

Nye-Okonmadu (Elderly Person) in Ikwerre Worldview: A Socio-Religious Approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of Nye-Okonmadu (Elderly Person) within the Ikwerre worldview through the using a socio-religious approach. The paper situates Nye-Okonmadu within the broader perspective of Ikwerre cosmology, and points to how the idea of greatness is constructed through moral integrity, communal responsibility, spiritual consciousness, and ancestral alignment. Drawing from African religious thought and sociological theories, the paper posits that Nye-Okonmadu is not just a mere political or economic achiever, but a morally upright, spiritually aligned, and socially responsible individual whose status is validated by both the community and the spiritual realm. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, relying on existing literature on Ikwerre culture and African religion. It concludes that Nye-Okonmadu embodies the integration of social prestige, religious legitimacy, and communal service, thereby functioning as amoral archetype in Ikwerre society.

Keywords: Nye-Okonmadu, Ikwerre Worldview, African Religion, Leadership, Socio-religious Identity.

1. Introduction

African societies conceptualize personality not merely as an individual trait but as a product of social, moral, spiritual and spiritual dimensions. The concept of Nye-Okonmadu among the Ikwerre people translated as “Elderly Person” reflects an integrated socio-religious idea that defines human excellence. This concept is embedded in the broader Ikwerre worldview, which recognizes the interconnectedness of humans and spiritual forces. Ikwerre is one among many societies with its own system of thoughts and perception of reality predicated on the nuances of her worldview. This worldview is deeply rooted in a cosmological system that recognizes interaction between the physical world of human and the spiritual world of the ancestors, deities and Supreme Being.

The Ikwerre philosophy of Nye-Okonmadu (Elderly Person) is relevant as it is necessitated by the meaning and value they ascribe to what constitutes greatness in the society. Hence, among the Ikwerre people, leadership/headship is paramount. Each family is recognized by family heads. It usually the Nye-Okonmadu that assumes headship of families. This is so because it is presumed that he is the most knowledgeable in customs and traditions of the people and will bequeath same to the younger generation. (Obodoegbulam and Amadi, 2008). Nye-Okonmadu is not self-proclaimed but socially conferred and spiritually validated. It is ascribed to the one who ensures that the family is constantly connected to the ancestors

through ritual prayers and worship. The Nye-Okonmadu is a respected individual in the home and in the society at large and in return, and family members accord him the honour due his position.

This paper explores the socio-religious significance of Nye-Okonmadu and its implication for leadership, morality and communal cohesion.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

The term Nye in Ikwerre connotes “one who embodies. Okonmadu refers to elderly individual who have attained advanced age and social recognition within the community. The title is both an ascribed and achieved status in Ikwerre culture. Traditionally, a Nye-Okonmadu was expected to be an elder, a reputable leader, and a person of means. The role involved being industrious, responsible, and knowledgeable about cultural norms. According to Amadi (2022), qualities of a Nye-Okonmadu include strength, wisdom, self-discipline, and leadership skills. The ideal man was expected to be a provider, maintain a large family, own land and farms, and contribute to communal welfare (Achebe, 1960). Wrestling and bravery were also key attributes of male leadership in ikwerre society (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2019). Beyond biological aging, the concept implies moral maturity, experiential wisdom, and eligibility for participation in sacred and communal institutions.

3. Theoretical Framework

Structural Functionalism and the Role of Nye-Okonmadu in Ikwerre Worldview

Structural Functionalism is associated with sociologist scholars such as Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Robert K. Merton.

Structural functionalism conceptualizes society as a complex system whose various components work interdependently to promote stability, order, and continuity (Parsons, 1951). Within this framework, institutions of the society such as family, religion, and governance perform specific functions necessary for the survival of the society. Within the Ikwerre cultural milieu, the Nye-Okonmadu (elderly Person) represents a critical structural component that sustains the socio-religious equilibrium of the community. However, although the structural functionalism offers a foundational analytical lens, this paper adds the African-centered view from great scholars like John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu and Kwame Gyekye whose works projects the inseparability of religion, community and ontology in African societies.

Functional Role of the Elderly in Social Stability

Structural functionalism posits that each segment of society can be likened to a living organism where each part performs functions that are responsible for the survival of the whole contributing to maintaining social order. Social structures such as the kinship systems, age grade, religious institution and council of elders all operate in a symbiotic manner to maintain social order. The Nye-Okonmadu occupies a strategic position within this organized system. As elders, they do not merely play passive roles in the society, but are active players who ensure the functioning of both social and spiritual institutions. Their role serves as stabilizing agents in Ikwerre society by preserving norms and values, regulating behavior through customary laws and providing leadership in communal decision-making. John Mbiti (1969) argues that African societies are intrinsically communal; this can be seen in the expression of “I am because we are”. This communal identity places elders in an apex position of social integration, embodying the accumulated wisdom and community experience.

Their presence ensures continuity and prevents social disintegration. This aligns with

Durkheim's notion of social solidarity (Durkheim, 1893/1997).

Maintenance of Collective Conscience

For Durkheim, collective conscience refers to shared beliefs and moral attitudes that operate as a unifying force within society. The elderly in Ikwerre society embody and transmit this collective conscience through oral traditions, ritual practices and moral instruction. Thus, Nye-Onkonmadu functions as moral repositories of communal knowledge, ensuring that societal values are internalized across generations. In the same vein, Bolaji Idowu (1973) states that African Traditional religion is rooted in the moral order of the society, where elders play the role of interpreters of divine and ancestral will. As such, the authority of the Nye-Onkonmadu is not only social but also sacred, foregrounding both ethical and spiritual values.

Religion as a Functional and Integrative Institution

Structural functionalism views religion as a key institution that promotes cohesion and proffers existential meaning. The Ikwerre worldview considers religion to be inseparable from social life. In this sense, there is no clear demarcation between the secular and the spiritual. Based on this, the elders perform religious rituals and sacrifices, act as intermediaries between the living and the ancestors and safeguard sacred traditions. These roles help to reinforce communal identity and spiritual unity, reflecting Durkheim's (1912/2001) argument that religion strengthens social cohesion. In the African perspective, Mbiti (1969) notes that the Ancestor (the Living-Dead) are always actively involved in the affairs of the living through the elders who serves as a link between both realms. Gwame Gyekye (1996) corroborates this when he asserts that African religiosity is inherently communal and ethical with elders showing examples of what morality should be in the society.

Role Differentiation and Social Integration

The Ikwerre society's idea of maintaining role differentiation and societal stability aligns with Talcott Parson's (1951) social equilibrium thought. In Ikwerre society, roles are distributed based on age. Elders (nye-okonmadu) are in charge of governance and ritual authority. They engage in labour and defense and women are not left-out as they contribute through parallel socio-cultural institutions like the Elewrenzi, Ogbotu, Omurinya etc. these division of roles ensures efficiency and integration with elders occupying the apex of authority due to their experience and wisdom.

Through the lens of the structural functionalist perspective, the institution of the Nye-Onkonmadu stands indispensable to the survival and continuity of Ikwerre society. Elders perform vital socio-religious functions that sustain moral order, cultural identity and communal cohesion. Despite modern transformations, the adaptive capacity of social structures suggests that the role of the elderly can always be redefined and never to be diminished.

Manifest and Latent Functions of Eldership

Robert Merton (1968) emphasizes on the distinction between the manifest and latent functions. This can be a useful tool in describing the institution of Nye-okonmadu of the Ikwerre people. The manifest functions of Nye-okonmadu include, dispute resolution and adjudication, leadership within the Ohna (Council of elders), and performance of religious rituals. While the latent functions include reinforcement of age-based hierarchy, promotion of social cohesion and identity and the preservation of cultural continuity. These latent functions are an indication that the Nye-okonmadu's responsibilities extends beyond visible

responsibilities, reinforcing deeper structural integrity of Ikwerre society.

African Communitarianism and the Ontological Status of Nye-Okonmadu (Elder)

African philosophy provides additional knowledge into the ontological significance of Nye-Okonmadu. Mbiti, (1969) analyses time in the African thought form as what differentiates the past from the present, where elders being closer to the ancestral realm possess heightened spiritual significance. Idowu, (1973) argues that elders function as custodians of both religious and moral traditions and bridge the gap between the divine, the ancestors and the living community. This perspectives elevates the status of Nye-Okonmadu from ordinary social actors to sacred figures whose presence ensure cosmic and communal balance.

Relevance of Structural Functionalism to the Study

Structural Functionalism highlights the indispensable role of elders in maintaining the socio-religious fabric of Ikwerre society and at the same time, showcases the African perspectives of spiritual and ontological dimensions of eldership which are often not paid attention to in Western sociological theories.

Ikwerre as a People

The Ikwerre people are a distinguished ethnic group located in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, specifically in the northern part of Rivers State. They share borders with the Igbo and Etche to the north, the Kalabari to the south, Eleme and Okrika to the east, and the Ekpeye and Ogba to the west.

According to Wotogbe-Weneka (1996), the Ikwerre constitute one of the major ethnic groups in contemporary Rivers State. Enyian (2017) classifies the Ikwerre language into four dialectal groups: REO, Esila, Ishimbam, and OPA—simplified labels recognized by Ogbakor Ikwerre, the principal socio-cultural organization of the Ikwerre people.

Geographically, the Ikwerre occupy a significant portion of Rivers State's northern half, covering approximately 21,400 square kilometers, which constitutes about 20% of the state's arable land. They make up over one-third of the state's projected population.

Elem (2020) further reinforces that the Ikwerre, also known as Iwhuruohna, are the most populous ethnic group in Rivers State. They inhabit four out of the 23 local government areas: Obio/Akpor, Port Harcourt, Emohua, and Ikwerre. Their strategic location allows them to host over 60% of companies in Rivers State, including notable educational institutions such as the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University, Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, PAMO Medical University, the Nigerian Law School campus, and Rivers State College of Health Science and Technology.

The Ikwerre Worldview and the place of the Elderly

The indigenous Ikwerre worldview is deeply rooted in religion, which is complex and pluralistic. Like most African cosmologies, their religious beliefs are intricately linked to their cultural and moral structures. Religion influences every aspect of their life, serving as a foundation for their values and guiding principles.

Amadi (2022) describes the pre-modern Ikwerre society as in segments, where each community functions autonomously, beginning from the family unit, with socio-political structures. Built around their belief is the interconnection between the visible and invisible realms. Ikwerre prioritizes the tripartite relationship between the visible world, the ancestral realm, and the spiritual domain. The Ikwerre worldview is also holistic, combining social organization with spiritual cosmology. For them, life is perceived as a continuum linking the living, dead (ancestors), and the unborn. Within this framework, elders function as the

custodian of both the visible and invisible realms. Also among the Ikwerre, the Supreme Being (Chiokike), divinities, ancestors, and the spiritual forces play active roles in human affairs. The ancestors were central to governance, with family heads, kindred leaders, community chiefs, and priests performing rituals to seek their approval.

The Ikwerre society believes that ancestors hold a sacred place in African Indigenous Religion. They are regarded as moral guardians, bestowing blessings, preventing misfortunes, and punishing wrongdoers (Olson, 2011). Only a Nye-Onkonmadu can be an ancestor. Eligibility for ancestor-hood requires individuals to have lived exemplary lives, had children, lived to a full ripe old age before death, did not die of any known disease, and received proper burial rites at death. Failure to fulfill all burial rites could deprive the deceased from gaining entrance in to the world of the ancestors and end up a wandering spirit (Tasie, 2007).

The core of Ikwerre society is the family (Oro), which forms the nucleus of larger social structures such as the village (Onumara) and clan (Mgbu). Families were interdependent, bound by kinship cooperation and ancestral lineage. Over time, these families expanded through natural growth, giving rise to extended families (Ezinuoro), villages (Onumara), and clans (Mbam). Despite such expansions, loyalty to the original lineage remained intact (Wobasi, 1993).

Economically, the Ikwerre engage in diverse activities, including farming, fishing, hunting, palm wine tapping, palm fruit gathering, craft-making, and trade. They are known for producing local gin (mmayagbeke) from raffia palm, palm oil (Mmononri), and palm kernel oil (Mono-aknu) (Elem, 2020).

Politically, the paramount ruler stands at the apex of Ikwerre leadership, with family chiefs and age-grade organizations playing crucial roles in governance. Traditional institutions such as the lineage systems, age grades, and councils of elders structure the Ikwerre society, with authority vested in senior members (Amadi and Nyewusira, 2023). This legitimizes the fact that age is not merely chronological but hierarchical and symbolic in Ikwerre society.

Socio-Religious Roles of Nye-Onkonmadu

Custodians of Tradition and Culture

Among the Ikwerre people, are known to preserve customs through oral traditions, and communal values. They transmit knowledge through proverbs, folklores, myths and rituals, ensuring continuity.

Membership in the Ohna Institution

The Ohna council of elders is a central socio-political institution in Ikwerre society. Membership is strictly based on seniority, integrity, and moral standing. Elders in this institution are regarded as wise and impartial adjudicators of communal issues (Amadi, 2018). The ohna settles disputes, maintains social order and upholds sacred traditions among other functions.

Mediators between the Living and the Ancestors

The Ikwerre view elders as intermediaries between the physical and the spiritual realms. They perform libations, sacrifices and rituals that connect the community and the ancestral world.

Moral and Judicial Authority

Elders are seen as embodiments of justice and morality. Their judgments in disputes are considered binding due to perceived supernatural insights, wisdom and neutrality.

Agents of peacebuilding: Elders play pivotal role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding through traditional mechanisms such as oath-taking and reconciliation rituals (Amadi and

Nyewusira, 2023).

Symbolism of Old Age in Ikwerre Thought

In Ikwerre society, old age symbolizes wisdom and experience, spiritual closeness to ancestors, authority, and leadership.

Gender Dimensions of Eldership

Traditionally, formal institutions like the Ohna are male dominated. Although women are accorded respect as elderly figures in the society, they are rarely permitted membership into the Ohna council (Amadi, 2018). They can only influence authority through parallel institutions among fellow women by forming women groups. This reflects broader patriarchal structures within the society.

Modernization and the Nye-Okonmadu Status in Ikwerre

Due to urbanization and civilization, there had been a decline in the reliance of elders on decision-making. Traditional structures have been greatly altered leading to lack of respect and regard shown to the stool of the elders by the younger Ikwerre generation. Also, the spread of foreign religions like Christianity and Islam have diminished the ritual roles performed by elders as most of them have embraced these new religions and forsaken the Traditional Religion of Africans.

Furthermore, while the traditional elements of Nye-Okonmadu persist, modern qualifications have evolved. Today, a Nye-Okonmadu can be a distinguished intellectual, a political leader, a business mogul, an academic, an administrator, a military officer, or a public figure. As long as one bears all the qualities that make up for the position, one is accorded the title as such.

4. Conclusion

The concept of Nye-Okonmadu in Ikwerre worldview transcends biological aging, embodying socio-religious authority, moral integrity and cultural preservation. This institution is indispensable for survival and continuity and cannot be sacrificed on the altar of modernity. Elders do not only serve as custodian of tradition, but also as mediators between the physical and the spiritual worlds as well as agents of peaceful cohesion. But in recent years, modern factors seem to threaten these roles, calling for a balance incorporation of a traditional and contemporary system. Sustaining the dignity and function of elders in Ikwerre society remains a vital tool for identity and heritage.

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