




# Fostering Peace through Traditional Sports amongst the Igbo People of Nigeria

Kelechi Johnmary Ani<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

## ABSTRACT

Sports has remained a human behavior that manifests in different forms in different societies. While there are a number of sports that have attained the international status of major sports that are presently practiced and competed for, across the globe, there remain a number of indigenous and traditional sports that are limited to specific environments. This study focused on the place of indigenous sports and their contributions towards peacebuilding amongst the Igbo people of Nigeria. It used primary and secondary materials to develop its content. The study found that traditional sports remain widely practiced amongst the Igbo people and that the sports contribute to inter-group relations, promote social peace, enhance human networking and advance critical thinking. The study recommends that sports be included in all government competitions that are sponsored by the South-Eastern governments in Nigeria in order to transform them. It concludes that the path towards human longevity will be promoted through sports, and traditional sports will appeal to the people faster, considering that sports are part of their cultural practice.

**Keywords:** Traditional Sports, Peacebuilding, Social Integration, Igboland

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional sports remain a powerful driver of development and cultural emancipation amongst different people in many societies. This is rooted in the fact that sports are based on the people's culture and traditions. Hence, when people engage in such sports, they tend to promote what unites or bonds them together culturally. The traditional sports of a given society also carry the landmark signature of the people's identity. It is the creative manifestation of the arts and culture of a given society. Traditional sports tend to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. It should be noted that some traditional Igbo sports, like wrestling were and still are promoted into the festival of the people.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, the interplay between tradition and modernity remained a recurring theme in interpreting and analyzing traditional sports among the Igbo people. Despite their cultural importance, traditional sports in Nigeria and Igboland specifically face several contemporary challenges. The challenges include rapid urbanization and the influence that global sports such as soccer have imposed on traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Nnamdi Chukwu, "Wrestling in Igbo Culture," *Tradition and Transition: African Studies Review* 58, no. 3 (2015): 84–100.

sports. This has led to a decline in the practice and interest in traditional sports. The younger generations of Igbo people living in scattered urban areas across the globe are often more attracted to modern sports, which receive more media coverage and institutional support than their traditional sports.<sup>2</sup> Some of these traditional sports are even totally strange to them, and they lack the knowledge of their existence due to the fact that some of these young Igbo people are born and brought up in cities that are far away from their communities. Ironically, as communities become more integrated into a global culture, there is a risk of losing traditional practices. The decline in traditional sports is part of a broader erosion of cultural practices that define community identities.<sup>3</sup> It is worthy of note that many traditional Igbo sports are performed during significant cultural and religious festivals. For example, wrestling matches are central to the New Yam Festival among the Igbo people of Nigeria, symbolizing strength and community unity.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Durbar festivals in Northern Nigeria showcase horsemanship and martial skills, which reinforce the Hausa-Fulani cultural pride and historical continuity in Nigeria.<sup>5</sup>

The study will explore how globalization impacts traditional celebrations, underscoring the dynamic nature of Igbo traditional sports in an evolving world. It will discuss the role of Igbo traditional sports in facilitating peacebuilding, social harmony and cultural development. These dynamics reveal the community's ability to adapt its cultural traditions and sustain them within the changing global landscape.<sup>6</sup> The research on cultural evolution further explores the concept of transformations in traditional festivals and offers insights into their resilience in the face of socio-economic changes. This underscores the ability of cultural practices to endure and evolve within shifting economic contexts.<sup>7</sup> In this study, the researcher focuses mainly on Ikpo Uga and Izu Ncho traditional sports. These two traditional sports amongst the Igbo people are not as popular as wrestling, which has been raised to sports festivals in many Igbo communities, hence needed more scholarly promotion and social support in the bid to manage their eradication and extinction.

This study is very significant because it speaks to the historical culture and civilization of the Igbo people. Many Igbo people who were born in remote villages engaged in these sports over the century. The language of sports is the mother tongue of the people. The people will sing in their native language and diverse Igbo dialects and respond to the rhythm of the game. Furthermore, the fact that the game is done in the Igbo mother tongue speaks of the reality of the people's nativity and worldview. The commentators and spectators around watch with extraordinary focus on the competitor and send their own jokes and praises to the winner. The praise songs and chants are used to subdue mental and psychological stress. This is perfected with jaw-breaking jokes that make the spectators laugh and forget their sorrows. It should be noted that the mother-tongue language of the Igbo traditional sports is deeply cherished amongst the people. Similarly, sports speak volumes about the gender differentiation amongst the Igbo people. The Ikpo Oga is used to encourage the young female into adolescence, while the Nwa Ncho is a characteristic adult male and female game that is performed in the evening. The energy exhibited and the powerful calculation that goes with each of the two traditional Igbo sports encourage strength and creativity among the Igbo people.

<sup>2</sup> Ikenna Nworie, Interview with a Social Commentator on Societal development on the need for the development of traditional sports in Southeastern Nigeria held on 28<sup>th</sup> December, 2024; Ade Ajayi, "Traditional Games and Intellectual Development in Yoruba Land," *International Journal of African Studies* 22, no. 1 (2017): 40–55.

<sup>3</sup> Kingsley N. Eze, "Globalization and Cultural Erosion". *The Nigerian Experience* (Lagos: Modern Nigerian Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Okoro Agu, Interview with a Chief on Traditional Sports Amongst the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2025; Anieze Okoro, "Festivals and Ceremonies in Igboland," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 30, no. 2 (2018): 150–65.

<sup>5</sup> Rasheed Bello, *Education and Cultural Preservation in Nigeria* (Zaria: Northern University Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Chigozie Mbah, *Igbo Cultural Practices and Their Modern Relevance* (Abuja: African Heritage Books, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Ebube Chukwu Azunna, Interview with a traditional sport Lover in Abakaliki Southeastern Nigeria on December 4<sup>th</sup> 2024; Jamiu Adetayo, "Urbanization and the Decline of Traditional Sports in Nigeria," *Journal of African Urban Studies* 14, no. 3 (2017): 55–69.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was developed using a combination of documentary evidence and interviews. Several respondents were selected randomly for an interview, considering their love for traditional Igbo sports. These key informant interviews (KIIs) were documented in italics in later parts of the study. These people have shown a passion for promotion of the sports in different villages. The documentary evidence was selected from published journals and books that advocated and discussed the different dynamics of traditional sports and their cultural significance amongst the people.

### **Ikpo Uga Traditional Sports**

Ikpo Uga is a traditional sport from the southeastern region of Nigeria, particularly among the Igbo people. This sport, often referred to as “Striking foot” or “Open and Close,” involves participants of 2 or more persons clapping their hands together, moving their bodies and strategically using their feet during the game. The challenge increases as songs are sung and more players join, testing the athlete’s skills, technique, strength, and coordination.<sup>8</sup> This sport is very popular amongst young girls who grew up in different Igbo villages across Nigeria.

*Ikpo Uga is not just a physical contest but a cultural event deeply embedded in the community’s traditions and celebrations. It is commonly held at home, in market squares, community playgrounds and sometimes during festivals, such as the New Yam Festival, and other communal gatherings (KIIs, I).*

The sport serves as a rite of passage for female children mainly and, in rare cases, young male children from the age of 8-20 years, symbolizing their transition from childhood to adolescence as they grow up and their readiness to take on more significant responsibilities within the community.

*This sport majorly involves the ladies, but there are no cultural barriers preventing the young boys, who are mostly minors, from participating. Sports naturally promote the creative idea of the female. It also promotes the culture of love and peace, which is fundamental in the traditional theology and religion of the Igbo people (KIIs, I I).*

It should be noted that this sport brings female friends from far and wide, and they come together to bond amongst themselves.

### **Rules and Game Play**

**Setup:** A good arena characterized by its smooth floor and devoid of weapons is often selected for the game as players step forward on their bare feet and a minimum of 2-3 players are set to start the game after assuming strategic positions.

**Participants:** Competitors are usually young girls and ladies who have undergone specific training, techniques and styles of play.

**Objective:** The aim is to strike your foot against your opponent’s results, counting from 10-100 as each player has a lifeline from 1-100, subtracting some scores after each strike.

**Winning:** The winner is the participant who has successfully stroked their opponents out by defeating them from 10-100 counts.

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<sup>8</sup> Egbo Okoro, Interview with a Traditional Sports Fan at Enugu, Southeastern Nigeria on January 10, 2025; Adeoye S. Adewale, “Culture and Socialization”. *Fundamental Themes in Social Studies Education* (Lucky Odoni Enterprises, 2005).

The practice of *Ikpo Uga* has seen a decline due to several factors, including urbanization, modernization, and the influence of global sports like soccer and basketball. However, efforts by cultural organizations and community leaders have been instrumental in reviving interest in this traditional sport.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 1.1: Ladies participating in the *Ikpo Uga* game

### **Izu Ncho Traditional Sport**

Izu Ncho, also known as Awale or Oware in different parts of the Igbo region, is called Pit and Pebble by the West but generally referred to as "*Izu Ncho*" by the Igbo people and officially known as Ayo game by the Yoruba people of Nigeria. It is a strategic game played on a wooden board with pits and seeds, often made from cowrie shells or pebbles. The game has been played for centuries and is deeply ingrained in Igbo culture, before its influence grew amongst the Yoruba of Nigeria. *Izu Ncho is a game of strategy, logic, and arithmetic. It helps develop cognitive skills such as counting, planning, and problem-solving. Traditionally, it was used as an educational tool to teach children mathematical concepts and strategic thinking. Izu Ncho is more than just a game; it is a cultural practice that has been passed down through generations* (KIIs, III). It embodies the people's values of wisdom, patience, and foresight, reflecting broader societal principles.<sup>10</sup>

### **Rules and Gameplay**

#### ***Game Setup***

**Board and Seeds:** The *Izu Ncho* is played on a wooden board with 12 pits arranged in two rows of six. Each player controls the six pits on their side. The game uses 48 seeds, with each pit initially containing four seeds.

**Objective:** The objective is to capture more seeds than your opponent by the end of the game.

<sup>9</sup> Mbah, *Igbo Cultural Practices and Their Modern Relevance*.

<sup>10</sup> Felix Ekechi, *Traditional Games and Festivals in Nigeria* (Enugu: Eastern Cultural Books, 2019).

### **Basic Rules**

**Starting the Game:** Players decide who starts, usually by agreement or a random method such as a coin toss. The starting player picks up all seeds from one of their pits and sows them counter-clockwise, placing one seed in each subsequent pit.

**Sowing:** Players take turns picking up all seeds from one of their pits and distributing them one by one into subsequent pits. Sowing continues until the player runs out of seeds.

**Capturing Seeds:** If the last seed of a player that is sowing lands in an opponent's pit containing one or two seeds (making it two or three seeds in total), those seeds are captured. The player who is sowing at that time will capture and remove all the seeds in that particular pit from the board and keep them in their store.

**Continuing Turns:** If the player's last seed lands in a pit that does not meet the capturing conditions, the turn ends, and the opponent plays next.

### **Advanced Rules**

**Empty Pits:** A player cannot start a turn from a pit that is empty or from a pit that does not have enough seeds to distribute at least one seed into the next pit.

**Forced Moves:** If a player has no right to move randomly because all their pits are empty or all have insufficient seeds, the game ends, and the opponent captures all remaining seeds on their side.

**Stalemates and Draws:** In some variations, if both players reach a point where no more seeds can be captured and they continue to repeat the same moves without any change in seed count, the game is considered a draw.

### **Winning the Game**

**Ending the Game:** The game ends when a player cannot make a move (either due to empty pits or by decision). At this point, the remaining seeds on the board are captured by the player who can legally take them.

**Determining the Winner:** The player with the most captured seeds at the end of the game is declared the winner. If both players capture an equal number of seeds, the game is considered a draw.



*Figure 1.2: Izu Ncho game. It should be noted that in the traditional Igbo Ncho game, the seeds are not placed in a wooden container but in ten shallow holes that are dug into the soil.*

## Peacebuilding and Social Significance

Peacebuilding is a collection of actions and inactions within a human society that is aimed at uprooting the roots of conflicts and ensuring the enthronement of an environment where harmony, love, unity, security and development reign. It is a process that survives mainly on the outcomes of social interactions with people at all levels within a human society. Education and interactions therein, both formal and informal drives peacebuilding.<sup>11</sup> Such interactions could be scientific, technological, economic, social, cultural, etc but their focus is aimed at advancing societal peace, promotion of conflict resolution and societal building.

The path to peacebuilding that is largely promoted by the traditional Igbo sports includes reconciliation through the fostering of forgiveness, which is attained when hitherto enemies play the traditional games.<sup>12</sup> It promotes social peace and social cohesion when a larger number of persons engage in traditional sports. It also promotes the opportunity for inter-personal dialogue and inter-group dialogue, which are fundamental for the promotion of societal peace through communication.<sup>13</sup> It is very difficult to promote sustainable peace where the culture of peaceful communication is lacking among the people.

Furthermore, traditional sports help in building trust between erstwhile enemies and conflict parties. *When they engage in recurrent traditional sports, they tend to forget their past history of conflict, and the culture of inner-healing is promoted amongst them, thereby creating a new phase of peaceful relationship amongst them. It also uproots the influence of spoilers, backbiters, and haters in negatively reinforcing their history of conflict, crisis, and disagreement* (KIIs, IV). When the spoilers and haters see that these former enemies are playing traditional sports together, they tend to recoil into their shells and suspend all further acts of negative gossip that worsen the trend of interpersonal or group conflict. It also helps in sustaining positive peace and the culture of peace already existing in any given society. It could then be argued that traditional sports help to heal the psychology of past conflicts in the hearts of hitherto enemies and promote peace.

On the other hand, *the place of the above traditional sports in exercising the body and the brain cannot be neglected. When these bodies and brains are properly exercised, they function optimally and enhance good health, which is a fundamental pillar of peace and peacebuilding. This is because good health promotes the psychology of peace in a society, while sicknesses, pandemics and epidemics create a crisis and neurotic environment amongst the populace* (KIIs, V).

Recognizing the cultural value of traditional sports, various efforts are being made to preserve and promote them. Cultural Festivals and Competitions involve reviving traditional sports through cultural festivals and competitions that help to attract both participants and spectators. These events not only preserve the sports but also promote tourism and provide economic benefits to communities.<sup>14</sup> By extension, tourism has become one of the modern cultures of man that enhances individual and group peace. Most tourists engage in the tourism adventure in a bid to burn-out stress, create a fresh mindset set, and increase family peace, integration, and family bonding.

*Traditional sports often carry educational values, teaching participants and spectators about strategy, discipline, and cultural heritage. Traditional sports foster a sense of community and belonging, which promotes communal peace. They bring people together, reinforcing social bonds and communal identity* (KIIs, VI). An example is evidenced in Ikpoko Uga and wrestling matches in Igbo communities, which are not just competitions but social events where people gather, socialize, and strengthen communal ties.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Vincent Okwudiba Anyika and Kelechi Johnmary Ani, "Track Five Diplomacy: The Role of Peace Education in Peacebuilding in Ebonyi State, Nigeria," *African Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies* 12, no. 3 (2023): 183–200.

<sup>12</sup> Kelechi Johnmary Ani and Donatus Ifukwu Ajaegbo, "Historical Foundations of Conflict Management and Peace Building Strategies in Nigeria," *Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation* 4, no. 1 (2015): 113–33.

<sup>13</sup> Kelechi Johnmary Ani, "Factoring Tradotronic Media Communication for Human Security Management and Social Stability in Nigerian Communities," *Conflict and Communication Online* 13, no. 1 (2014): 1–10.

<sup>14</sup> Bello, *Education and Cultural Preservation in Nigeria*.

<sup>15</sup> Ekechi, *Traditional Games and Festivals in Nigeria*.

*Traditional sports are a means of preserving and celebrating the Igbo cultural heritage. They embody the history, myths, and values of a community. These sports serve as a form of cultural expression, showcasing the unique customs and practices of a community* (KIIs, VIII). For example, distinctive styles of wrestling and the rituals associated with it in different Nigerian cultures highlight the diversity within the country.<sup>16</sup> Ikpo Uga, on its part carries the Igbo cultural stamp. Many traditional sports are part of larger ceremonial activities, often associated with religious or seasonal festivals.

*Traditional Igbo sports hold immense value in preserving cultural heritage, fostering community unity, and promoting social and economic development. They serve not only as forms of entertainment but also as powerful tools for education, identity preservation, and community cohesion* (KIIs, VIII). By continuing to celebrate and promote traditional sports, we can ensure that future generations remain connected to their cultural roots while also reaping the economic and social benefits that these activities bring to different Igbo communities.

Cultural preservation plays a central role in these traditional Igbo sports. They emphasize the importance of preserving cultural traditions for community development and identity. They also underscore the role of oral histories in safeguarding cultural heritage and in understanding local traditions. These narratives are instrumental in preserving and transmitting cultural practices across generations, thereby further strengthening the cultural identity of the community.<sup>17</sup>

Specifically, Ikpo Uga and Izu Ncho promote community cohesion and provide entertainment, drawing spectators from surrounding areas. The event often includes singing and dancing, as well as critical reasoning and strategic manipulation of advantages in order to win against the opponent, thereby further enriching the Igbo cultural experience as participants play the Ikpo Uga game on bare feet, while those who engage in Izu Ncho are properly dressed.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Utilizing media to broadcast traditional sports events and leveraging technology to create digital archives can significantly aid in preservation efforts. Social media platforms, documentaries, and online content can reach a broader audience, including the Nigerian diaspora and global viewers interested in cultural heritage. Efforts should be made to continue preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the Igbo people through sports festivals. This can also include initiatives to document and transmit traditional sports knowledge and practices to younger generations. Programs that educate both community members and visitors about the cultural significance of the festival can enhance understanding and appreciation.

Again, Igbo communities should explore opportunities to develop cultural tourism around their traditional sports festivals. This involves marketing and infrastructure development to attract visitors and boost the local economy. To mitigate economic challenges, the festival organizers should explore new revenue streams, such as traditional sports sponsorships and partnerships with local businesses. It is essential to actively involve community members, traditional leaders, and organizers in decision-making processes related to traditional sports festivals. Their input is invaluable in maintaining the delicate balance between tradition and modernity. The festival organizers should remain flexible and adaptive to changing circumstances, including evolving socio-political structures and economic challenges.

Finally, there is a need for the government at the grassroots level to fund traditional sports competitions. The truth remains that the government in Nigeria is the greatest controller of national wealth. Sequel to the direct payment from the Federation account to the purse of the local government administrators, the Chairmen of local governments in Igboland should, as a matter of urgency, consider funding and sponsoring traditional sports festivals in their geopolitical areas as a way of promoting the Igbo traditional sports that are currently facing the threats of globalization.

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<sup>16</sup> Kalu Ogbaa, *Igbo: 'Heritage Library of African Peoples'* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Ajayi, "Traditional Games and Intellectual Development in Yoruba Land."

## CONCLUSION

This study has focused on traditional Igbo sports and how they are useful tools for the promotion of societal peacebuilding. Specifically, the study used Ikpo Uga and Izu Ncho for primary analysis. Ikpo Uga and Izu Ncho are more than just traditional sports; they are integral parts of the Igbo's cultural heritage, reflecting the rich history and values of the Igbo people. Despite the challenges posed by modernization, concerted efforts in education, documentation, and cultural promotion can help preserve these sports traditions for future generations. Incorporating traditional sports into school curricula and documenting them through research and publications are essential steps in preservation. Educational programs that highlight the value of traditional sports help in passing them on to younger generations. Continuous research and documentation of the festival's history and cultural elements should be encouraged to ensure the preservation of this rich heritage.

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## ABOUT AUTHOR

Kelechi Johnmary Ani bagged a doctoral degree in Peace Studies from the Department of Politics and International Relations, North West University, South Africa. He is of the School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.