

Indigenous Peace and Conflict Management Institutions Among the Worshippers of Igbe Religion

By

Afatakpa Onoseme Fortune, P.hD

Department of General Studies
Dominion University Ibadan

Abstract

Existing studies tend to focus on peace and conflict management within Abrahamic religions, offering limited attention to indigenous faith systems. This article explores the peace and conflict management institutions within Igbe religion, examining their roles and significance within the community. Using an ethnographic research design, data were collected qualitatively through in-depth interviews with the *Uku* Supreme, *Uku* (high priests), *Omote Uku* (high priestesses), *Onori* (chief priests), and community leaders. The study employed **Structural Functionalism Theory** and analyzed the data thematically through a narrative approach. Findings expose that Igbe religion has a well-structured system of peace and conflict management centered around the offices of the *Uku* Supreme, *Uku*, *Omote Uku*, *Onori*, and *Oni Igbe*, which primarily deploy mediation and arbitration mechanisms. The study concludes that recognizing the functions of indigenous systems can enhance understanding of their vital roles in peacebuilding, particularly in contexts where formal state institutions are weak or mistrusted.

Keywords: Igbe Religion, Peace, Conflict, Management, Institutions

1. Introduction

Conflict is an inherent part of human interactions and has been a constant feature across societies throughout historyⁱ. It arises from differing interests, values, and perceptions, and can occur at individual, community, or societal levels.ⁱⁱ Conflict, while inevitable, does not always lead to violence or destruction. How a society manages or resolves conflict plays a crucial role in

maintaining social harmony and order. The capacity of a community to address and resolve disputes effectively is vital in ensuring stability and fostering cooperation. As such, the presence of conflict in itself is not inherently negative; rather, it is the approach taken to manage or resolve it that determines its outcome.ⁱⁱⁱ

Before the advent of colonialism, indigenous African societies had well-established mechanisms for conflict management.^{iv v} These systems were rooted in customary laws and practices passed down through generations^{vi}. Conflict management in many ethnic groups in Nigeria was traditionally handled by local institutions that were deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community^{vii}. Elders, chiefs, and spiritual leaders often played central roles in mediating disputes, using restorative approaches aimed at restoring balance and ensuring peaceful coexistence.^{viii} The effectiveness of these indigenous conflict management institutions was largely due to their cultural relevance, their accessibility to community members, and their emphasis on reconciliation and healing, rather than punishment. The ability to resolve conflict effectively is not simply a matter of having a system in place; it requires a culturally appropriate framework, accepted by the people, and capable of addressing the complexities of local disputes. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine the indigenous peace and conflict management institutions among the worshippers of Igbe religion in Urhobo Land.

2. Statement of the Problem

Extant studies on Igbe Orhe,^{ix x xi xiiixiii} have been preoccupied with its historical growth and expansion; its response to Christian missionary activities and conflicts with the colonial government in Urhoboland; its monotheistic identity which is not in conformity with the normative features of classical African Traditional Religion and *Igbe Orhe* as a mechanism for social control; the effects of syncretism and the proliferation of different brands of Igbe religion across Delta

State. However, these existing studies offer little insight into the peace and indigenous conflicts' management institutions in *Igbe Orhe*. The article filled the identified gaps.

3. Literature Review

Conflict

Broadly speaking, conflict refers to a state of opposition or disagreement between two or more parties who have incompatible goals, interests, values, or beliefs.^{xiv} This disagreement can manifest in different forms, ranging from interpersonal disputes to large-scale social, political, or international conflicts. The essence of conflict lies in the competition for scarce resources, differing perceptions of justice, or the struggle to assert power or identity within a given social setting^{xv}.

Conflict is often seen as an inevitable part of human existence. It is not necessarily a negative phenomenon but a natural consequence of human interaction and social dynamics^{xvi}. In societies, conflicts arise from a variety of factors, including economic inequalities, cultural differences, power struggles, and historical grievances. While the presence of conflict is natural and even expected in any human society, its outcomes largely depend on how it is managed or resolved. Unresolved conflicts can escalate into violence, war, or social disintegration, while effectively managed conflicts can lead to growth, reconciliation, and social cohesion^{xvii}.

Conflict can be categorized in several ways: personal, inter-group, or societal. Personal conflict often involves individual differences, such as disagreements within families or work relationships, while inter-group conflict refers to disputes between different social, ethnic, or political groups. Societal conflict, on the other hand, typically involves systemic issues such as class struggles, national disputes, or ethnic conflicts. The severity of these conflicts often depends on the stakeholders involved, the context in which the conflict occurs, and the perceived stakes^{xviii}.

In traditional African societies, conflict was often managed within the community using indigenous mechanisms designed to restore peace and order without resorting to violent confrontation. In this sense, conflict management systems in pre-colonial Africa were structured not only to address the root causes of conflicts but also to restore social harmony through mediation, negotiation, and reconciliation^{xix}. As such, the concept of conflict is not just about the existence of disagreements but about how these disputes are dealt with within the social and cultural context.

Conflict Management

Conflict management refers to the process of addressing and resolving conflicts in a way that reduces negative outcomes and promotes peaceful and constructive solutions (Omene, 2021)^{xx}. It involves strategies, methods, and techniques aimed at controlling the intensity of conflict, preventing escalation, and guiding the involved parties toward a resolution (Rahim, 2002).^{xxi} Conflict management is not about avoiding conflict altogether, but about managing its dynamics to prevent harm and facilitate cooperation. Effective conflict management seeks to address the root causes of disputes, foster communication, and encourage mutual understanding among conflicting parties.^{xxii}

There are various approaches to conflict management, often categorized as avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration^{xxiii}. Each of these strategies serves different purposes depending on the context and nature of the conflict. For instance, in situations where time is critical, a competitive approach may be necessary to quickly resolve disputes. However, in cases where maintaining long-term relationships is essential, a collaborative approach which is focused on finding mutually beneficial solutions might be more effective.^{xxiv}

In indigenous African societies, conflict management has often been characterized by community-based, restorative methods aimed at restoring harmony and balance.^{xxv} Elders and respected community leaders typically act as mediators, using established cultural norms and traditional practices to address conflicts. These methods prioritize reconciliation, collective responsibility, and social restoration rather than punishment.^{xxvi} This contrasts with more formalized, adversarial approaches often seen in Western legal systems, which can focus on individual rights and judicial processes rather than community healing.^{xxvii}

Conflict management systems, particularly in traditional African settings, often emphasise preventive measures and community involvement in resolving disputes. By using negotiation, dialogue, and mediation, these systems aim to preserve social ties and maintain societal harmony. Importantly, indigenous conflict management approaches are deeply intertwined with cultural beliefs and values, reflecting the society's collective understanding of justice, fairness, and social cohesion.^{xxviii}

The study of conflict management is vital not only in understanding the mechanisms that resolve disputes but also in addressing the broader social structures that influence conflict. Effective conflict management contributes to maintaining peace, reducing violence, and strengthening social bonds within communities. As societies continue to evolve, it is essential to examine how traditional conflict management systems can complement or integrate with modern conflict resolution techniques, especially in the face of globalization and changing social dynamics.^{xxix}

4. Methodology

This ethnographic study was carried out across ten *Ogwa ri Igbe* (Igbe religious temples) located in Delta State, Nigeria. These temples are found in the towns of Eginni, Ovwian-Aladja, Kokori, Emokpa-Ughelli, Oria-Abraka, Agbarha-Otor, Ekrrerhavwe, Ogume, Upper Agbarho, and Orherhe-Agbarho.

Primary data collection involved in-depth interviews with the *Uku Supreme*—the Supreme Head of the Igbe religion—as well as seven *Uku* (high priests), five *Omote Uku* (high priestesses), and three *Onori* (chief priests). Key informant interviews were also conducted with the Senior Secretary at the Kokori headquarters, two community leaders knowledgeable about the religion, and five lay adherents. These interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule composed of open-ended questions tailored to the research objectives, offering flexibility that enriched each conversation. Interview questions centered on the peace and conflict management mechanisms within the Igbe religious framework, exploring the functions and significance of the various institutions and actors. The sessions were conducted in Queen’s English, Pidgin English, and the Urhobo language. When Pidgin and Urhobo were used, interviews were transcribed into modern English. Notably, instances where the Urhobo language provided expressions more suited to the context were immediately interpreted by a fluent Urhobo speaker who was equally proficient in English.

In Urhobo, conflict is articulated through terms such as *ohonre* (fight), *omévwávwò* (competition), *vwarhe* (struggle) and *sivwi* (contest, struggle for). Conversely, the concept of management is expressed as *ísuésu* (administration). These culturally grounded terms informed the framing of interview questions, enhancing participants’ understanding of the subject matter.

In addition, secondary data were sourced from a range of materials including books, academic journals, theses, internet sources, and unpublished manuscripts. All collected data were analyzed

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thematically using a descriptive narrative approach, allowing for a rich and nuanced understanding of the Igbe religious community and its conflict management systems.

5. Indigenous Peace and Conflict Management Institutions in Nigeria

Indigenous Peace and conflict management institutions in Nigeria are native systems that predate colonial and formal state institutions.^{xxx} These institutions are entrenched in local governance structures. They play a role in peace and conflict resolution, particularly in rural and peri-urban settings where formal legal mechanisms are either inaccessible or inefficient.^{xxxi}

Indigenous peace and conflict management institutions in Nigeria operate within culturally defined norms and practices that emphasize consensus-building, reconciliation, and social harmony. These institutions rely on established leadership systems such as councils of elders, family heads, indigenous religious institutions and leaders, as well as community chiefs. Unlike the Western legal framework, which is adversarial, indigenous methods prioritise restorative justice and social cohesion.^{xxxii} Historically, these institutions managed disputes over land, trade, marriage, and inheritance. They also handled inter-group conflicts, particularly among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups, including the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani.^{xxxiii} Even in contemporary times, indigenous institutions continue to be relevant in addressing conflicts.

Indigenous peace and conflict management institutions are structured along hierarchical lines, with leadership positions based on age, wisdom, experience, and social status. Among the Fulani agro-pastoralists, for example, the *Sarkin Fulani*, *Mawdo*, and *Jawmu Saare* play crucial roles in dispute resolution.^{xxxiv} Similarly, among the Esan people of Edo State, councils of elders and age-grade systems serve as mediators in local disputes ^{xxxv}. At the core of these institutions is the emphasis on dialogue and mediation. The process often begins with fact-finding, followed by negotiations led by respected community figures. Resolution is reached through compensation, apology, or

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17632182> || Page No - 235

restitution, avoiding punitive measures that could escalate tensions. This structure contrasts with state-driven conflict management approaches, which often involve law enforcement and judicial processes.^{xxxvi}

6. The Founding of Igbe Religion

The *Igbe Orhe* religion, rooted in the life and experiences of its founder, Ubiesha Etarakpor, emerged during a period of significant spiritual oppression in Urhoboland, Nigeria. The historical context of this emergence is complex, with various accounts suggesting that the origins of this religious movement span differing timelines. While some scholars^{xxxvii xxxviii} argue that *Igbe Orhe* began in the early 19th century, Akama^{xxxix} assert that it began around the 20th century. Despite the lack of consensus on the founding date, it is universally accepted that Ubiesha Etarakpor is the pivotal figure in the establishment of *Igbe Orhe*.

The historical acknowledgment of Ubiesha and the *Igbe Orhe* was limited during his lifetime, largely due to the prevailing modes of documenting history in Urhoboland. Consequently, much of the knowledge about Ubiesha and his spiritual movement has been transmitted orally by his followers and is encapsulated in songs associated with the religion.^{xl} This reliance on oral history reflects not only a gap in formal documentation but also highlights the deeply communal nature of spiritual practice and memory in the culture.

Prior to the advent of *Igbe Orhe*, Urhoboland was home to several dominant spiritual movements and divinities that promised protection and deliverance from malevolent forces.^{xli} These included the *Eni* water divinity and the *Ugo* (Eagle) divinity. However, many practitioners of these spiritual traditions began to exploit the ignorance and vulnerabilities of the people, leading to a widespread sense of spiritual oppression. In this environment of fear and exploitation, Ubiesha emerged as a transformative figure, offering a new path for those seeking healing and spiritual security.^{xlii}

Ubiesha's early life provides insight into his eventual role as the founder of *Igbe Orhe*. “Born to a man named Etarakpor in Awhirhe village, located within the Agbarha Kingdom (present-day Ughelli North Local Government Area), Ubiesha grew up in a setting rife with spiritual conflict”¹. “After marrying Ikekeraye, who struggled with childbearing due to repeated miscarriages, the couple moved to Kokori, where Ikekeraye finally conceived and gave birth to a son”². Ubiesha named his son "Ubiesha," which translates to "a single seed of bean" in the Urhobo language. This name was emblematic, as the couple hoped it would symbolise abundance and future fertility, reflecting their struggles with childlessness.

Ubiesha's spiritual awakening began when he experienced a series of divine revelations. He communicated to his family that he had been chosen by God for a purpose, which spurred his decision to embark on a spiritual journey.^{xliii} “Initially, his behaviour especially his dancing steps alarmed those close to him, including his wife, who perceived his actions as madness. Unable to cope with the changes in her husband, she eventually left him, which only intensified Ubiesha’s commitment to his newfound mission”³. The transformative experience of his spiritual calling revealed to him the profound responsibilities he would assume.

A pivotal moment in Ubiesha’s journey occurred while he was farming with his wife, Erukainure. During this time, he discovered a mysterious white chalk, known as *orhe* in the Urhobo language. Although initially unremarkable, this chalk would become central to his spiritual practices. “After his discovery, Ubiesha dreamt of a mystic figure who revealed the significance of the *orhe* and

¹ Onori Jonathan Okpako, 37 years, Personal Communication, Eginni, Delta State, December 29, 2024

² Omote Uku, Sarah Eferemodia 58, Personal Communication, Ovwian -Aladja, Delta State, October 16, 204

³ Late Uku Phillip Akpokovo, (90 years) Personal Communication, October 16, 2016, Kokori, Delta State

instructed him on how to organise a new religious movement. This encounter imparted knowledge about healing, rituals, and the importance of maintaining ritual purity”⁴.

Ubiesha’s home healing and prophetic gifts drew a large following, notably after curing a leprosy patient named Idubor, which spread *Igbe Orhe*’s faith across Urhoboland. A test by Oba Eweka II, who disguised himself as a child, further boosted Ubiesha’s credibility. His influence expanded beyond Urhoboland to other ethnic groups, attracting witchcraft and spirit-attack protection seekers. By the mid-1970s *Igbe Orhe* extended to non-Urhobo communities and gained international recognition with a London chapter and followers in the United States.^{xliv}

In conclusion, the formation of *Igbe Orhe* was not just the result of a singular vision but a profound response to the spiritual needs of a community grappling with oppression, fear, and the desire for healing. Ubiesha Etarakpor’s legacy continues to resonate through the enduring practices and beliefs of *Igbe Orhe*, reflecting a rich tapestry of cultural and spiritual resilience.

7. Beliefs and Practices in Igbe Orhe

Igbe Orhe presents a coherent system of belief and ritual, anchored in a carefully defined set of sacred objects, practices, and cosmological claims. Central elements include *Orhe* (the native white chalk)), and *adjudju*, (the indigenous handheld fan), as well as the bed, the seat of authority on which the *Uku* (High Priest) or *Omote Uku* (High Priestess) sits during worship, and the *Ogwa*, (the temple where worshippers gather). Adherents venerate these items as embodiments of fellowship, authority, power, and communion with *Oweya* (God)⁵.

⁴ Late Prophet Oyiboame Emojevu (77 years) Personal Communication, December 29, 2016, Emokpa-Ughelli, Delta State, Nigeria

⁵ *Onori* Joseph Akpore 65 years, Senior Secretary, Personal Communication, *Igbe* Headquarters, Kokori, December 17, 2024

A defining feature of *Igbe Orhe* is its clear distinction between the sacred and the profane. The *orhe* and *adjudju* are regarded as vehicles of spiritual efficacy, guiding ritual life and communal governance, while other temple elements shape a life of purity and shared devotion. A central belief is that purity of heart is essential for access to *Oweya*. This purity is symbolically expressed through white garments and the daily licking of the *Orhe*. Repeated licking is understood to cleanse impurities, and an ongoing state of purity is believed to sustain a continuous flow of blessings from *Oweya*⁶.

Votary dance and praise hold a foundational place in *Igbe Orhe* worship. Dance is frequently described as the primary mode of religious expression, with many adherents asserting that *Oweya* can be accessed through dance and that dancers can exorcise demons and other malevolent spirits. *The Uku* or *Omote Uku* (High Priest or High Priestess) presides from the bed, the highest spiritual authority in the temple, from whom salvific rites are administered and blessings pronounced on special occasions⁷.

The temple space, the *Ogwa*, is deliberately devoid of pictorial depictions of deities. The *Orhe* remains a central pillar of ritual life, while the *adjudju* and bed are integral to authority and communion. A local lantern symbolizes divine light. Charms and divination are not part of *Igbe Orhe* practice, and there are no poles erected before the temple⁸. The *Orhe* and *adjudju* are believed to serve preventive, protective, and curative roles against witchcraft and illness. Healing and protection are closely tied to communal worship, and ancestors are not the primary focus of

⁶ *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko 80-year, Personal Communication at Kokori, Ethiope East LGA, October 16, 2024, Delta State, Nigeria,

⁷ Late *Uku* Phillip Akpokovo, (90 years) Personal Communication, October 16, 2016, Kokori, Delta State

⁸ *Uku* Festus Ikoba 70 year. Head *Oweya* Missionary Association, Personal Communication, Oria-Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria.

eneration or appeasement; instead, direct worship of *Oweya* and the purification practices sustaining a holy community take precedence⁹.

Founding narrative and ethical orientation also shape *Igbe Orhe*. Ubiesha Etarakpor is viewed as a messenger of *Oweya*, articulating an ethical vision of reciprocity—*ufuoma akpoeje* (for the peace of mankind)—and guiding the religion’s overarching aim to serve humanity. The belief system thus frames its rituals, symbols, and communal practices as expressions of a purposeful, human-centered cosmology¹⁰.

8. Indigenous Peace and Conflict Management Institutions in *Igbe Orhe*

This section of the article focuses on the strategic indigenous leadership institutions within the *Igbe* religion, namely the *Uku Supreme*, *Uku/Omote Uku*, and *Onori/Oni Igbe*. These groups are recognised as the elite within the *Igbe* religious framework and are pivotal in managing peace and conflict

Uku Supreme

The *Uku Supreme* in *Igbe* Religion is the highest spiritual and political figure. He is called *Uku Supreme* because the various sectarian groups in *Igbe Orhe* have their spiritual and administrative heads known as *Uku*. *Onori* Joseph Akpore¹¹ maintains that the *Uku Supreme* is the highest spiritual rank one can attain in the priesthood order of *Igbe Orhe*. Becoming the *Uku Supreme* of

⁹ *Uku Micheal* Osete Ame, 60 years, Personal Communication at Agbarha -Otor, December 30, 2024 Delta State, Nigeria

¹⁰ *Omote Uku* (Dr) Victoria Odaighofua, 60 years, Personal Communication at Eginni, Delta State, Nigeria December 27, 2024.

¹¹ *Onori* Joseph Akpore 65 years, Senior Secretary, Personal Communication, *Igbe* Headquarters, Kokori, December 17, 2024

Igbe religion is by inheritance. *Uku* Festus Ikoba¹² notes that the position of *Uku* Supreme is reserved for the eldest male child from the paternal side of the family according to the custom of the Urhobo people. His position contradicts an earlier view that it is only *Oweya* who can select an *Uku*.^{xlv} According to *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko (JP):

After the death of Ubiesha, the founder of the religion, Ibodje Ubiesha succeeded him as the spiritual head. When Ibodje Ubiesha died, Macdonald Ibodje succeeded him as *Uku Supreme*. Jackson Ibodje took over as *Uku Supreme* after the death of Macdonald. The current *Uku* Supreme Obaoga Ibodje ascended the position after the death of Jackson Ibodje¹³.

Uku Phillip Akpokovo¹⁴ gave an insight into how *Uku* became the established title for priests in Igbe religion. In his narrative, a certain Oba of Benin who wanted to test the prophetic and visionary power of Ubiesha disguised as a child. Prior to the day, the Oba intended to visit, Ubiesha announced to his members that *Oweya* revealed to him that they would be playing host to a very important personality soon. On a certain worship day, a small boy entered the *Ogwa* of Ubiesha. On sighting this small boy, it was reported that Ubiesha ordered the entire congregation to stand to their feet in honour of the supposed small boy.

¹² *Uku* Festus Ikoba 70 year. Head *Oweya* Missionary Association, Personal Communication, Oriabraka, Delta State, Nigeria.

¹³ *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko 80-year, Personal Communication at Kokori, Ethiope East LGA, October 16, 2024, Delta State, Nigeria,

¹⁴ Late *Uku* Phillip Akpokovo, (90 years) Personal Communication, October 16, 2016, Kokori, Delta State

Furthermore, *Uku* Phillip Akpokovo stated that Ubiesha ordered elaborate entertainment for the supposed small boy to the amazement of the entire congregation. Later, the small boy left the hall of worship. After some weeks, the narrative has it that the Oba of Benin sent emissaries to Ubiesha with a gift of a specially crafted *adjudju* (traditional handheld hand fan) and a stool; the Oba then called Ubiesha *Uku*, meaning one who is highly revered. This narrative resonates among all the respondents. It was also confirmed by the three FGDs conducted for men, women and youth across the sectarian lines. The relics of the traditional handheld fan can still be found in the *Ogwa* of *Uku* Phillip Akpokovo at Kokori, Delta State.

According to *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko (JP)¹⁵, Ibodje was the first to use the title *Uku* Supreme. According to him, when they started ordaining people as *Uku* in order to take charge of local Igbe assemblies, it became imperative to distinguish the overall spiritual leader of the religion from others. As a result, the appellation *Uku* Supreme was invented and it has remained so till today. This lends credence to the thesis that traditions can be invented in order to maintain certain hegemony.^{xlvi}

The *Uku* Supreme resides in Kokori and from there he superintends over the affairs of Igbe Religion. The *Uku* Supreme is the Viceroy of *Oweya* and highly revered by followers of the religion. The authority to ordain anyone as *Uku*¹⁶ or *Omote Uku*¹⁷ is the sole responsibility of the *Uku* Supreme after. *Uku* Osete Ame¹⁸ explains that though the *Uku* Supreme is the direct representative of *Oweya*, he still must submit himself to the discipline and laws otherwise he will

¹⁵ *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko 80-year, Personal Communication at Kokori, Ethiope East LGA, October 16, 2024, Delta State, Nigeria,

¹⁶ *Uku* means High Priest

¹⁷ *Omote Uku* means High Priestess

¹⁸ *Uku Micheal* Osete Ame, 60 years, Personal Communication at Agbarha -Otor, December 30, 2024 Delta State, Nigeria

incur the wrath of *Oweya*. In the words of the immediate past *Uku* Supreme *Ose ri Isi*¹⁹ Obaoga Ibodje:

As *Uku Supreme*, I serve the peace of humanity and must refrain from bloodshed or causing death. I do not pronounce curses, lead with partiality, or abuse authority. I am a father to all followers and am known as *Ose ri Isi*. I, as *Uku*, must remain faithful to my wives and avoid actions that bring *Oweya*'s name into disrepute. The office is governed by strict laws and demanding ethical standards.²⁰

Attesting to the strictness of the laws of the Igbe Religion, *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko²¹ detailed that Ubiesha, the founder of *Igbe Orhe*, was sanctioned by *Oweya* because he took another man's wife without going through the laid down traditional procedures of the people. *Uku* Gabriel Obonofuoga²², *Omote Uku* Victoria Odaighofua²³, and *Omote Uku* Queen Ejinawho Ogitie²⁴ agreed with *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko (JP).

¹⁹ *Ose ri Isi* means Overall Spiritual Father of the Religion

²⁰ Late Obaoga Ibodje, the Immediate Past *Uku* Supreme of Igbe Religion. The interview at Kokori, the Headquarters of the Religion on October 19, 2016.

²¹ *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko 80-year, Personal Communication at Kokori, Ethiope East LGA, October 16, 2024, Delta State, Nigeria,

²² *Uku* Gabriel Obonofuoga, 50 years, Personal Communication at Ekrerhavwe, Delta State, Nigeria October 28, 2024.

²³ *Omote Uku* (Dr) Victoria Odaighofua, 60 years, Personal Communication at Eginni, Delta State, Nigeria December 27, 2024.

²⁴ *Omote Uku* Queen Ejinawho Ogitie, 65 years, Personal Communication at Eginni, Delta State, Nigeria December 27, 2024.

Anthony Sakpra²⁵ claims that the *Uku* Supreme is the final go-between when it comes to the management and peace resolution of conflicts in Igbe religion. The office of the *Uku* Supreme is sacrosanct to the management of conflict and maintenance of the peace traditions in Igbe religion. *Uku* Anthony Echekume²⁶, and *Omote Uku* Victoria Amajatoja²⁷ maintained that when they intervene in conflicts and their intervention is not satisfactory to parties in conflict, they refer such cases to the *Uku* Supreme. While *Uku* Osete Ame²⁸ mentioned that as far as Igbe religion is concerned, the *Uku* Supreme has the final say on any matter. No one flouts or faults the judgment of *Uku* Supreme otherwise such a person will be challenging the wisdom of *Oweya*.

In the words of immediate past *Uku* Supreme *Ose Isi* Obaoga Ibodje “when they bring any matter to me, once I make my pronouncements on it, nobody goes against it”²⁹. *Uku* Festus Ikoba³⁰ affirms that “ordinarily, not all matters should get to the *Uku* Supreme. But because some *Uku* and *Emete Uku* have compromised their calling, some adherents no longer trust their judgment. Hence, they would rather prefer to take their conflict challenges to the *Uku* Supreme”. Once the *Uku* Supreme pronounces on a matter, his words are regarded as sacred and his decisions are considered as direct revelation from *Oweya*. This confers on him the power to mediate in any conflict issue that is

²⁵ Anthony Sakpra, 58 years, Community Leader, Personal Communication at Ovwian-Aladja, Delta State, Nigeria, August 5, 2024.

²⁶ *Uku* Anthony Echekume, 66 years, Personal Communication at Ogume, Delta State, Nigeria, August 10, 2024.

²⁷*Uku* Victoria Amajatoja, 55 years, Personal Communication at Upper Agbarho, Delta State, Nigeria, August 10, 2024.

²⁸ *Uku Micheal* Osete Ame, 60 years, Personal Communication at Agbarha -Otor, December 30, 2024 Delta State, Nigeria

²⁹ Late Obaoga Ibodje, the Immediate Past *Uku* Supreme of Igbe Religion. The interview at Kokori, the Headquarters of the Religion on October 19, 2016.

³⁰ *Uku* Festus Ikoba 70 year. Head of *Oweya* Missionary Association, Personal Communication, Oria-Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria.

brought before him. Peace and reconciliation take place once he makes a pronouncement on any issue.

Uku Festus Ikoba recounts a case brought before the Central Working Committee, which initially found him guilty. He refused the ruling and demanded referral to the *Uku* Supreme. The *Uku* Supreme ultimately ruled, and although the decision did not favour him, the episode underscores adherents' trust in the *Uku* Supreme as the ultimate arbiter in conflict resolution.

9. *Uku/Omote Uku*

The appellation *Uku* refers to a male high priest, while *Omote Uku* refers to a high priestess. Igbe religion operates an Episcopal pattern of administration because each *Ogwa ri Igbe* has a presiding *Uku* or *Omote Uku* who must have been ordained by the *Uku Supreme* at Kokori. All *Uku* ordained from Kokori report to the *Uku Supreme* and they also pay homage to him from time to time to renew their spiritual authority and allegiance.

The office of *Uku* or *Omote Uku* has both spiritual and administrative responsibilities. In each *Ogwa ri Igbe*, the *Uku* or *Omote Uku* performs the highest ritualistic functions. They carry out the major spiritual ceremonies, healing processes and all confessions are made to them.^{xlviii} In the local *Ogwa ri Igbe*, the *Uku* or *Omote Uku* has the final say and his/her words are believed to be as sacred as the *Orhe*. The following words from *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko (JP) establishes the enormous authority of an *Uku* or *Omote Uku*:

Once ordained, an *Uku* or *Omote Uku* commands universal respect regardless of age. Age cannot override the honor due to them as representatives of Oweya.³¹

³¹ *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko 80-year, Personal Communication at Kokori, Ethiope East LGA, October 16, 2024, Delta State, Nigeria,

Uku Osete Ame disclosed that there are certain dynamics that play out before someone can be ordained *Uku* or *Omote Uku*. He explains that:

To be ordained *Uku* or *Omote Uku*, the recipient must first be a fully established member of the religion. Becoming a full member entails the licking of the chalk after renouncing all forms wickedness and surrendering any paraphernalia termed fetish by the leadership. The process of licking the chalk and surrendering all fetish items unveils the concept of total repentance in *Igbe Orhe* known as “*shi gwe kei’ Baba*” (literally it means kneeling before our Father God)³².

Uku Festus Ikoba revealed that:

when an *Igbe* adherent says “*vwo ke shi gwe kei’ baba*”,³³ it signals repentance and full surrender to *Oweya*. Relinquishing fetishes signals readiness for a holy life dependent on *Oweya*. The chalk-licking ritual symbolizes inner cleansing, after which individuals may be called to serve as apprentices under an *Uku*. Apprenticeship length varies and is directed by *Oweya*’s spirit.

³² *Uku Micheal* Osete Ame, 60 years, Personal Communication at Agbarha -Otor, December 30, 2024 Delta State, Nigeria

³³ *vwo ke shi gwe kei’ baba* it means “you must kneel before the spiritual father”

Uku.³⁴

Upon satisfactory performance as an apprentice, the Senior *Uku* will take the aspiring *Uku* to meet with the *Ose Isi Uku* Supreme at Kokori on a specified date. He will introduce the man or the woman and explain to the *Uku* Supreme that the person standing before him is a devoted member of the religion and very active in the *Ogwa ri Igbe* and that he /she desires to answer the call of *Oweya* by becoming *Uku*. *Uku Osete Ame* further explained that the *Uku* Supreme will ask how many years he or she has served as an apprentice. Depending on the guidance of *Oweya*, the *Uku* Supreme will recommend additional years or months of training.

As they submit themselves for further training intermittently, the *Uku* Supreme will send for the intending *Uku* or *Omote Uku* for more interrogations. After a while, their power of clairvoyance will be tested. *Uku Osete Ame*³⁵ maintained that a major prerequisite for becoming an *Uku* or *Omote Uku* is having the power of clairvoyance, which means the ability to assess visions and prophesy and attests to the fact that any *Uku* or *Omote Uku* who can effectively “make use of his/her eyes” can never go hungry. He further adds that depending on the programme going on at the headquarters, the *Uku* Supreme will give the would-be *Uku* some assignments that will require the engagement of the gift of prophecy, visions and discernment. Through the assignment, it will be confirmed whether his spiritual gifts are genuine or not. Once the *Uku* Supreme is satisfied, he will then pronounce him/her fit to be ordained *Uku* or *Omote Uku*. There is yet a proviso: one

³⁴ *Uku Festus Ikoba* 70 year. Head of *Oweya* Missionary Association, Personal Communication, Oria-Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria.

³⁵ *Uku Micheal Osete Ame*, 60 years, Personal Communication at Agbarha -Otor, December 30, 2024 Delta State, Nigeria

cannot become an *Uku* without going through the rank of *Onori* (male chief priest) or *Oni Igbe* (chief priestess).

However, undertaking a critical assessment of the current trend of things in relation to the *Uku* office, *Uku* Osete Ame noted that things have changed. In his evaluation, things are no longer the way they used to be concerning ordination into the office of *Uku*. He claims that some adherents now use all sorts of means to get the *Uku* title and influence, some use money, while many others are using the *Uku* as a means to exhibit arrogance and pride. According to him, in some instances the *Uku* is commercialized. He further laments that because of the wealth and influence that accompany the office of *Uku*, some followers no longer subject themselves to the rigours of apprenticeship. He concludes that it has resulted in the ordination of some questionable characters as *Uku*³⁶.

The same law that binds the *Uku* Supreme also binds an *Uku* in Igbe Religion. *Uku* Obonofuoga expounded on the strict regime of discipline that accompanies the office of *Uku*:

An *Uku* or *Omote Uku* must not tell lies, an *Uku* must be very frank; must not be partial; an *Uku* must not claim to see what he has not seen, and they must not engage in a quarrel or be a trouble maker; an *Uku* must not incite people into committing crime or violence (Interview at Ekrerhavwe, Ughelli North Local Government. December 28, 2024)³⁷.

³⁶ *Uku Micheal* Osete Ame, 60 years, Personal Communication at Agbarha -Otor, December 30, 2024 Delta State, Nigeria

³⁷ *Uku Gabriel* Obonofuoga, 43 years, Personal Communication at Ekrerhavwe, December 30, 2024 Delta State, Nigeria

Likewise, an *Uku* and *Omote Uku* must not engage in whatever will tarnish the image of the religion. Above all, whatever affects one *Uku* affects all and it is major factor responsible for the bond that exist amongst all the *Uku*.

*Olorogun Mukoro Ochuko (JP)*³⁸, indicated that a major factor that confers an *Uku* or *Omote Uku* with the moral authority as an institution to intervene in peace and conflict issues is the concept of “*orhuerakpor*” which literarily means redeemer. As “*orhuerakpor*”, an *Uku* or *Omote Uku* is socialised into the mould of a bridge builder. In the words of the late *Uku* Supreme Obaoga Ibodje:

An *Uku* is a peacemaker; he builds bridges. The sects of conflict parties do not matter. Even Christians bring quarrels to me and I settle them because as *Uku* I am *orhuerakpor* and *ufuoma akpoeje* (meaning peace for mankind) is our watchword (Interview at Kokori, Ethiope East Local Government. October 19, 2016)³⁹.

Corroborating the *Uku* Supreme, *Omote Uku* Ejinawho Ogitie explained that it is mandatory for all adherents of Igbe to pray for people of other faith traditions that it shall be well with them an action which according to her has influenced their commitment to “*ufuoma akpoeje*”⁴⁰. Comrade Gilbert Isoko agreed with the assertion of *Omote Uku* Ogitie by citing the example of his

³⁸ *Olorogun Mukoro Ochuko* 80-year, Personal Communication at Kokori, Ethiope East LGA, October 16, 2024, Delta State, Nigeria,

³⁹ Late Obaoga Ibodje, the Immediate Past *Uku* Supreme of Igbe Religion. The interview at Kokori, the Headquarters of the Religion on October 19, 2016.

⁴⁰ *Omote Uku* Queen Ejinawho Ogitie, 65 years, Personal Communication at Eginni, Delta State, Nigeria December 27, 2024.

neighbour, an elderly Igbe adherent who consistently prayed for Christians and Muslims after her early morning service⁴¹.

A critical examination of the literal meaning of “*orhuerakpor*” (redeemer) and the expression “*ufuoma akpoeje*” (peace for mankind) shows that an *Uku* or *Omote Uku* does not act on sentiment and would rather take action (s) that can galvanise conflicting parties to embrace peace. Therefore, as *orhuerakpor*, an *Uku* or *Omote Uku* must not make inflammatory comments that can incite violence. Moreover, as *orhuerakpor*, the sectarian group does not matter when they are intervening in conflicts. What matters most is the general interest of every person that is involved in the conflict.

It underscores the view that a pivotal factor in the escalation of social tensions into violent strife along ethnic, religious, or sectarian lines is the critical role of elite mobilisation.^{xlviii} Religious elites can leverage referent power to promote tolerance and coexistence. Operationally, the concepts *orhuerakpor* and *ufuoma akpoeje* embody peace and tolerance: an *Uku* or *Omote Uku* does not claim possession of absolute truth, so dissatisfied parties may seek redress from another *Uku* or, if needed, pursue justice through the *Uku Supreme*. In linguistic terms, *orhuerakpor* and *ufuoma akpoeje* orientation give *Uku* and *Omote Uku* intrinsic motivation to act as peace ambassadors for humanity. Proper deployment of these linguistic representations can nurture positive interrelational dynamics and mend tensions within the religious community.^{xlix}

⁴¹ Comrade Gilbert Isoko, 60 years, Personal Communication at Orherhe-Agbarho, Delta State, Nigeria December 27, 2024.

10. *Onori*

In the leadership hierarchy of Igbe Orhe, the *Onori* (singular) or *Inori* (plural) is next to the *Uku* or *Omote Uku* in any *Ogwa ri Igbe*. *Olorogun* Mukoro Ochuko (JP) explained that in Igbe, it is possible for an *Onori* to own and manage an *Ogwa*. An *Onori* after some diligent years of service can apply to be ordained as an *Uku* if he perceives that there is a call of *Oweya*. This corroborates the submission that after some years, when he has acquired much knowledge, wisdom and in fact spiritual development, an *Onori* could apply to be elevated to the status of *Uku*.¹

According to *Uku* Osete Ame, the law that binds *Uku* also applies to *Onori* and it aligns with Nabofa^{li} that every *Onori* is seriously enjoined to uphold the good name of the religion by adhering to the rules and acting as the light within his/her sphere of interest. Just like the *Uku*, after ordination, the *Onori* pays homage annually to the one who ordained him. According to *Uku* Festus Ikoba:

As a chief priest in Igbe, the *Onori* assists the *Uku* or *Omote Uku* to carry out some specific religious functions in the *Ogwa*. Part of the functions of the *Onori* is to take new members to the presiding *Uku* or *Omote Uku*. They also follow up members in their circle and pay visits to the sick among them. An *Onori* also carries out other specific administrative or spiritual functions that are assigned to him by the presiding *Uku* or *Omote Uku*.⁴²

⁴² *Uku* Festus Ikoba 70 years. Head Oweya Missionary Association, Personal Communication, Oria-Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria.

The status of an *Onori* also confers on him the privilege of intervening in matters of peace and conflicts whether it is congregational or sectarian. But their intervention must be within the terms of reference specified by the presiding *Uku* or *Omote Uku*. In her comment, *Omote Uku* Sarah Okoloba⁴³ revealed that, in some instances, conflict parties report their issues directly to an *Onori*. But once the *Onori* resolves the matter, the presiding *Uku* or *Omote Uku* must be fully briefed. In her response, *Omote Uku* Victoria Amajatoja⁴⁴ expounded that when conflict issues are brought to their court depending on the magnitude of the conflict, they will first delegate a team of *Inori*. If they cannot resolve it, then it will be referred to the presiding *Uku* or *Omote Uku*. The *Inori* are the set of priests that members confess to in secret. Also, issues like backbiting and grumbling as issues within the purview of *Onori* (singular) or *Inori* (plural) to handle. He also identifies offences such as bewitching, sorcery, stealing and adultery as grievous issues that must be brought before the presiding *Uku* or *Omote Uku*. Therefore, the *Onori* or *Inori* is an established peace and conflict management institution in Igbe religion.

11. *Oni Igbe*

The *Oni Igbe* (chief priestess) is another leadership institution saddled with the responsibility of managing peace and conflict matters in the Igbe religion. The word *Oni Igbe* literally means the *mother of Igbe*. *Omote Uku* Victoria Odaighofa⁴⁵ explained that *Oni Igbe* (singular) or *Ini Igbe* (plural) possesses spiritual powers to unravel mysteries. As a result, their ministry is taken with

⁴³ *Omote Uku* Sarah Okoloba, 60 years, Personal Communication, Ovwian-Aladja, Delta State, Nigeria.

⁴⁴ *Omote Uku* Amajatoja, 55 years, Personal Communication at Upper Agbarho, Delta State, Nigeria December 27, 2024.

⁴⁵ *Omote Uku* (Dr) Victoria Odaighofua, 60 years, Personal Communication at Eginni, Delta State, Nigeria December 27, 2024.

seriousness. The *Oni Igbe* is also guided by the law that binds an *Uku* and *Onori*. The *Uku* or *Omote Uku* can designate an *Oni Igbe* to investigate conflict issues among members. But if the issue is beyond the capacity of the *Oni Igbe* to resolve, it will be brought to the notice of the presiding *Uku* or *Omote Uku*.

12 Reflection on How Igbe Findings Compare to Peace and Conflict Studies in Africana Religions

The Igbe Uku Supreme system offers a vivid, codified example of how African Indigenous spiritual traditions draw on sacred authority, restorative justice, and morally informed leadership to contain conflict and maintain social order. When viewed in comparative perspective alongside broader Africana-religion peace studies, certain defining patterns emerge. These include characteristic approaches to peace construction found across many of these traditions.^{lii liii}

The legitimation of peacemaking through sacred authority is a recurring theme across Africana religious contexts. In *Igbe Orhe*, the *Uku Supreme* serves as a trusted mediator whose spiritual authority stands beyond conventional judgement. This role parallels that of other high priestly or prophetic figures, such as Yoruba *obas*, *Ifa* priests, Edo-Benin high priests, and prophet-led networks. In these settings, spiritual authority strengthens dispute resolution processes beyond coercive or purely secular methods. The outcome is a durable settlement grounded in a shared ethical framework, rather than a juridical decision imposed by force or protocol.^{liv lv}

Closely tied to this sacred authority is a restorative, rather than punitive, orientation. The *Igbe* emphasizes reconciliation, the restoration of social bonds, and the reintegration of individuals into the moral community—values that align with Indigenous Nigerian conflict management systems. Punishment alone is insufficient; repairing relationships, rebuilding trust, and preserving communal balance are the ultimate aims. The *Uku Supreme*'s leadership, articulated as divine or

Oweya-authorized, re-establishes the legitimacy of leadership and the continuity of communal principles. This sacred endorsement also paves the way for renewed harmony among disputing parties.^{lvi lvii}

Legitimacy in the *Igbe* system arises from a triangulation of sources: genealogical lineage, ritual authority, and demonstrated success in resolving conflict. This reflects a broader Africana pattern in which authority stems from the interconnectedness of lineage, ritual efficacy, and ethical leadership. Such composite legitimacy stabilizes social order by linking office, belief, and tangible results, making authority both comprehensible and trustworthy during crises.^{lviii lix}

Material culture also plays a significant governance role. Objects such as *Adjudju* hand fans, *stools*, and mythological narratives about *Ubiesha* and *Oweya* serve as tangible focal points of authority. These artifacts reinforce decisions by providing recognizable symbols through which community members can identify legitimate authority and understand when a pronouncement carries sacred weight. This mirrors a broader African religious governance pattern in which material symbols act as repositories of legitimacy during conflict or emergency, helping to regularize decisions.^{lx lxi}

A key tension in many Africana-religion traditions lies in balancing centralized power with multiple governance structures. The *Igbe* maintains this balance: final appellate authority and sacred privilege belong to the *Uku Supreme*, while multiple sub-offices—such as *Uku*, *Omote Uku*, *Onori/Ini Igbe*, and *Oni Igbe*—operate within their own domains and with regional autonomy. This arrangement mirrors other traditions in which a central sovereign or high priest shares authority with regional leaders. Such dynamics can influence both the efficiency of conflict resolution and the inclusiveness of peace processes. *Igbe* thus provides a model that combines swift, decisive central rulings with the legitimacy that comes from regional input.^{lxii lxiii}

One distinctive feature of the *Igbe Orhe* in this comparative frame is the overt sacramental quality of its rulings, presented as unmediated divine utterances from *Oweya*. These rulings are regarded as direct divine disclosures, which heighten perceived legitimacy and often accelerate compliance. While prophetic speech or oracular pronouncements appear in many Africana traditions, the *Igbe Orhe* foregrounds the sacramental element more strongly, concentrating interpretive authority and reducing opportunities for challenge.^{lxiv lxxv}

Another defining element is the blend of dynastic and institutional structures, which provides a clear pathway to achieving *Uku* status. Inheritance supports legitimacy, but an apprenticeship, formal ordination, and a ceremonial abjuration rite—*shi gwe kei' Baba*—create a disciplined training continuum within the *Oweya-Uku* hierarchy. This integration of dynastic succession and structured spiritual formation ensures leadership transition and continuity are codified in explicit, highly organized terms.^{lxvi lxxvii}

Conflict resolution within *Igbe* unfolds through a stepped sequence. Disputes begin with *Inori* acting as preliminary intermediaries, —pastoral-judicial figures who manage ongoing issues and refer serious cases—and conclude with the *Uku* or *Omote Uku's* final verdict. This cascading process embodies restorative justice, emphasizing confession, reconciliation, and spiritual healing over punitive measures, while maintaining a focus on social responsibility. Decisions by the *Uku* or *Omote Uku* are well-known even among non-members, including Christians, underscoring a transboundary moral authority that extends beyond the *Igbe* community.^{lxviii lxxix}

Overall, the *Igbe Orhe Uku Supreme* system exemplifies a highly structured, spiritually grounded model of conflict and peace management that resonates with, and complements, broader Africana-religion scholarship. It shows how centralized religious authority, disciplined doctrinal clarity, and multi-level restorative processes can defuse tensions, repair social bonds, and sustain communal order. At the same time, its distinctive sacramental logic, dynastic progression, and hierarchically

choreographed dispute resolution provide deeper insight into how traditional African religious systems generate legitimacy, implement restorative justice, and balance central authority with regional autonomy in pursuit of lasting peace.^{lxx lxxi}

13. Theoretical Analysis of Igbe's Peace and Conflict Management Institutions Through Structural Functionalism

Deploying Structural Functionalism, this paper identifies the *Uku Supreme* as the apex peace-and-conflict institution within the Igbe worshipping community of Delta State, Nigeria. The Uku Supreme functions as the central unifier, articulating and safeguarding peace traditions that sustain overall social order; his pronouncements are treated as divine and binding. His authority spans *Igbe Orhe* variants, combining political and spiritual power to foster peace, bridge-building, and life renewal. Findings indicate that the *Uku Supreme*'s conduct model's virtuous leadership, with influence cascading through the system to maintain harmony.

The Office of *Uku* (high priests) and *Omote Uku* (high priestess) are pivotal for peace management across *Ogwa ri Igbe*. Local assemblies are led by an *Uku* or *Omote Uku*, who preserve peace, decorum, and ritual sanctity, and who uphold religious law. They possess expulsion power and, given *Oweya* (God) sanction, adherents typically comply with norms of engagement. Their substantial spiritual authority reinforces norms and deter disruptive testing of will, including ordination decisions. This governance structure contributes to attitudinal homogenization and conflict containment within the congregation.

The Onori (chief priests) and *Oni Igbe* (chief priestess) serve as frontline dispute mediators, addressing breaches such as contractual violations, theft, and family discord, and referring unsolved cases upward when needed. They function as intermediaries between the Uku and the laity, reinforcing order and decorum in line with Structural Functionalism. Nonetheless, checks

and balances exist: misuse by *Onori* or *Oni Igbe* can be sanctionable, ensuring accountability to *Urhi* (laws) and preserving social harmony.

Despite tensions from the commercialisation of titles, loyalty to leadership structures remains strong, sustaining spiritual and social cohesion and effective peace management. While instances of integrity compromise occur, the Igbe framework retains its resilience, illustrating the durability of traditional religious institutions within a functionalist reading.

Viewed in a global context, the Igbe model echoes other religious hierarchies that stabilise communities and uphold moral order, especially where state governance is weak or distrusted. Recognising these indigenous institutions enhances understanding of their role in peacebuilding and social reproduction.

14. Conclusion.

This study examines *Igbe Orhe* in Delta State, Nigeria, revealing a coherent, highly organized peace-and-conflict framework centered on *Uku Supreme*, *Uku*, *Omote Uku*, *Onori*, and *Oni Igbe*. Together, these offices articulate a moral-spiritual order that preserves social cohesion, governs conduct, and sustains divine reciprocity. Aligning with Africana perspectives, the *Igbe Orhe* system shows how faith-based authorities deploy normative power to manage conflict, promote welfare, and legitimize leadership through ritual and ethical pedagogy.

Consistent with Africanaist and ethnoreligious scholarship, *Igbe Orhe* encodes norms, codifies dispute procedures, and embeds accountability within a sacred horizon. The study engages with debates on modernization, noting pressures from title commercialization that threaten integrity and trust. These tensions reflect broader dynamics of power, commodification, and reform as African traditional institutions navigate globalization, state governance, and markets.

Nevertheless, the architecture includes checks and balances to curb misconduct, aligning with functionalist and complementary views of adaptive social systems that stabilize society while preserving culture. Ethical lapses underscore the need for reflexive governance—scrutinizing how tradition intersects with modernity, economy, and human rights in Africana contexts.

Positioned within wider Africana studies—indigenous conflict-resolution epistemologies, religion in social reproduction, and ritual authority—the *Igbe Orhe* regime contributes to understanding how African religio-social systems cultivate harmony, negotiate change, and sustain resilience. Future work could compare *Igbe Orhe* with other indigenous peace-building modalities to map patterns of ethical governance, legitimacy, and adaptation amid regional and global pressures.

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