

Reviving Ancestral Cultural Heritage for Social Cohesion and Peace Building: A Study of the Okonko Traditional Men's Society in Umuagu Clan, Umuaha North Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The study focuses on reviving ancestral cultural heritage for social cohesion and peace building in Umuagu clan, in Umuaha North Local Government Area of Abia State in Nigeria. This study centres on the activities of the Okonko traditional men's society. The Okonko men's society helped to maintain peace and peaceful co-existence among the people. Functionalist theory was adopted and so respondents were purposively selected from the four (4) communities of Umuagwu clan. These respondents were interviewed and were revealed that modernization and urbanization changed the activities and functions of the Okonko. So many youths and Adults have abandoned the cultural practices and embraced foreign culture. It was also revealed that Christianity adversely affected the activities of the Okonko traditional men's society in Umuagu clan. Based on these findings we recommended that cultural studies should be encouraged and incorporated into the educational curriculum from primary schools to secondary school. Secondly, the members of the Okonko should be allowed to participate in festivals and ceremonies, so that the youths will be acquainted with their culture.

KEYWORDS: Reviving, Heritage, Peace building and Culture.

INTRODUCTION

The study of a society or any aspect of it is incomplete without a proper understanding of the culture of that society. Culture and society go together and are inseparable. Culture is a unique possession of man. It is one of the distinguishing traits of human society. Culture does not exist at the sub-human level (Irikana & Obuzor, 2024). Odikey (2024) asserts that tradition can be defined as part of the social and cultural heritage, transmitted through successive generations of humanity and preserved over an extended period of time in any given society. It involves the processes and methods by which a society's heritage of material and non-material wealth is transmitted to the next generation. It denotes a set of such customs and usages viewed as a coherent body of precedents influencing the present generation, which are not written down in established sacred books such as the Bible or the Quran of these monotheistic religions.

The foundation and behaviour of a group of people is laid and reshaped by culture, which distinguishes them from others in terms of their dressing pattern, food, music, dance pattern, language, value system, ceremonies and festivals, religion, norms, masquerades, common historical background, etc.

Okonkon is one of the traditional heritages of the Igbos that occupied the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. Its origin can be easily traced back to the 14th century, and it emanated from the shrine of Arochukwu (The Long Juju of Arochukwu) that was dreaded and highly respected by the people. However, it predominates around the Old Bende area of Abia State and its believed to stand against injustice and marginalization as well as acting as a binding force that unite the people together. It is also saddled with the responsibility to settle disputes between two or more groups of people, families and communities in Abia State.

Okonko is being passed from generation to generation by initiating every male child born into any community at the age of seven. This initiation is to teach them from tender age the real

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culture of the land and how things are being done. This includes how to stand for justice fearlessly, dance traditionally, respond to masquerade, etc. The initiation ceremony involves taking the male children into the shrine for four days where they will be trained and initiated. They will tie them with white cloth, shave them and feed them with mix item or concussion; the children are prepared by their fathers. This occurs prior to the new yam festival which occurs between July and August every year (The Guardian, 2017).

Only men of proven integrity and character without any shameful past were accepted into the Okonko society. It was a gathering of nobles and the Aristocrats. It shares certain roles with the Amanikpo cultural group of Ogoni in Rivers State, the Ofiokpo of Andoni of Rivers state, Ekpo of Efik in Akwa-Ibom state, Poro of Sierra Leone and the Oro of Yoruba in southwest Nigeria. We also have other powerful secret societies in Igbo land; they are the mmanwu and the Akan with other powerful deities, such as Agbala at Awka, amadioha at Ozuzu, igwekala at Uhuno and Obini ukpabi of Arochuku. The Okonko enforced the verdicts of the Amala (Village Assembly). The people became more apprehensive and anxiety increased tremendously if the music and drum were played closer to their compounds. After the performance at night and the palm leaf was left behind in a man's compound, it simply means that he had been summoned to appear before the Okonko's court. Members of the Okonko group were highly honoured and dignified because they represent justice, fairness, peace, stability, truthfulness, security, etc. In a nutshell, Okonko aims at maintaining peaceful co-existence, unity and harmonious living from the precolonial, colonial and the post-colonial era. It's unfortunate that the functions and roles of the Okonko were hindered by the forces of modernization and religious revolution that swept the entire length and breadth of Africa. The penetration of the European explorers, missionaries and colonialists have really changed the narratives and negatively affected the roles performed by the Okonkos in the various communities. In spite of these hindrances and divergent perceptions, the Okonko society or group still struggle to raise their heads above water level.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It is an obvious fact that several scholars and researchers have written and conducted researches on the cultural heritage of most communities and ethnic groups in Nigeria, but this study focuses on reviving ancestral cultural heritage which paves way for social cohesion in Umuagu clan. The Okonko traditional society aimed at maintaining justice, fairness, peace and peaceful co-existence in the various communities. It serves as a unifying factor that binds the people together.

Like every other communities and clan in Nigeria, Umuagu clan in Umuahia North Local Government Area of Abia State has also experienced the erosion of its traditional cultural heritage because of the advent of Christianity, and advancement in science and technology as well as urbanization.

This ugly scenario was best captured by Chinua Achebe in his famous book titled "Things Fall Apart" as thus;

The white man is clever. He came peacefully and quietly with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now, he has won and converted our brothers to their religion, and our clan can no longer act as one. He has put knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart.

Nwosu (2003) carried out his study on the Okonko ethos and values in creative tension in Igbo land. The findings revealed that like it happened to other traditional institutions, the ethics and values of Okonko society were violently attacked by the Christian missionaries and their agents as devilish, pagan and satanic. They were quick to condemn the theory and praxis of Okonko society (okonkonism) and this prepared the ground for the moral degradation clearly noticeable in Igboland today.

In the light of the above, the Christian missionaries were working assiduously and

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relentlessly to disrupt and replace the long aged tradition, ethics and value system of the Igbo people with a foreign religion. This was done without corresponding soul-centered projects that will serve as alternative for the people's identity, experience and historical background.

According to Onwubiko (1991) in Nwosu (2003), having impressed on the converts in the church, and on the children in the school, that performing traditional ceremonies was bad and sinful, neither the converts nor the missionary had the good intension to see what was good in the ceremonies and the rites and rituals that, in them and through them, expressed the traditional African religiosity. Some never dared even to ask what influences... puberty initiations had over the stability of the life of an individual and thus the African community and the stability of marriage and sexual morality.

Akubor (2018) carried out a study on urban space expansion and loss of traditional heritage in Kogi State. The study surveyed 1,340 participants, and revealed that urbanization impacted negatively on cultural conservation and heritage. He recommended that the culture of the people should be preserved.

In similar vein, Ekpenyong, Raimi and Waabah (2011) also conducted a study in Rivers State on the impact of urbanization on the culture. It was revealed that modernization was the cause of loss of valuable cultural practices. They recommended that cultural practices should be preserved for the sake of the community well-being.

This aged-long mechanism through which law and order, peace, harmony and socialization of young adults were enhanced was later bastardized by the activities of the Christians. The missionaries and the new converts preached against the preservation of our culture. This situation was worsened in the 21st century, were greater number of the children and young adults live in the cities that are far away from home. This implies that some children and young adults of this generation are not brought up and socialized in the culture of the Umuagu people. They got assimilated into the urban culture and ways of life, which viewed the tradition as local, barbaric and fetish. Orisa (2013) asserts that the family as a social unit is bestow with the responsibility to care for its young ones and to inculcate the values into them. He emphasised that the responsibility is not limited entirely to the nuclear family units. It covers the extended family, relatives as well as neighbours who invariably contribute immensely to the upbringing of the child, providing him or her with wide range of stimulating interaction that positively nature the child's intellectual, physical and moral development.

Apart from the socialization role of the family, other institutions and groups also helped to socialize the children and the youths in Umuagu clan, which Okonko is one of them.

Amaechi and Epuchie (2002) aver that during the pre-colonial days, the Igbo people use folktales to educate their young ones on various aspects of Igbo history, values, norms, beliefs, language and so forth.

Unfortunately, in this contemporary era, the values are eroding rapidly because of the influence of globalization, which exposed our youths to dangerous drugs that enhanced anti-social behaviour and criminality in our society today.

However, several researchers have carried out similar study but none of them conducted their researches in our study area, hence the researchers are motivated to fill the existing gap.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to examine the reviving ancestral cultural heritage for social cohesion and peace building: A study of the Okonkon traditional men's society in Umuagu clan, Umuahia North Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives are as follows:

To examine the impact of modernization and urbanization on the practice of the Okonko men's

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society in Umuagu clan.

To examine the impact and influence of Christian religion on the practice of Okonko men's society in Umuagu clan.

To examine the impact and influence of the practice of Okonko men's society on social cohesion and peacebuilding in Umuagu clan.

To proffer solutions to the problems identified.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts the functionalist theory of culture popularized by Bronislaw Malinowski. Bronislaw Malinowski was a Polish anthropologist school of thought. In his work "Magic Science and religion and other essays" published in 1948. The study revealed that belief systems are functional. He sees religion and magic as interrelated aspects of the attempt by man to understand and control natural events (Ottong, 2011).

Malinowski states that culture is a study of functional interdependences where each element serves its specific purpose in maintaining the stability and coherence of the society.

Cultural norms function to support the fluid operation and continued stability of society, and cultural values guide people in making choices. Just as members of a society work together to fulfill a society's needs, culture exists to meet its members' basic needs (<https://course.umenlearning.com>, cited in Ogubike, 2025).

This theory assumes that the belief system is functional, and it helps man to control natural events. In examining the revival of the Okonko society, we can lay hands on how their revivals represent an adaptive response to the challenges from modernization. This theory believes that culture is functional and all institutions interdepend on each other for survival. Each serves a specific purpose in maintaining the stability and coherence of the society. This theory is suitable for this study as it helps to illuminate how the Okonko traditional men's society is functional in maintaining stability and peace in Umuagu clan in Umuahia Local Government Area of Abia State.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are some of the research questions.

To what extent has modernization and urbanization impacted on the practice of Okonko men's society in Umuagu clan of Abia State?

To what extent has Christian religion affected the practice of Okonko men's society in Umuagu clan of Abia State?

To what extent has the practice of Okonko men's society enhance social cohesion and peace building in Umuagu clan of Abia State.

METHODOLOGY

This part of the study is specifically designed to unveil the scientific methodologies employed to carry out this investigation. It involves the research design, population, area of study, sample size and sampling technique, method of data collection and method of data analysis.

Sampling Size/Sampling Techniques

The sampling size of this study is 80 respondents. The communities include; Aguebi, Ngbagoro, Umuezehini and Umukaonu.

Purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 respondents from each community in Umuagu clan, while the four communities were also purposively selected.

Method of Data Collection

Key informant interview was the main source of data collection. The questions were derived from the research questions and objectives of the study. However, information were also sourced from textbooks and internets. All categories of adults were included in the interview, such as the

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chiefs, youths, women group, community development committee members (CDC), adult men including some members of the Okonko society.

Method of Data Analysis

The thematic data analysis method was adopted to analyse the results of the interview that was conducted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Theme I

What are the impacts of modernization and urbanization on the practice of the Okonko men's society in Umuagu clan in Umuahia North Local Government Area of Abia State?

Several respondents were interviewed but the key informant for the theme (1) one is Pa Felix Akaliro. It was revealed that Okonko is their cultural heritage bequeathed to the Umuagu people by their ancestors, but in recent times, its influence and popularity among the kinsmen of Umuagu clan has reduced to its lowest ebb. It was noticed that its popularity and influence changed due to external influences or factors.

Chief Felix Akaliro, who is ninety years (90) old has this to say:

The Okonko traditional men's society is a generational culture that was in existence before his birth. He observed that the okonko culture was in place before the arrival of the Europeans in Nigeria. He buttressed that okonko dance and its masquerade perform during festivals like mourning a title chief, burials of Ezes, new yam festivals, traditional remembrance of one of the members of okonko society, etc. He also claimed that the advent of the whitemen who introduced their administration, education and other forms of modernization affected the performance and functions of the okonko society. In fact, urbanization and modernization pushed the okonko society backward as young men no longer find pleasure in it and regarded it as fetish.

Other people that were also interviewed corroborated the views of Pa, Chikezie Akaliro, that the spread and development of cities forced many people from Umuagu clan and other rural communities in Igbo land. Their children are raised in the cities, in a foreign culture. Our culture and the Okonko society seem to be alien to them, and uninteresting. According to Okadigbo Nnanna, one of the elders that were interviewed have this to say "our youths no longer come home from the cities to participate in the new yam festivals and other ceremonies including the okonko men's society because of their engagements in the cities. The okonko society and other traditional institutions have been neglected and undermined, but are so much interested in whitemen's culture. Some of them claimed that community life is boring because of absent of modern facilities. They really lamented that were the young suckers that will grow and take over leadership from us when the old banana tree will die.

Okadigbo Nnanna further buttressed that the introduction of modern judicial system has impacted greatly on the prominence and efficacy of the okonko society. The imposition of western legal frameworks undermined the power of adjudication of the okonko society. The elites preferred to settle their cases in the court.

Theme II

To what extent has Christian religion affected the practice of okonko men's society in Umuagu clan of Abia State.

Several respondents were interviewed but the key informant interview for this theme or research question was Chief Nnnanna Ikechi. He revealed that the Okonko men's society in Umuagu clan of Abia State is as old as creation, and served both judicial and socio-cultural functions for the purpose of enhancing peaceful co-existence among the people.

Chief Nnanna Ikechi also revealed that the functions of the Okonko men's society of Umuagu clan of Abia State has been influenced and adversely affected by Christian religion introduced by the

Europeans. He buttressed that the Christian religion condemned its activities and regarded it as fetish, barbaric, uncivilized and contradicts the doctrine of the Bible.

Presently, greater proportions of the population are Christians and are no longer interested in the activities of the okonko men's society. Some of the minor disputes are settled by the pastors and leaders of the church. These issues are no longer reported to the okonko men's society.

Other people that were interviewed revealed that churches have been established throughout the length and breadth of Umuagu clan in Abia State, this has really weakened the activities of the okonko men's society in Umuagu clan. Infact, this new generation has no idea about the activities of the okonko men's society.

Theme III

To what extend has the practice of Okonko men's society of Umuagwu clan enhance social cohesion and peace building.

Several respondents were interviewed but the key informant interview for this theme or question was Chief Okafor Ogbike. He revealed that the Okonko men's society of Umuagwu clan actually enhanced social cohesion, peaceful co-existence that were enjoyed and experienced in the past in Umuagwu clan. The Okonko men's society settled disputes between individuals, families and grips that were having misunderstanding with each other. Okonko ensures that justice and equality are practice and became interested in what bind communities together, that is why it is called upon to settle communal clashes ensure that Okonko is sustained from generation to generation young male children are usually initiated so that justice, social cohesion and peaceful child that had attained the age of initiation refused the family will be visited and affected with mental illness, back luck, sickness and sudden death. Chief Okafor Oguibike emphasized that members usually take blood oath as means of bonding together and to maintain their secrecy. Okonko carried out certain tradinal rites during burial especially a man that lived up to 70 years, three masquerades celebrated them and sent them to their ancestors.

It is unfortunate that things have fallen apart as the Okonko men's society is no longer active and powerful in this contemporary time. We are now experiencing conflicts that are not properly settled, justice has eluded us, the tradition that binds us together is not more because we have embraced foreign and urban cultures.

CONCLUSION

Okonko men's society of Umuagwu clan of Abia State is an ancient organisation established by the early settlers of Umuagwu clan of Abia State to maintained peace and tranquility among the people. The organization was saddled with the responsibility to settle disputes among the inhabitants of Umuagwu clan.

However, the finding revealed that urbanization and modernization adversely affected the activities of the Okonko men's group. So many indigenes have left the communities and were socialized in urban cities. It was also revealed that religion has negative impact on the activities of the Okonko men's society. Their activities are presently considered as barbaric, fetish and contradictory to the Bible. Everything about initiation into the group has stopped for several years because almost all the young men don't want to be remaining in the village any more. Okonko men's society enhances social cohesion in the past as well as peaceful co-existence but the reverse is the case in this contemporary society because this generation abandoned the culture and the practice of Okonko and embraced foreign culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the following findings, the following recommendations were proffered as solutions to the problems of the okonko men's society of Umuagu clan of Abia State.

Few decades ago, the okonko members used to take responsibility for the burial of their

Deedam Dorka Godbless PhD & Ikechi Ogbike - Reviving Ancestral Cultural Heritage for Social Cohesion and Peace Building: A Study of the Okonko Traditional Men's Society in Umuagu Clan, Umuaha North Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria

members. They also participated actively in the memorial service of members, this normally accompanied by masquerades and dance. This attracted most young men to be members, so I am suggesting that the okonko men's society should take over burial as usual.

Okonko men's group should be allowed to participate in community new yam festivals, Christmas celebration and other festivals, so that they can showcase their culture and values of the Igbo people through their dance, songs and masquerade. This will also attract the younger generation to be initiated.

Cultural exchange activities: A cross cultural exchange of okonko groups at festivals like new yam festivals among communities should be encouraged. Members of okonko from different communities should be invited to perform during new yam festivals and events. Such events will attract the youths to join the okonko society.

School curriculum: Our educational curriculum should incorporate the teaching and learning of our cultural heritage and also encourage students to pay more attention to cultural norms and values of the Ibos.

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Deedam Dorka Godbless PhD & Ikechi Ogbike - Reviving Ancestral Cultural Heritage for Social Cohesion and Peace Building: A Study of the Okonko Traditional Men's Society in Umuagu Clan, Umuaha North Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria

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