Niger Delta, oral traditions have historically played significant roles in shaping community and clan identity and maintaining relations with neighbouring groups. The Epie, like many Niger Delta societies, developed indigenous systems of interaction where storytelling, communal performances, rituals, and symbolic expressions facilitated communication, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence (Sambo, 2018). These practices provided platforms through which historical memories were preserved, social obligations were reinforced, and relationships with neighbouring communities were negotiated (Alagoa, 1972).

Diplomacy, in its conventional sense, is often associated with formal relations between modern states, involving negotiation, representation, treaties, and international agreements. Accordingly, Sambo & Bailey (2025) and Akinjogbin (1992) have argued that diplomacy existed long

before the emergence of modern state systems and operated through traditional institutions, kinship networks, cultural exchanges, rituals, and oral communication. Indigenous African diplomacy therefore refers to the processes through which communities managed relations, resolved disputes, established alliances, and promoted peaceful coexistence using culturally recognized mechanisms.

In this context, the oral traditions of the Epie ethnic nationality can be understood as diplomatic tools. Narratives, proverbs, songs, and performances carried messages of unity, respect, cooperation, and reconciliation. Elders and traditional authorities often employed storytelling and symbolic communication to teach younger generations about acceptable social conduct, historical relationships, and the importance of maintaining harmony with neighbouring communities (Sambo & Bailey, 2025). Through these practices, oral traditions became a form of indigenous diplomatic engagement.

The Central Niger Delta has historically been characterized by complex relationships among different ethnic groups, shaped by migration, trade, marriage alliances, environmental interactions, and political exchanges. Communities under the Epie clan and neighbouring clans over the years have developed mechanisms for managing both cooperation and conflict. Oral traditions provided historical explanations of origins, shared ancestry, migration experiences, and past agreements, thereby strengthening collective memory and social bonds (Alagoa, 1972). These narratives contributed to the construction of identities while also providing frameworks for understanding relationships between communities.

Peace-making represents one of the central functions of indigenous diplomatic practices. In many African societies, conflicts were not only addressed through physical confrontation but also through dialogue, mediation, rituals, and reconciliation processes. Elders, chiefs, and community representatives utilized proverbs, symbolic gestures, and storytelling to communicate grievances and encourage compromise. Such approaches reflected indigenous concepts of justice that emphasized restoration, reconciliation, and the continuation of social relationships rather than punishment alone (Gyekye, 1997).

Alliance formation was another important dimension of oral traditions and indigenous diplomacy. Historical narratives, marriage traditions, communal celebrations, and ceremonial performances helped create bonds between communities. Stories about shared ancestry and mutual assistance reinforced relationships and encouraged cooperation in areas such as trade, security, and cultural exchange. These alliances contributed to stability within the wider Niger Delta environment (Sambo & Bailey, 2025).

Performance practices also served diplomatic purposes. Festivals, songs, dances, talking drum, sound bit, and communal ceremonies created spaces for interaction among different groups. Such performances communicated shared values and reinforced social solidarity. They also provided opportunities for communities to renew relationships, settle misunderstandings, and strengthen collective belonging (Schechner, 2013). In this sense, performance was not simply artistic expression but a social and diplomatic practice.

The relevance of studying Epie oral traditions and indigenous diplomacy becomes increasingly important in contemporary times when many indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution face challenges from modernization, globalization, and changing social structures. The weakening of traditional communication systems may affect the preservation of historical knowledge and indigenous approaches to peace-building. Therefore, examining these practices provides insights into how traditional societies managed relationships and maintained social cohesion.

This study is anchored on the argument that oral traditions among the Epie and their neighbours represent historical records and diplomatic resources that contributed to peace-making, alliance formation, conflict resolution, and social cohesion. By examining storytelling and performance as diplomatic practices, the study expands the understanding of diplomacy beyond formal political institutions to include indigenous systems of negotiation and relationship management.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Symbolic Interactionism Theory as its theoretical framework. Symbolic

Interactionism emerged from sociological studies focusing on how individuals and communities create meanings through social interactions. The theory is primarily associated with scholars such as George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, and Erving Goffman.

George Herbert Mead developed the foundational ideas of symbolic interactionism by arguing that human beings act based on meanings developed through social interaction. According to Mead, meanings are not naturally fixed; rather, they emerge through communication and shared experiences within society (Mead, 1934). This perspective highlights the importance of language, symbols, gestures, and cultural practices in shaping human relationships.

Herbert Blumer later developed Mead's ideas and formally introduced the term Symbolic Interactionism. Blumer (1969) identified three major principles of the theory:

People act based on the meanings things have for them.

Meanings emerge through social interaction.

Meanings are modified through interpretation and experience.

Applying this theory to the study, oral traditions, storytelling, and performances among the Epie are viewed as symbolic systems through which communities create, transmit, and interpret meanings. Proverbs, folktales, songs, rituals, and ceremonies contain symbolic messages that communicate values about peace, respect, cooperation, and social responsibility.

For instance, traditional narratives about community origins and relationships with neighbours provide symbolic meanings that reinforce identity and belonging. These stories influence how individuals understand their obligations toward other groups and encourage peaceful interaction. Similarly, proverbs used by elders during conflict resolution serve as symbolic communication tools that express wisdom, encourage compromise, and restore social harmony.

Symbolic Interactionism also explains the diplomatic significance of performances. Festivals, dances, and communal ceremonies are not merely cultural activities but symbolic interactions where communities or groups express unity, renew relationships, and negotiate social connections. Through these performances, participants interpret shared meanings that strengthen alliances and collective identity. Furthermore, the theory helps explain how indigenous diplomacy operates through communication rather than formal institutions. The Epie diplomatic practices examined in this study demonstrate that negotiation, reconciliation, and alliance-building can occur through symbolic expressions embedded in oral culture.

Therefore, Symbolic Interactionism provides an appropriate framework for analyzing how oral traditions and performances function as diplomatic instruments among the Epie and their neighbours in the Central Niger Delta. It reveals that cultural expressions are not passive traditions but active mechanisms through which communities construct relations, resolve conflicts, and maintain social cohesion.

2.1. Oral Traditions and Storytelling as Instruments of Indigenous Diplomacy and Alliance Formation among the Epie and her Neighbours

Oral traditions represent one of the most enduring mechanisms through which indigenous societies preserve historical consciousness, communicate social values, and regulate relations among communities. In African society, oral traditions are not merely forms of cultural entertainment but constitute important systems of knowledge production, political communication, and social organization (Finnegan, 2012). Among the Epie ethnic group of the Central Niger Delta, oral traditions such as folktales, proverbs, historical narratives, praise songs, genealogical accounts, and communal memories served as channels through which diplomatic values and inter-group relations were transmitted.

The concept of indigenous diplomacy extends the understanding of diplomacy beyond modern state-to-state relations. Traditional African communities developed their own diplomatic mechanisms through elders, chiefs, kinship networks, rituals, cultural exchanges, and oral communication. These mechanisms enabled communities to negotiate relations, manage disagreements, establish alliances, and sustain peaceful co-existence (Akinjogbin, 1992). In this regard, oral traditions functioned as diplomatic resources because they provided the language, symbols, and narratives through which communities understood themselves and relates with others.

Among the Epie and their neighbouring communities, storytelling played an important role in

preserving memories of migration, settlement patterns, ancestry, and historical relations. Stories about origins and communal experiences often provided explanations of how groups became connected and why certain relationships deserved respect and protection. Such narratives reinforced ideas of belonging and mutual responsibility among neighbouring communities. According to Alagoa (1972), historical traditions in the Niger Delta were preserved largely through oral accounts, which provided communities with knowledge of their past and frameworks for understanding their relations with other groups.

Storytelling also served as a mechanism of alliance formation. In many indigenous societies, relations were not maintained only through political arrangements but also through shared narratives and cultural connections. Oral accounts of cooperation, inter-marriage, trade relations, and mutual assistance strengthened bonds between communities. These narratives reminded successive generations of existing obligations and encouraged peaceful interactions. The telling of historical experiences created collective memories that supported unity and cooperation.

The diplomatic importance of oral traditions is also evident in the role of proverbs and wise sayings. Proverbs function as condensed expressions of social knowledge and moral principles. Elders frequently employed proverbs during negotiations, community meetings, and conflict discussions because they carried meanings understood within the cultural environment. Rather than using direct confrontation, symbolic expressions allowed individuals to communicate difficult messages in socially acceptable ways. This practice reflects the argument of Symbolic Interactionism that meanings are created and transmitted through shared symbols and social interaction (Blumer, 1969).

For the Epie, as with many Niger Delta communities, elders traditionally served as custodians of knowledge and mediators of social relationships. Their authority was partly derived from their ability to interpret historical narratives and apply cultural wisdom to contemporary situations. Through storytelling sessions, elders educated younger generations about acceptable behaviour, respect for neighbours, and the importance of maintaining communal harmony. Therefore, oral traditions became instruments for diplomatic education and social continuity.

Alliance formation through oral traditions was also connected to cultural performances and communal gatherings. Festivals, ceremonies, and storytelling events created spaces where different communities interacted and renewed relations. These gatherings strengthened social networks and provided opportunities for dialogue. According to Schechner (2013), performance is not simply artistic representation; it is a social action through which community or group express identities, negotiate meanings, and maintain relations. Furthermore, oral traditions helped regulate relations between communities by preserving memories of agreements, friendships, and historical cooperation. In societies where written treaties were limited, collective memory served as a form of historical record. Narratives about past alliances functioned as reminders of obligations between groups. This contributed to the maintenance of diplomatic relations and reduced tendencies toward conflict.

The use of oral traditions as diplomatic instruments also reflects broader African approaches to international and inter-group relations. African diplomacy historically emphasized negotiation, mediation, hospitality, kinship, and symbolic communication. Rather than relying exclusively on formal agreements, many societies depended on cultural practices that promoted trust and reciprocity (Gyekye, 1997). The experience of trade relations between the Nembe and Epie traders during the 1940s therefore demonstrates that diplomacy existed within indigenous social systems long before the emergence of modern diplomatic institutions.

However, modernization, globalization, and changing patterns of communication have affected the transmission of oral knowledge. Younger generations increasingly depend on written and digital forms of communication, creating concerns about the preservation of indigenous diplomatic knowledge. Despite these challenges, oral traditions remain valuable sources for understanding how communities historically managed relations and maintained peace. Therefore, this demonstrates that the Epie oral traditions and storytelling served as diplomatic mechanisms through which communities preserved historical knowledge, constructed identities, formed alliances, and promoted peaceful relationships with neighbouring groups in the Central Niger Delta.

2.2. Performance Practices, Conflict Resolution, and Social Cohesion in Epie Indigenous Diplomacy

Performance practices constitute another significant dimension of indigenous diplomacy among the Epie and their neighbours. In indigenous African societies, performances such as songs, dances, festivals, rituals, masquerades, talking drum, and communal ceremonies were not simply forms of recreation; they represented important social institutions through which communities communicated values, resolved tensions, and reinforced collective identity (Schechner, 2013).

The relationship between performance and diplomacy is based on the understanding that social relationships are maintained through communication and symbolic interaction. Symbolic performances create shared meanings that influence how individuals perceive themselves and others. Mead (1934) argues that human society depends on communication through symbols, as people interpret and respond to meanings created within social interaction. In this context, the Epie cultural-festival performances can be understood as symbolic diplomatic activities that strengthen relations among communities within the Epie clan.

One major function of performance practices was conflict resolution. Indigenous societies often viewed conflict as a disruption of social harmony rather than simply a disagreement between individuals. Consequently, conflict management emphasized reconciliation, restoration, and the rebuilding of relations. Community elders, traditional leaders, and respected individuals often used dialogue, rituals, songs, and symbolic performances to mediate disputes. These practices reflected indigenous approaches to justice that prioritized restoring balance within society (Gyekye, 1997; Sambo & Bailey, 2025). Among the Epie and neighbouring groups, communal gatherings provided spaces where grievances could be expressed and negotiated. Performances during festivals and ceremonies created opportunities for interaction between groups and reduced social tensions. The presence of shared cultural activities encouraged dialogue and reinforced the idea that communities were connected through common experiences.

Songs, in particular, served diplomatic purposes by communicating historical memories, moral lessons, and collective values. Through songs, communities preserved stories of cooperation, warned against behaviours that threatened unity, and celebrated relationships with neighbouring groups. Music and performance therefore became channels for transmitting diplomatic messages across generations. More so, traditional festivals among cultural-clans also contributed significantly to social cohesion. Festivals brought together individuals and communities for collective participation, exchange, and celebration. Such gatherings strengthened inter-personal relations and promote cultural understanding. Turner (1969) explains that communal rituals create moments of social unity where individuals experience a sense of belonging beyond ordinary social divisions.

The use of symbolic rituals in conflict resolution further demonstrates the diplomatic character of indigenous performances. Rituals often marked important moments of reconciliation, forgiveness, and renewal of relations. Through symbolic actions, communities communicated their willingness to restore peace and continue peaceful interaction. These practices provided legitimacy to agreements reached between conflicting groups.

Performance practices also supported alliance maintenance. Cultural events allowed neighbouring communities to demonstrate friendship, cooperation, and mutual respect. Participation in one another's ceremonies strengthened diplomatic ties and encouraged social exchange. In this way, performances functioned as informal diplomatic meetings where relationships were renewed. The role of performance in maintaining social cohesion is particularly important within the Niger Delta because communities historically depended on cooperation for survival. Environmental conditions, economic activities, trade networks, and shared resources required peaceful interaction among neighbouring groups. Cultural performances helped reinforce values of cooperation and collective responsibility.

Additionally, performance practices contributed to identity formation. Communities express their histories and values through cultural performances, creating a shared sense of belonging. According to Hall (1997), cultural expressions play a central role in constructing and maintaining collective identities. For the Epie, performances provided avenues through which community identity is preserved while also allowing interaction with neighbouring groups.

Despite the importance of these practices, contemporary challenges threaten the continuity of indigenous performances. Urbanization, modernization, and changing social values have reduced the frequency and influence of some traditional practices. However, their relevance remains significant because they provide alternative approaches to peace-building and conflict management. Thus, this reveals that Epie performance practices served as diplomatic mechanisms for conflict resolution, reconciliation, alliance maintenance, and social cohesion. They demonstrate that diplomacy existed not only through formal negotiations but also through cultural expressions embedded within everyday community life.

3. Contributions to Knowledge

This study contributes significantly to the expanding scholarship on indigenous diplomacy, oral history, and African conflict-management systems by demonstrating that diplomacy is not exclusively a modern state-based practices but also exists within indigenous cultural institutions and communication systems. While conventional diplomatic studies often emphasize formal negotiations between states, this research reveals that oral traditions, storytelling, and performance practices among the Epie and her neighbours functioned as indigenous diplomatic mechanisms for managing relations, negotiating differences, and sustaining cooperation (Akinjogbin, 1992).

First, the study contributes to knowledge by repositioning oral traditions as active instruments of diplomacy rather than merely cultural expressions or historical sources. Through folktales, proverbs, historical narratives, and communal memories, Epie society preserved diplomatic knowledge concerning peaceful coexistence, respect, reciprocity, and obligations toward neighbouring communities. This reinforces Finnegan's (2012) argument that African oral traditions represent complex systems of knowledge transmission capable of preserving social, political, and historical experiences.

Second, the study expands understanding of indigenous peace-making mechanisms by demonstrating how storytelling and symbolic communication contributed to conflict prevention and resolution. The research shows that elders and traditional authorities utilized narratives, proverbs, and culturally recognized expressions to communicate reconciliation messages, encourage compromise, and restore damaged relationships. This supports Gyekye's (1997) and Sambo & Bailey's (2025) arguments that like the societies in the Niger Delta, African indigenous societies developed philosophical and social mechanisms that emphasized communal harmony and restorative approaches to conflict.

Third, the study contributes theoretically by applying Symbolic Interactionism to the analysis of indigenous diplomatic practices. The theory demonstrates that meanings attached to oral expressions, rituals, and performances shaped how communities understood relations and negotiate social realities (Blumer, 1969). By applying this framework to Epie society, the research highlights how symbols, stories, and performances functioned as diplomatic languages through which communities constructed peace, identity, and cooperation.

Fourth, the study contributes to Niger Delta historiography by providing a broader interpretation of inter-group relations beyond economic and political explanations. Existing studies of the Niger Delta have often focused on resource conflicts, environmental challenges, and political struggles. This study introduces cultural diplomacy as an important dimension of historical relations among communities. The work of Alagoa (1972) on Niger Delta oral traditions supports the importance of indigenous historical narratives in understanding community interactions and collective memory.

Fifth, the study contributes to contemporary peace-building discourse by showing that indigenous diplomatic practices remain relevant in modern conflict-management strategies. The principles embedded in traditional storytelling, communal performances, and reconciliation practices can provide valuable lessons for strengthening social cohesion in multi-cultural societies. As Schechner (2013) and Umeme (2023) have respectively noted, performance creates social spaces where identities are expressed, relations are negotiated, and communities are united.

Finally, the study contributes to the preservation of indigenous knowledge by emphasizing the need to document and protect oral traditions threatened by modernization, globalization, and changing

communication patterns. The preservation of these traditions ensures that future generations understand the historical mechanisms through which communities maintained peace and cooperation.

4. Conclusion

This paper examined oral traditions, storytelling, performance, and indigenous diplomatic practices among the Epie and her neighbours by focusing on their roles in peace-making, alliance formation, conflict resolution, and social cohesion. The paper established that oral traditions were not merely cultural practices but important diplomatic tools through which communities communicated values, preserved historical memories, and managed relations.

The descriptive-narrative revealed that storytelling provided a platform for transmitting knowledge about communal identity, historical relationships, and expectations of peaceful interaction. Through narratives and proverbs, elders educated younger generations on the importance of cooperation, respect, and maintaining harmonious relationships with neighbouring groups (Finnegan, 2012). These practices served as informal diplomatic mechanisms that strengthened alliances and prevented social fragmentation.

The paper further demonstrated that performance practices such as festivals, songs, rituals, and communal ceremonies played significant roles in conflict management and social integration. These performances created opportunities for interaction, reconciliation, and renewal of social bonds. Through symbolic communication, communities expressed shared values and reinforced collective identity (Mead, 1934; Schechner, 2013). The application of Symbolic Interactionism Theory revealed that indigenous diplomacy operated through meanings attached to cultural symbols and social interactions. Oral expressions, rituals, and performances provided frameworks through which communities interpreted relationships and negotiated peace (Blumer, 1969).

In conclusion, Epie indigenous diplomatic practices demonstrate that diplomacy existed beyond formal political institutions. They reveal a historical system of negotiation and relationship management embedded within cultural expressions. Recognizing these practices enriches understanding of African diplomatic history and provides useful insights for contemporary approaches to peace-building and conflict resolution.

5. Recommendations

5.1. Documentation and Preservation of Oral Traditions

Government institutions, cultural organizations, and researchers should prioritize the documentation of Epie oral traditions, storytelling traditions, and performance practices to prevent the loss of indigenous diplomatic knowledge (Finnegan, 2012) and (Sambo & Bailey, 2025).

5.2. Integration of Indigenous Mechanisms into Peace-building Processes

Modern conflict-resolution frameworks should incorporate traditional diplomatic practices such as elder mediation, storytelling, and communal dialogue because they emphasize reconciliation and social restoration (Umeme, 2023).

5.3. Strengthening Cultural Education

Educational institutions should include indigenous history, oral traditions, and cultural diplomacy in their curricula to promote awareness among younger generations about traditional systems of social cohesion.

5.4. Promotion of Inter-group Cultural Exchanges

Cultural festivals, communal performances, and traditional gatherings should be encouraged among the Epie and neighbouring communities to strengthen relations and promote peaceful coexistence (Schechner, 2013).

5.5. Recognition of Traditional Institutions

Traditional leaders and cultural custodians should be recognized as important stakeholders in community diplomacy and conflict-management processes because of their knowledge of indigenous values and historical relationships.

5.6. Further Research on Indigenous Diplomacy

Scholars should continue investigating indigenous diplomatic systems across African

societies to broaden understanding of diplomacy beyond Western state-centered approaches.

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