

Okonko masquerade cult and communal conflict management in Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East LGA, Abia State, Nigeria

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Abstract

In most indigenous societies, different elements often act as agents of social justice and control that bind groups together. In traditional Ndoki communities, the Okonko masquerade cult has offered a paradigm shift in social control, but its role in conflict management has not been properly examined in the literature. This study explored the roles of the Okonko masquerade cult in communal conflict management and the socio-political implications of such roles in Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East LGA, Abia State. The study adopted a cross-sectional design. Data were obtained from primary sources using a structured questionnaire and analysed using inferential statistics, to show the mean and standard deviation of the responses generated. A sample size of 621 respondents was purposely selected from nine villages within the study area. Three research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. A triangulation of Afrocentric and Symbolic Interactionism theories were adopted as the theoretical framework. The findings reveal that the Okonko masquerade cult is a custodian of justice modeled on

cultural values and ethos of indigenous beliefs. Traditionally institutionalised justice systems are reconciliatory agencies for socio-cultural and political integration in Africa, which propels peace building and sustainable development. This is different from Western court litigation processes that are based on technicalities and winner-takes-all, without reconciliation or social integration of offenders. The study calls for the revival of indigenous conflict management systems that are in tandem with the cultural worldview of oneness in African societies.

Keywords: Okonko, masquerade cult, Ndoki communities, social control and conflict management

Introduction

In inter-societal relationships, disputes emanate due to differences in individual needs, thoughts, perceptions, and other incompatibilities. As a result, conflict can be described as a phenomenon that emanates through human interactions among and within interdependent people whose perceived interests are incompatible and complex. Buttressing this opinion, Destercke and Burger (2013) defined conflict as a process that begins where one party perceives that the activities of another party have negatively affected something the other party may care about. Therefore, such perception breeds tension, which often metamorphoses into deepened scuffles that can mar shared common values and harmonious relationships. Most often, communal conflicts occur among people

that share common prehistoric identity, religion, ethnicity, parochial circle, and resource or boundary ties. Therefore, the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP (2015) elaborates on this by stating that:

Common to inter-group conflicts in many ill-defined federal states with plural identity groups is the skewed distribution of socio-economic and political resources, which breeds inequalities amongst culturally and sometimes religiously different groups. Such practices constitute the structure within which certain groups perceive injustice and marginalization, leading to the construction of enemy images of the government and other groups who appear to be favored

by it. Without recognition of such structures, which differ from place to place, responding to conflicts will only be like addressing the symptoms while neglecting the causes. This is why the structural analysis of the cause of conflict must cover social, economic, and political spheres, intending to identify the grievances that might make taking to violence inevitable for groups that feel maligned. This helps to understand how socio-economic and political needs intersect with ethnic or religious identities in providing a shared narrative of exclusion and marginalization that might provide self-justifying rationalization for violence (UNDP, 2015).

In the same vein, conflict is ubiquitous in all human existence. It is a phenomenon that is inevitable in all human societies due to differences in interest, goals, values, and intentions among people (Kazeem, 2009). Rhetorically, conflict is an incompatible feeling between groups or people over a desired goal, resources, properties, etc. This may be described as an open clash between two opposing

groups or individuals in the form of ideas, disagreement, struggle or quarrel (Anugwom, 2000). In most African communities, there are frameworks for social control and de-escalation of violence. Hence, in Southern Nigeria, indigenous social institutions stood at the apex of customary authority over intra/inter human contentions that may erupt within the social fabric of the society.

The term, conflict management is used arbitrarily in social interactions. Ogonor, (2004), explained the concept of conflict management as some "multi-dimensional strategies employed to reduce frequency of destructive encounters by strengthen the inhibitors to conflict actions and avoid triggering off events at limiting violence between parties" (p. 247). By this definition, it means that every action taken before and after a dispute, with the aim of reducing the negative impacts of rancour, with the intention of promoting moral understanding, unity and peace among conflicting parties can be referred to as conflict management. Also, Egwu et al. (2003) opined that communal conflicts impact adversely on all forms of human progress, resulting in the inability for people to interact with one another; unhealthy competition over jointly owned

resources, and other complex set of negative occurrences such as poverty, ethno-religious clashes, and grievances which affect the social relationship of the people in such communities. Examining communal conflicts among Ndoki communities, Shebbs et al. (2019) pointed out that the economic detriments of resource-related conflicts mostly manifest in inequality, social exclusion, and wanton destruction of lives and properties, which adversely affect the peaceful co-existence of the people.

Masquerades constitute a traditional cultural praxis that plays an important part in maintaining harmony and social control in most traditional African communities. Akubor (2016) posits that Africans believe that masquerade practices attract the spirit world (ancestors and deities). From a cultural lens, masquerades are seen as familial daemons that neither compromise cultural standards, nor succumb to foreign ideologies and governmental policies. Therefore, they directly or indirectly attract the spirit world (ancestors, deities) and employ African science, which, as a culture cannot be modified or changed. Building on this, Nwankwo (2015) argued that masquerade-spirits are representations of

powerful cultural entities from the underworld with special powers for diabolic display in socio-cultural engagements, such as bidding farewell to a titled man as he embarks on his ancestral journey to the underworld and adjudication of social justice among families, individuals, and communities in most indigenous communities.

The Okonko masquerade is an ancient Igbo traditional masquerade cult which is believed to have originated from the great shrine of Ibini-Ukpabi in Arochukwu during the fourteenth century. It was initially concentrated in the old Bende area of present-day Abia State before spreading to other parts of Southern Nigeria (Guardian, 2019). The deity, Ibini Ukpabi, which simply means the "Drum of the Creator God," was a great oracle of peace and justice, invoked in cases of murder, witchcraft, poisoning, and communal disputes in the Arochukwu region in the precolonial era. During the colonial era, the British referred to this oracle as "Long Ju-ju," which shows the magnanimous respect and value accorded to this oracle.

As time progressed and the fame of Ibini-Ukpabi spread increasingly in Southern Nigeria, its associated masquerades

became pictorial symbols in celebrating Africa's iconic figures and cultures. This was what propelled the idea of forming the Okonko masquerade cult by the Arochukwu communities to celebrate the good deeds of the great oracle, Ibini-Ukpabi. The primary focus and ideology behind the formation of the cult is the deployment of masquerades to fight injustice, violence, and unruly behavioral conducts in traditional Igbo communities. This cultural practice is being passed from generation to generation through continuous initiation of free-born young men into masquerade cult. The essence of this acculturation is to instill in the oncoming generation the basic behavioral qualities of communal well-being, which include: how to stand against injustice, fearlessness, traditional justice patterns, and response to communal emergencies, among others.

The Ndoki people are the Igbo-speaking clan found in three states in Southern Nigeria, namely: Rivers State (particularly in Oyigbo Local Government Area); Akwa-Ibom State (specifically in a village called Ikot Inyang Udo or Oha-Obu in Ukanafun Local Government Area); and Abia State (in Ukwa-East Local Government Area). The greater part of the Ndoki population lives in Ukwa-East Local Government

Area of Abia State, where this study was carried out.

For over two decades, the Ndoki communities in Ukwa-East Local Government Area of Abia State has witnessed numerous acts of violence that have driven families from their homes. There have been countless violent incidents of communal land disputes as well as resource/boundary-related disputes that have persistently resulted in loss of lives and destruction of valuable properties within the communities. For instance, on 24th December 1996, two Ndoki communities from Ukwa-East area (Obeaku) and their neighbouring community in the Ukanafun area (Oha-Abu) clashed over a contested area of land. The incident resulted in the use of guns, machetes, and explosives, leading to the death of at least twelve people, and destruction of property valued at millions of naira (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Similarly, on 9th April 1997, the Owazza community in Asa-Ndoki engaged their neighbouring community of Umu-Ode, Asa-Ndoki in a gruesome violence over an oil-resource-related dispute. Over five people were killed, more than twelve others were seriously injured; while over five hundred people were displaced (Charles, 2017). Also, in

August 2001, three Ndoki communities of the Oyigbo enclave and other three communities of Ukwa-East, namely: Mgboji, Obeakpo and Akwete, were involved in a dispute over fishing rights, which grew into a serious conflict.

In the past, scholars have explored many issues sustaining communal conflicts among Ndoki communities, such as boundary adjustments and resource development, as well as the means of finding lasting solutions to conflicts in the area (e.g., Nwosu, 1998; Ikurekong et al., 2012; Onuoha & Lolo 2004; Shebbs, et al., 2019). However, these studies explored the root causes of communal conflicts in the area with the aim of proffering solutions to them based on Western litigation mechanisms, which have failed to curb the reoccurrence of communal conflicts in the area. Hence, the current study intends to explore an alternative dispute resolution mechanism in the area by examining the role of the Okonko masquerade cult in communal conflict management among the Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East L.G.A in Abia State.

Conceptual Issues

The concept of indigenous dispute resolution refer to existing home-tailored

patterns and hybrid mechanisms of conflict management that have been practiced over a long period of time and have evolved within people of a particular society and used as a means of settling disputes (Osi, 2008). For instance, among indigenous Igbo societies, the use of summonses of deities, elders in council, traditional rulers, age-grade, umunna, and umuada has been a fundamental mechanism in communal conflict management over the years. The indigenous rules and roles of these entities determine how communal disputes are managed and they represent constituted institutions within the social web of the Igbo indigenous community.

In addition, conflict management among indigenous communities focuses on non-violent approaches to dispute resolution. These non-violent approaches employ restorative justice mechanisms that will ensure peaceful coexistence and sustainable development among individuals and communities in conflict. They constitute a win-win solution enshrined in the philosophy of the African concept of "Ubuntu" that is, "we exist because the society exists and the society exists because we exist" (Akinwale, 2010).

Hence, within Igbo indigenous communities, masquerade practices play vital roles in maintaining social control and orderliness. According to Okrah (2003) the traditional society resolved conflicts through internal and external social controls. The internal social controls involve the use of deterrence by means of personal shame and fear of supernatural powers, while the external controls rely on the use of sanctions for approved or disapproved behaviours.

Summarising the concept of masquerade practices among most communities in southern Nigeria, Akubor (2012) avers that, to the Esan people of Edo State, "masquerade is organic to their myth of creation". This suggests that masquerades among the Esan people are pivotal in determining one's destiny. For the Igbos, masquerades represent the "living dead" who often visit the living. This visit is regarded as a spiritual intervention and symbolic resurrection of ancestors to the living and, as a result, is highly venerated. In Ibibio communities, Ekpe masquerades symbolise both an inherited covenant and representation of resuscitated spirits of the dead, whose appearances signify what can be referred to as the "cosmo-ontogenia" model (personification of the dead) among the living. Precisely, this

understanding governs the rules of masquerade performances which were immutable and punishable, and compelled the living to moral responsibilities through upholding the ethical standards of past generations.

Within the communal conflict management systems of indigenous societies, traditional practices of conflict resolutions are necessarily designed to maintain communal relationships. (Aliwa, 2019). Therefore, the community's role in communal conflict management lies in entrusting issues that concern the community to third-party adjudicators, whose decisions are expected to be upheld by the community as a moral obligation (Azuonwu, 2002). This is in stark contrast to the Western litigation processes, which are largely adopted in modern-day dispute resolutions. These Western processes are shredded in technicalities and reliant on evidence-based decisions based on formalised treaties and bureaucracies.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the Okonko masquerade cult as an indigenous mechanism of alternative dispute resolution in the Ndoki communities of Ukwa East Local

Government Area. Specifically, the study explores its role as a traditional system of social control and justice, arguing that, in contrast to Western litigation, it is better positioned to address the root causes of communal conflicts among the Ndoki communities. In addition, the study aims to suggest possible ways to curbing the root causes of communal conflicts that have ravaged most Ndoki communities in southern Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study intends to address the following questions:

1. To what extent do masquerade practices influence communal conflict management among the Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East LGA?
2. How does the Okonko masquerade function as an instrument of social justice and control among the Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East LGA?
3. To what extent does the Okonko masquerade cult contribute to the resolution and prevention of communal conflicts among the Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East L.G.A?

Research Hypotheses

H0₁: There is no relationship between the Okonko masquerade cult and communal conflict management among the Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East LGA.

H0₂: There is no relationship between indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution and Western litigation patterns in communal conflict management in the Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East LGA.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the concept of masquerade in the Igbo worldview, Afrocentric and symbolic interactionism theories were adopted in this study. The Afrocentric theory aims to explain the socio-religious and cultural activities of Africans within the context of African historical experiences and knowledge (Asante, 2018). The theory is primarily concerned with the promotion of intercultural engagements with other cultures, rather than imposing or seeking to advance its own material cultural advantages over others. This is in consonance with the Igbo socio-cultural traditional practice of masquerade performance as a means of socio-cultural control, justice, reward and recommendations in various social strata

of indigenous communities. Symbolically, masquerade performance expresses indigenous beliefs about fraternity and superlative guests (the gods, the living-dead and the living) as part of the cosmological belief system of the Igbo.

On the other hand, Symbolic Interactionism theory as proposed by Blumer (1980), argues that people act toward things on the basis of the meaning they ascribe to them. That is, things do not have inherent or unvarying meanings; rather, their meanings differ depending on how people define and respond to them. The societal lens through which people view and understand a phenomenon gives meaning to such a phenomenon when they encounter it, and shapes their actions towards it (Edeogu & Nnaji, 2014). Therefore, to understand the social meaning of masquerades in the overall worldview of the Igbo people, we must know how to define the concept of masquerade as a socio-religious entity that unifies the living, the ancestors and the gods to ensure that the basic structures of socio-cultural indigenous justice paradigms are maintained within a community. Within the Igbo cosmological worldview, it is literally difficult to define the masquerade

concept within specific conceptual boundaries than to understand it in lived experiences.

The triangulation of the two theories is complementary in explaining masquerade practices as an Afrocentric institution through which communal morality, identity, social control, justice, and social security are continuously produced and contested through symbolic interactions between spirit-embodied masquerades and members of the Ndoki indigenous communities.

In applying these theories, communal conflict management is understood as a group response to particular kinds of unexpected events, and how individuals in the community react to such events, as well as what reasonable mechanisms and approved ways are engaged in resolving differences. The triangulation also helps to examine social and resource-induced conflicts that occur in a communal context, which are often understood and shaped by what people fight about, how they fight about it, which they fight with, and how the conflicts end. The communal context here embraces the way of life entrenched in a community over a period of time that constitutes moral values and behavioural regularities.

Literature Review

Indigenous Mechanisms for Conflict Management in Igbo Communities

It is obvious that the persistent challenges and recurrent failures witnessed today in managing communal conflicts in Africa can be attributed to the societal neglect of the indigenous methods of communal negotiation and conflict resolution for foreign models. According to Nwolise (2005) the displacement of the indigenous methods has contributed to the escalation of violent conflicts across the Africa continent. The study argues that in the contemporary conflict management systems, a mere land dispute between two families or communities could lead to the killing of several people and destruction of hundreds of houses; whereas, in the traditional African society, the systems put in place to monitor, prevent, manage and resolve conflicts would have readily prevented such wanton damage.

Every indigenous community has its own ways of handling conflicts to ensure sustainable peace, especially when it has to do with communal disputes. For instance, several African communities relied on oath-taking and divination

methods to prevent and curb most unruly behaviours of their members. However, the Western world emphasized formal constitutional systems presided over by lawyers and judges. Africans, on the other hand, uses informal socially constituted institutions such as: the council of elders, specialized cults, age-grade, summoning of deities, congregation of village folks, king's court, etc, for conflict resolution and justice dispensation, tailored to the ethos and cultural legitimacy of a given community. According to Albert (2001), the Elder in Council may not have physical power to enforce decisions, but they rely on leaders of the various age-grades or specialized cults (e.g., masquerades cults) to arbitrate and mediate peace based on truly negotiated terms in a particular dispute. The world of the ancestral spirits, represented by masquerades in the indigenous worldview, is an extension of the world of the living; while supernatural beings are part of the traditional worldview. The ancestors, deities, specialized cults, and shrines enhance conflict management within and between communities and are believed to impose decisive, rightful verdicts on controversial issues and. According to Oparaocha (2024), when the cola nut (*Acuminata*) is used to offer prayers over a disputed land, farm, or

other things under contention to the divinities, the dead and the living are invoked for a reconciliatory verdict that must be obeyed. Therefore, disputants regard such oblation as divine judgment that must be adhered to. Terms agreed are mutually accepted and obeyed for fear of negative consequences from the spirit world.

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. This method accommodates the views, opinions, attitudes, and interests of respondents on a given research issue by utilizing research tools such as questionnaires and interviews (Black et al., 2004). A questionnaire with a Likert scale of five dimensions and items derived from the research questions of the study was employed. The study area was grouped into three clusters of communities. Out of these three clusters a purposive sampling technique was employed to select three villages from each of the clusters, making a total of nine (9) selected villages. The choice of this selection is based on the rate of reported cases of communal conflict reoccurrences within the selected villages. The total population of the study area (Ukwa-East LGA) according to the projected population by the National

Bureau of Statistics (2022) was estimated at 84,700 adults, consisting male and female adults. Therefore, to determine the sample size of the study, Yamane's (1967) formula derivation was applied, with a 95% level of significance. The formula is given as: $n = \frac{N}{1 + (e)^2}$

Where; n= sample size

N= target population of study

e = error limit (0.04²) or 0.0016

1- constant

Applying the formula, we have:

$$n = \frac{84,700}{1 + 84,700(0.0016)}$$

$$n = \frac{84,700}{1 + 135.52}$$

$$n = \frac{84,700}{136.52} = 620.42$$

Therefore, approximately, sample sizes of 621 respondents' were purposively selected from the chosen nine villages within the study population.

Research Design

The study instrument (Masquerade Inventory Scale) was developed by the researcher after reviewing relevant literature. The questionnaire has two sections: A and B. Section A seeks demographic information of respondents, while section B contains the

questionnaire items arranged in five clusters, numbered A-E. Cluster A explores the influence of masquerade on the cultural worldview of Ndoki communities; Cluster B seeks information on traditional masquerade practices in Ndoki communities; Cluster C seeks information on indigenous agents of social justice and control; Cluster D seeks information on the Okonko masquerade as an arbiter in communal conflict management in Ndoki communities; and Cluster E examined the Okonko masquerade cult as a corrective entity in enhancing peaceful co-existence and unity among Ndoki communities.

Inferential statistics was used in the data analysis. Two hypotheses were tested at 0.05 levels of significance, and t-tests were used to test the hypotheses raised. The findings were presented in tables, showing the mean and standard deviation of the respondents' statements. The mean scores for accepting a statement were

benchmarked as follows: if the mean is greater than ($\geq$) 3.0 and the standard deviation is greater than ($\geq$) 0.40; otherwise, reject.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The Masquerade Inventory Scale was pilot-tested on two villages in Obukpa community of Nsukka Local Government Area in Enugu State, which were outside of the study area. One hundred (100) participants were used for the pilot study. The Cronbach's alpha values obtained were .73 for cluster A, .89 for cluster B, .78 for cluster C, .79 for cluster D, and .84 for cluster E, respectively. The overall reliability of the instrument was 78. The results indicated that the various sections are reliable.

Data Presentation

The socio-demographic information of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents		
Variables	Frequency (621)	Percentage (%)
Gender of respondents		
Male	391	63.0
Female	230	37.0

Age of respondents		
24-29 years	221	36.0
30-44 years	218	35.0
45-60 years	182	29.0
Educational status of respondents		
No formal education	198	32.0
Primary education	228	37.0
Secondary education	158	25.0
Others	37	6.0

Note: Author's Fieldwork, 2026

The mean and standard deviation of responses on the research question 1: "To what extent could masquerade practices influence communal conflict management among Ndoki communities?" are contained in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Influence Masquerade Practices on Communal Conflict Management among Ndoki Communities of Ukwa-East LGA

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Remarks
i.	Masquerade practices are an omen of the gods, ancestors, and the living.	2.8	0.77	Rejected
ii.	Masquerade cultic practices enhance peaceful co-existence in Ndoki communities.	2.7	0.81	Rejected
iii.	I feel like most of our masquerade practices are useless and outdated.	2.6	0.78	Rejected
vi.	The Okonko masquerade cult is a goddess of peace that promotes harmony in Ndoki communities.	2.5	0.89	Rejected
v.	I believe that Okonko practices have a good positive impact on communal conflict management in Ndoki communities.	2.9	0.78	Rejected

The above table shows that masquerade practices have negligible influence on communal conflict management. All items were rejected, showing that Okonko masquerade practices are not linked to premonition of the dead and the living, and do not enhance peaceful co-existence or serve as the goddess of harmony in the study population. Therefore, the above-listed items reflect most of the Ukwá-East community's

worldview towards masquerade as an indigenous cultural practice.

Table 3 contains responses on the research question 2: "To ascertain if Okonko masquerade is a symbol of social justice and control among Ndoki communities?". It shows the mean and standard deviation of the responses generated.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Responses on if Okonko Masquerade is a Symbol of Social Justice and Control among Ndoki Communities in Ukwá-East LGA

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Decision
i.	I believe that masquerade practices are a kind of social control.	3.1	0.66	Accepted
ii.	I remain loyal to our indigenous judgment no matter what the outcome is.	2.6	0.85	Rejected
iii.	Okonko proceedings are affordable and faster than court litigation.	3.3	0.91	Accepted
vi.	I believe that through Okonko practices our culture and traditions are preserved.	2.9	0.56	Rejected
v.	Okonko's judgment is based on the community's system of belief, not on technicalities.	3.0	0.68	Accepted

The above table exposes factors supporting the view that the Okonko masquerade cult symbolises an indigenous mechanism of social control and justice among Ndoki communities. The findings indicate that Okonko masquerade practices are tailored to curtail communal conflicts by administering fast and affordable verdicts that represent the community's worldviews. Hence, responses to three items in the above table confirmed that

Okonko masquerade is a symbol of social control and a pendulum of justice within the studied population.

Table 4 shows the respondents' perceptions on the research question 3: "To determine if the Okonko masquerade cult proffers a solution to communal conflict among Ndoki communities?". It also shows the mean and standard deviation of the responses.

Table 4: *Mean and Standard Deviation of the Responses on if the Okonko Masquerade Cult Proffers Solutions to Communal Conflicts in Ndoki communities of Ukwá-East LGA*

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Decision
i.	Okonko's judgment is perceived as the verdict of the gods that represents truth.	3.6	0.61	Accepted
ii.	Fears of Okonko impose compliance among the populace.	2.6	0.44	Rejected
iii.	Okonko is a representation of our ancestral heritage.	3.4	0.47	Accepted
vi.	I believe that Okonko masquerade practices stand as ancestral stools for communal justice.	3.7	0.68	Accepted
v.	Okonko is seen as part of our indigenous institution meant for dispute settlement.	3.4	0.48	Accepted

The table above shows the illustrative strength of the Okonko masquerade cult as an alternative dispute resolution institution in Ndoki communities of

Ukwá-East. The findings indicate that Okonko represents an ancestral heritage and justice institution meant for dispute settlement among Ndoki communities of

Ukwa-East. Also, there are hegemonic beliefs that Okonko's verdicts are truths spoken by the gods.

HO₁. There is no significant relationship between the Okonko masquerade cult and communal conflict management among Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East.

Test of Hypotheses

Table 5: T-Test Analysis of Cultural Practices of Okonko Masquerade Cult and Communal Conflict Management among Ndoki Communities in Ukwa-East

Grouping	N	Mean	SD	Df	Tcal	T-crit	Decision
Okonko masquerade	283	2.6	0.49				
Communal conflict management	338	3.6	0.56	606	0.62	0.93	NS

Table 5 shows that the obtained t-cal value is less than the t-crit value. The t-cal value is 0.62 while the t-crit value is 0.93. Since t-cal is less than t-crit, the null hypothesis (**HO₁**) is therefore accepted. Therefore, we conclude that there is no significant statistical difference in the mean rating of Okonko masquerade and communal conflict

management in Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East.

HO₂: There is no relationship between indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution and western litigation pattern on communal conflict management in Ndoki communities of Ukwa-East.

Table 6: T-Test Analysis of Indigenous Mechanisms of Conflict Resolution and Western Litigation Pattern on Communal Conflict Management in Ndoki Communities of Ukwa-East.

Grouping	N	Mean	SD	Df	T-cal	T-crit	Decision
Indigenous mechanism	317	3.4	0.52				
Western litigation	304	3.1	0.50	610	0.66	0.98	NS

Table 6 shows that the obtained t-cal value is less than the t-crit value. The t-cal value is 0.66 while the t-crit value is 0.98. Since t-cal is less than t-crit, the null hypothesis (H_0) is therefore accepted. Therefore, we conclude that there is no significant statistical difference in the mean rating of indigenous methods and the Western pattern of communal conflict management among Ndoki communities of Ukwá-East.

Discussion of Findings

The respondents' opinions revealed that the Okonko masquerade cult has a substantial influence on communal conflict management in the study area. This however, implies that communal conflict management is not linked to the fear of masquerade practices; rather, the cultural indoctrination of Okonko as an ancestral symbol of justice has led to the acceptance of the masquerade's verdicts as the command of the gods, that should be adhered to. This finding negates the submission of Enendu (2014) that masquerades are generally regarded as spirits, who wield enormous powers. That is, masquerades being regarded as the conscience of a community, playing the role of the village police, and enforcing social control and traditional authority in the restoration of peace and social

justice. On the other hand, Nwabueze (2003) observed that in the Igbo society, masquerade performances are meant to actualise certain results. The Igbo's believe in the efficacy and impartiality of masquerades' involvement in conflict resolutions, hence, the Okonko masquerade is invoked as the final judge in the arbitrations of serious cases. Therefore, in the Igbo society the demands of the living were clearly communicated to the supernatural forces through masquerade practices.

The current study revealed that within the indigenous dispute resolution systems of the Ndoki communities, the Okonko masquerade cult stood at the apex. This underscores the cultural beliefs of the people regarding Okonko as a symbol of social justice and control that is meant to reflect the ethical values and customs of the people. Collaborating this finding, Ogbonna (1984) buttresses the importance of indigenous institutions in communal conflict management. He argued that indigenous institutions provide mechanisms through which the probability of sustained divisive conflict is reduced through the conversion of secular actions of law enforcement into sacred, supra-social actions. Gena and Jarra (2023) strengthened this finding by

stating that traditional dispute resolution mechanisms have contributed to the de-escalation of violent conflicts and averted malevolent actions. The mechanisms have played essential roles in promoting peace and stability in resource-motivated conflicts in indigenous communities.

Similarly, Ajayi and Buhari (2014) emphasize that in communal conflict management in most African cultures, indigenous institutions are not only relevant but often more effective and trusted than formal agencies. Drawing from case studies in countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Uganda, they argue that people feel safer when communal disputes are managed by individuals, groups, and entities they know, such as community members, local chiefs, or neighbourhood security units, because they are perceived to be more accessible, transparent, and responsive than state institutions. However, though indigenous institutions may appear efficient, they often lack regulative competence and expertise (Igbokwe et al, 2021). In many instances, informal institutions have been known to use excessive force in settling disputes based on bias, or alignment with dogmatic interests or opinions (Igwe et al, 2020).

Therefore, a hybrid dispute mechanism can be employed on communal-related issues. In this mechanism, states do not ignore or suppress indigenous institutions, but rather engage them in reformative training through community-oriented strategies that blend culture, legitimacy, and legal standards.

Furthermore, the current study revealed that Okonko masquerade verdicts represent an indigenous distinctive perception of justice on communal conflicts among the people under study. This suggests that Okonko signifies a social control entity that ameliorates communal disintegrations by unifying them socially. This finding is in consonance with the findings of Ebhomienlen and Idemudia (2014) on the importance of Ekpo masquerades among the Edo people of Nigeria. They argued that the Ekpo masquerade provides a means of socio-economic relevance as a spirited institution, for social cohesion and control in mitigating victim and culprit ambience through the traditional worldview of the community. Also, Ubani (2019) findings aligned with this study by affirming that among the indigenous Annang communities, Ekpe masquerades are invited to settle land disputes. This is done by barricading the place with fresh

palm fronds so that nobody could go into the land until a verdict had been given. However, when such a verdict was violated, a heavy fine would be imposed on the violator as a deterrence to others. Therefore, Ekpe masquerades function as an agent of socio-political mechanism in the settlement of land disputes among Annang communities.

Conclusion

This study explored an indigenous method of conflict management system using the socio-cultural practices of an institutionalized cultic masquerade (Okonko) among the Ndoki communities of Ukwu-East Local Government Area in Abia State. The study focused on indigenous mechanisms of communal conflict management. Specifically, it examined the Okonko masquerade institution as a prominent indigenous alternative dispute resolution mechanism within the study communities.

The study findings suggest the need for an indigenous and culturally based justice system which is community-oriented, traditional and culture-friendly, time and cost effective, as a jurisdictional measure in communal conflict management. This will curtail the persistent escalation of violent communal disputes.

More so, the study made a significant comparison between indigenous methods of conflict management, which are community-based and Western litigation systems, which are characterised by technicalities. The study argued that traditionally institutionalised justice systems serve as reconciliatory agencies of socio-cultural and political integration that propels peacebuilding and sustainable development, while Western litigation systems are characterised by winner-takes-all syndromes, without focusing on peaceful reconciliations.

The findings of the study are significant in offering insights that would be useful to academics, government, policy makers, and other stakeholders in Nigeria. By leveraging traditional mechanisms of communal conflict management, the negative impacts of communal conflict in the study communities and Nigeria at large can be curtailed.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. **Reviving of indigenous pattern of conflict management:** The study recommends the adoption of a justice system that is tailored to indigenous beliefs and the cultural worldview of the

people, suggesting that such will propel forgiveness and reintegration of offenders through the cultural worldview of oneness in African societies.

2. Hybrid dispute mechanism: The study calls for an alternative method of conflict management which combines informal and formal structural mechanisms in resolving communal conflicts. This method should not be based on technicality and evidence alone, but rather on truth and true justice that will represent the cultural ethos, morals, beliefs, and worldview of the indigenous communities.

3. Traditional Mechanisms in Dispute Resolution: The study also suggests the introduction of the Traditional Dispute Resolution Mechanisms (TDRMs), which are comprehensive and broader in replacement of the Western conflict resolution system. This mechanism employs cultural rudiments in resolving communal conflicts, embracing both negative and positive peace, and ensuring societal harmony, by leveraging the African principle of "community as an individual and the individual as the community"

4. Ethical principle of reconciliation and peace building: The study recommends the use of an indigenous mechanism centered on a win-win and not a win-lose scenario for reconciliations. This is against the Western justice patterns of litigation proceedings, where the "winner-takes-it-all". This will strengthen reconciliatory processes and promote sustainable development and peaceful coexistence within African communities and nations at large.

Conflicts of Interests Declaration

In accordance with ethical obligations as researchers, the authors affirmed that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships of any kind that could have influenced the objectivity of this study.

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