THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS SPORTS IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENTS IN IKWERRE ETHNIC NATIONALITY FROM PRE-COLONIAL TIMES

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Abstract

The paper interrogates the role of indigenous sports in Ikwerre with focus on *Egelege* wrestling competition *eri obor* traditional music and *eri owhee* masquerade dance which has been the most popular form of sports and entertainment among the Ikwerre people of Rivers State. They are major socio-cultural activities that bestowed cohesion, promotes peace and harmony, fosters unity, stability and economic development. The study argues that *egelege*, *eri obor* and *eri owhee* are the most popular form of entertainment and sports among the Ikwerre ethnic nationality. The forms, styles and rules of the games are also highlighted. The study is premised within the framework of functionalist theory which emphasized the importance of studying the components of culture as an integral aspect of cohesion of the society. Interdisciplinary approach, primary and secondary sources were used to reconstruct the work and it concludes that wrestling competition, traditional music and masquerade dance promotes peace, unity, conflict management and development in Ikwerre, therefore should be encouraged by government officials, stakeholders, and policy makers.

Keywords: Wrestling, Sports, Development, Ikwerre, Peace

Introduction

Ikwerre people valued leisure and engaged in recreational activities or traditional sporting activities such as wrestling *egelege* also called *ute* or *ota* in some parts of Ikwerre. This is the most dominant cultural or traditional entertainment of the Ikwerre people. It has been used as a tool for the provision of amity among the warring communities of Ikwerre. Since conflict is a social phenomenon experienced in all societies of the world, it stands to reason therefore, that as long as the Ikwerre is inhabited by man, there must be fight, struggle, disagreement or quarrel. This implies that there must be some traditional entertainments or sports, mainly wrestling *egelege* traditional music *eri obor* and masquerade dance *eri-owhee*, which the ancestors of Ikwerre utilized as tools for conflict prevention and peaceful co-existence. These rich Ikwerre indigenous sporting activities should not be left to go extinct because of rapid urbanization and other influences which are fast eroding our culture (Wobo, 2021).

Ikwerre is an ethnic group in Rivers State encompassing four local government areas namely Ikwerre, Emohua, Obio/Akpor and Port Harcourt. The territory is bounded by other ethnic groups, to the north and west are the Ogba-Egbema, Ekpeye and Abua/Odual, to the south are the Kalabari and the Okrika of the Ijo, to the southwest and east, are the Tai/Eleme, Etche and Oyigbo and to the northeast are the Umuapu and Ohaji of Imo State. All these groups constitute the neighbours of Ikwerre.

Ikwerre is blessed with vast hectares of land which has dictated the people's occupational life. The people possess rich vegetation, high soil fertility and well drained coastland. The vast and fertile land not only promotes farming but also other economic activities such as hunting, palm wine tapping, palm oil production, gin distillation, carving, basketry, and fishing among others. Due to the soil fertility, the Ikwerre people produce several crops such as yam, cocoyam, cassava, maize, native beans, three leafed yam, pepper, okro as well as several vegetables. There are also fruits like mango, pawpaw, oranges, and various species of bush fruits and vegetables which are also utilized for medicine (Amadi, 2017:2). All these areas of human endeavours call for cooperation and collaboration which in one way or the other is plagued with disagreements and conflicts. This is because for an individual to meet their basic needs, they depend on the active participation of other individuals. Because they have to interact, they must experience one form of conflict or the other. Thus, the ability of the Ikwerre people to manage or resolve some of these crises is encapsulated in our traditional sporting activities such as *egelege*, *eri obor* and *eri-owhee* handed down by the ancestors so that the people can co-exist peacefully and harmoniously without rancour or war (Abali, 2021). This has been a binding and centripetal force to the cohesion of the Ikwerre ethnic nationality of Rivers State.

Conceptual Clarification

Wrestling**,** traditional music and masquerade dance celebrations bring peace and amity to warring factions in Ikwerre as it surmounts and resolve conflicts. The term "conflict" is derived from the Latin word *conflictus* meaning struck together. The conflict has featured more in mankind's search for interest, peace and security. Conflict affects us as individuals, families, communities organisations, nations and states. Man in his ability to eke out a living generates conflict. Therefore, conflict is an unavoidable part or process of social life and interaction. It is an endemic phenomenon in every human relation. Thus, Ikwerre sporting mechanisms have been duly explored by the people for conflict prevention and promotion of peace and stability with the notion that conflict which is inevitable can majorly be resolved or controlled through Ikwerre *egelege*, *eri obor* and *eri owhee.*

Okolie (2009:53) defines "conflict as an inevitable aspect of the human being as they must interact, an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions." This stance is taken in the fact that man as a precarious animal is naturally predisposed to live in groups, communities and societies such as the Ikwerre. Because they live in a community where scarce resources exist, they must experience one form of conflict or the other. The ability to resolve these conflicts through traditional mechanisms such as wrestling *egelege*, *eri obor* and *eri ewhee* formulated by the ancestors for conflict prevention should be valued.

Lewis (1995) cited in Okowa (2008:41) identified three determinants of economic growth and development which include:

i. The effort to economise or carry out economic activities

ii. Increasing knowledge and its application; and

iii. Increasing the number of available resources natural or man-made.

In terms of the first proximate determinant of development which is economic activities, it is to be noted that wrestling tradition, music and masquerade dance celebrations usually boost the economy of the Ikwerre people and Rivers State at large. Before the commencement of these activities, Ikwerre people produced plenty of garri, yam, coco-yam, three-leafed yams, pepper, okro, palm oil, palm wine as well as native gin, *kai-kai* or *akameru*. These are kept for consumption, gift items as well as for sales. Economic activities are the soul of development. They are the fuel and engine that power the rocket of development during the wrestling period and other sporting activities.

Theoretical Framework

This work shall be conducted within the framework of the functionalist approach, which emphasizes the importance of studying the components of culture as an integral aspect that makes a functional contribution to the cohesion of society. The two main proponents of this approach are A.R. Radcliff Brown and Bronislaw Malinoskwi. The foundation of this approach is that society is structured into a working unity in which the parts are interdependent in a way that maintains the whole. Consequently, the function of an institution is its contribution to the maintenance of the entire system of which it is a part (Andah, 1988). Functionalists believe that society has strong ideals to maintain its stability and internal cohesion.

Malinoskwi views culture as an integral system that functions to maintain peace and satisfy the psychological needs of the individuals while Radcliff emphasizes the distinction between the satisfaction of the requirements of a social system such as the indigenous sporting activities of the Ikwerre people (Chinda, 2006). Functionalism emphasizes equilibrium that can best instil harmony, stability and cohesion within the society such as the Ikwerre.

Sources and Methods

In the reconstruction of African history, historians usually depend on several sources. Thus, the work adopted the inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary approach. Alagoa (1978:13) posits that the difficulties of penetrating the distant past of African societies through oral traditions, literature and ancient artefacts have imposed the necessity of a multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary approach using knowledge from related disciplines in the social sciences and humanities to generate data. Therefore, through the application of the knowledge of the techniques and methodologies of other disciplines, the work examined the socio-cultural and economic development arising from the celebration of wrestling *egelege,* traditional music *eri obor* and masquerade dance *eri owhee* in Ikwerre from pre-colonial times.

The work also used the primary and secondary sources of data which include the oral sources and the written sources. Oral sources such as oral tradition, oral history, and face-to-face individual interview techniques were used. Oral tradition penetrates deeper into the past as well as provides the most authentic account of the history and culture of the Ikwerre people. The problems associated with this source

include the possibility of distortion of facts, failure of human memory, the risk of exaggeration and the omission of unfavourable events. Despite the usefulness of oral tradition, the inherent weaknesses and limitations make it necessary to be supplemented with written sources.

Written sources used include books, journals, research thesis and dissertations by scholars. They have the advantage that they cannot be altered after they have been written. While we reckon with written records as reliable sources for historical reconstruction, cautions about the circumstances which might make them unreliable should be taken which include the problem of bias, distortion of knowledge and forgery. The work utilized these sources to achieve a logical, concise and objective history of the Ikwerre culture such as wrestling *egelege* traditional dance *eri-obor* and masquerade dance *eri owhee* in conflict management and development of Ikwerre ethnic nationality.

Indigenous Sporting Activities *Egelege* in Ikwerre

One of the indigenous sporting activities in Ikwerre *egelege* exists in the form of wrestling and also called, *ute* or *ota* in some parts of Ikwerre. Wrestling is the most prominent cultural entertainment and heritage of the people. Every year thousands of Ikwerre people both young and old, men and women, illiterate and educated, far and near celebrate this respected culture with style. It usually begins after some traditions and rituals associated with it have been performed. Every Ikwerre man is believed to be physically strong because the culture has helped in moulding the individual to overcome or outsmart his opponent in physical combat (Tasie,

2008:98). Wrestling commences at the end of each planting and harvesting seasons except the impromptu wrestling which can always come up at any time to test the strength of a given community. Wrestling periods constitute an occasion for feasting. The youths look forward to the time when the period resumes and as soon as it starts, they want to demonstrate their masculine ability to the admiration of all especially the women who would dance rigorously in appreciation of the wrestler's ability and victory (Amadi, 2017:264). The culture of wrestling was initially used to test the physical strength, quality and capability of Ikwerre warriors before going to war (Tasie, 2008).

Before the wrestling begins in each season, the chiefs and *owhor* holders would gather at the village square to pour libation to *eli* the god of the land, thanking her for good planting and harvesting seasons while suing for peace, long life and fruitfulness in the next farming season. Once this libation has been done, wrestling commences (Amadi, 2004). During a wrestling competition, a person can never be declared a winner until he satisfactorily falls down his opponent by placing his back flat on the ground. The women are so excited when their favoured man throws an opponent, that they are soon to accept the winner for marriage. Apart from being a sport, wrestling *egelege* plays other roles as it draws admiration, promotes peace, physical fitness, bravery, recreation, respect as well as economic development among the people.

The Forms, Styles and Rules of Wrestling in Ikwerre

Wrestling drummers and wrestlers were beautifully adorned in a special way to portray Ikwerre culture. The champions *ezeota* or *nyeikerema* were adorned in very special ways with several paintings on their body using *oro* chalk and *ihie* camwood. They also tie animal skin around their waist and hung lines of cowries around their ankles. Each community was expected to distinguish itself by producing a wrestling champion *nyeikerema* or *ezeota*.

The *ezeota*, before being declared the overall champion of some Ikwerre communities like Aluu, Emohua, Isiokpo, Ndele and Rumuji must remain undefeated for seven years. In the pre-colonial era, one of the privileges was that he would have the opportunity to relate with some of the respected elders and chiefs in the community. Another reason is that he will have other opportunities like marrying beautiful wives which many parents are ready to give him for marriage due to his bravery. Some ladies on their own made advances to the wrestlers. The ladies see the powerful wrestlers as men who could protect them at any given time.

Winners also made large amounts of money because of the money sprayed on them during wrestling as they defeated their opponents. He might also be given good gifts like *George* wrappers, drinks and some food stuff. During wrestling festivals, people always remember their extended families and used the opportunity to visit them. In many communities in Ikwerre, the wrestling period is also known as a time for merriment (Tasie, 2008:99).

In the pre-colonial era, to ensure victory, most wrestlers engaged in fetish means to achieve victory. Some performed rituals and practised voodoo methods to incapacitate their intending opponents by making them weak, lose concentration, have blurred vision and have other temporary body and mental weaknesses. But they are soon to be disappointed because the god of the land *eli* will always neutralize the charms (Azunda, 2021).

Wrestling as a very important aspect of the people's culture involves a lot of merry-making where *okazi* soup, pounded yam, palm wine *manya ngwo* and native gin *kaikai* feature prominently for entertainment. Nyekazi (2021) posits that a new wrestling champion *nyeikerema* or *ezeota* emerges every year and if for any reason, no new champion emerges the old reigning champion continues until someone is able to throw him or until he retires from wrestling.

There are different types of wrestling which include *egelege abali* night wrestling, *egelege mgberede* impromptu wrestling and *egelege orah* several days of wrestling which mandated the wrestlers travel outside their communities for several days between four to six days. Community members could also join and could make more friends during the visit as they had to put up in their friend's houses for several days. The *egelege oha* lasts every weekend in each of the villages that make up the town to entertain people usually towards the end of each year (Onunwo, 2021).

Wrestling requires the exhibition of skills, talent, tact and stamina. The wrestler can use any style in the bout so long as it may enable him to win. The styles include

osunnsu (lifting an opponent on the shoulder while throwing him backward), *nkwu-kwo* (using your leg to engage the legs of your opponent to make a throw), *ogaazu* (being able to get behind your opponent's back), *ovuli-zu-ochilaru nu olu* (ability to lift an opponent's feet off the ground) and *owhezaochi nu risi* (flinging one's leg over the opponent's head). During the matches, the wrestlers *nde-gbagaegelege*, judges *nde buogaegelege,* drummers *ndo kwagaegelege* are well costumed decorated with *iri* native tattoo and *ihie* camwood. Before wrestling, the wrestlers converged at the village square and from that point they danced around the village ringing all sizes of bells, some carried earthen pots with fire, and others hung animal skulls. Some Ikwerre youths hung life tortoise thereby making the event look spectacular. Wrestling songs in Ikwerre are most powerful to move an individual to dance. During wrestling, the waiting crowd which gathers around the wrestling arena waits in expectation of how and who should emerge as the champion. The crowd cheers, claps, laughs, shouts and dances as the occasion continues (Azunda, 2021). The tale of who wins and who loses in the contest and the manner of victory or defeat of the wrestlers lasts for days even after the wrestling festival.

Traditional Music (*Eri-Obor*)

Ikwerre land also produced skilled musicians and dancers who used the *obor*, *eregbu* and *oduma* instruments to give traditional culture display considerable colour and charm. *Eri-obour* is a cultural entertainment dance in Ikwerre. It originated from Ikwerrland and has made some remarkable achievements in fostering peace and unity within the Ikwerre communities. In the pre-colonial days

even recently, many Ikwerre men and women got married as a result of their ability to shake their waists when dancing.

Nnah (2000:34-35) cited in Amadi (2010:118) notes that Simeon Abraham alias Boro of Egbeda, Olulu Wamadi of Ibaa, James Wizor of Emohua, Mwonnunu Ohia of Elele-Alimini and promoter Eze of Odegu are some of the recent examples of Ikwerre's excellence in traditional music which portrays the peoples beliefs, feelings, problems, achievements and prospects and the level of development so far in the area. *Obor* is a local guitar made from a dried calabash and has metal spokes fastened to it. All the rhythm comes from the *obor* and is heavily supported by other local instruments to produce sweet and danceable tunes which make the waist swing in different styles.

Ikwerre people see the *eri obor* as the most recognized cultural entertainment dance and music from the pre-colonial period till date. Ikwerre people used the *eri-obor* to entertain some foreigners that visited Ikwerreland. A good example was when two British researchers Gregory Adams and Edwin Burnett visited Omeke in Isiokpe in 1913 and was entertained with the *eri-obor* traditional dance (Tasie, 2008:1901). *Eri-obor* traditional dance is still valued and is hired to perform during traditional occasions like age grade initiations, chieftaincy coronation and burial ceremonies. They are also hired in the higher institutions during Ikwerre Cultural Week to showcase their cultural heritage. The *obor* is usually hung on the neck of the singer while fingers work on the *obor* as he sings (Tasie 2008:102).

Masquerade Dance *Eri-owhee*

Masquerade dance *eri-ohwee* is mainly used for entertainment and sports. Some of the masquerade dance permeated into Ikwerreland as a result of the intergroup relations between Ikwerre and the neighbouring communities of Ogoni, Abua, Ibibio, Kalabari and Okrika in their *Okonko* (cultural dance), *Aminikpo (*cult dance*)* *Arungu* and *Oki* (entertainment dances) as well as *Egbukele, Owuama, Ekpo* and *Egbe-pelebo* (masquerade dances) (Amadi, 2010:118).

Aminikpo is a masquerade dance borrowed from the Ogoni people. It displays the use of magic on inanimate objects carved like human beings. *Arungu* is a dance associated with marine gods and goddesses and was borrowed from Kalabari. Mmanwu is another cultural dance borrowed from the Ibibio. They are all used to thrill visitors in Ikwerre. It aimed to make Ikwerre a cosmopolitan city so that the people and the strangers live in peace. The masqueraders wore different masks on their faces and sometimes used knives to entertain their spectators.





Wrestling in Rumuokoro of Ikwerre




Masquerade Dance in Ikwerre

Wrestling, Traditional Music, Masquerade Dance and Conflict Resolution

Amadi (2017:264) posits that wrestling contests *egelege* traditional music *eri obor* and masquerade dance *eri-owhee* fostered friendship and unity among the communities and helped in the prevention of communal conflicts among the Ikwerre people. Wrestling (*egelege*) has been used to cement relationships among warring factions through requests by an opponent on the wrestling ground for them to engage in the encounter after which their grievances are resolved (Worlu, 2021).

As a way to further cement the relationship between communities of Ikwerre, Uchendu (2021) admits that a community might decide to invite a neighbouring community to participate in their wrestling festival. The aim is to strengthen the mutual relationship between the two communities. There have been instances when Omuanwa invited Obelle-Ibaa, Rumuagholu invited Degema people, Elelenwo invited Eleme people, and Nkpolu-Orowurukwo also invited Rumuagholu all geared towards peaceful co-existence and harmonious living. The individual also

invited their friends from the neighbouring communities to come and witness their wrestling competition (Egeonu, 2021).

Wrestling *egelege* entrenches good conduct and the spirit of sportsmanship, which promote humility and friendship among the Ikwerre people and their neighbours. Traditional music *eri obor* and masquerade dance *eri-owhee* also promote positive relationships among communities. The dancers after the period of learning showcase their skills on a date on which members from the communities and their neighbours usually come to witness and merry with the hosting community.

Impact of Wrestling Celebration, Traditional Music and Masquerade Dance on the Economic Development of the Ikwerre People

Since wrestling is always celebrated at the end of the planting and harvesting season, there are always some laid-down preparations towards the occasion. Before the event, Ikwerre farmers embarked on producing large quantities of garri, yam, three-leafed yam and several vegetables which they sold to enable them to generate funds that would be used to entertain their guests. Native gin *kai-kai* or *akameru* which is always one of the items valued for entertainment is usually produced or distilled in large quantities. The reason is that those engaged in the distillation would have to sell some of it to enable them to purchase other items needed for food and entertainment for their guest.

Palm wine *manya ngwo* is a major drink produced by the Ikwerre tappers and used for important ceremonies such as wrestling, traditional music and masquerade displays. The tappers will have to sell some of the quantity to generate funds to buy

other things for the occasion. These economic transactions before and during the wrestling proper generated money and improved the economic status of the people. Food has always been in good supply in Ikwerre therefore, visitors that come to Ikwerre to witness the wrestling celebration, especially during the *egelegeorah* celebration always go back with a lot of farm produce such as garri, yam, three-leafed yam, *okazi* leaves and other vegetables to show for their visit. The traditional music *eri-obor* and masquerade dance *eri-owhee* also enhanced the economic development of Ikwerre as guests or visitors will be ushered in lavished entertainment.

These gifts will in no small measure enhance the economic condition of the participants as they strive to save money from the generosity of the members of the community hosting the *egelege* (Mgbakiri, 2021). Equally, the arrangement or purpose of producing whatever was needed for the celebration and sales of these items to the public puts physical monies in the hands of Ikwerre men and women.

Continuity and Change

It is a truism that wrestling, traditional music and masquerade dance are age-long cultural activities of the Ikwerre people that promote unity, harmony, peaceful co-existence as well as economic development of the people. However, some aspects of this cultural heritage have been retained while some have been changed over time. According to Egeonu (2021), *ezeota* or *nyeikerema* is no longer accorded the respect given to him in the pre-colonial period. Parents cannot give the hands of

their daughters in marriage simply because he is the *ezeota.* There must be other notable qualities that may give rise to such marriage arrangements.

In terms of their styles of dressing, many of the present wrestlers have changed from tying animal skin on their waist to George wrappers. They do not also adorn themselves with native *iri* or camwood *ihie* all over the neck and back areas of their body.

The traditions and rituals associated with it are still being performed. Before the commencement of wrestling, the chiefs and *owhor* holders would gather at the village square or playground to pour libation to *eli* the god of the land to thank her for good planting and harvesting seasons, long life, and fruitfulness in the next farming season while suing for peace. The *eri obor* traditional music and masquerade dance are still predominant as sporting activities and entertainment, especially during the festive period as well as some important events such as during the burials of important personalities like the *nye-nwe-eli* in most Ikwerre communities.

Conclusion

Over the years, Ikwerre rich cultural recreational and sporting activities especially wrestling *egelege* traditional music *eri obor* and masquerade dance *eri-owhee* have been a binding factor that fostered friendship and unity among the Ikwerre communities and their neighbouring ethnic groups. It has been a major tool used by the people in preventing conflicts as well as promoting peace, unity stability and the economic development of the Nigerian state. Wrestling *egelege* should be

promoted by the government at all levels within Rivers State due to its efficacy in conflict prevention and promotion of peace especially in the prevailing circumstances of insecurity in the state. Traditional music and masquerade dance have brought so many communities together so that any community that is celebrating, their neighbouring communities are always invited which has led to peaceful co-existence and harmonious living.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:

- This rich Ikwerre cultural sporting activities that bring amity to the people should not be allowed to go extinct by the people, government at all levels, stakeholders and policymakers.
- The wrestling celebration in Ikwerre should be organized properly through a common meeting by the traditional rulers on when each community should undertake their turn within the stipulated period. This will harmonies the event and make it more relevant within Ikwerre.

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