

Tokilitokili and Successful Spiritual Transition and Cultural Recognition of Burial Rites of Ndi Ichie: A Study of Enugu-Otu Aguleri Tradition in Anambra East LGA of Anambra State, Nigeria

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Abstract: Traditional burial rites remain important cultural practices that reflect the beliefs, values, and social structures of African communities. Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, funeral rituals are deeply rooted in ancestral traditions and spiritual beliefs about life after death. In Enugu-otu Aguleri community in Anambra East Local Government Area of Anambra State, the Tokilitokili ceremony is a unique ritual performed before the burial of elderly respected men known as Ndi Ichie. The ceremony is believed to facilitate the successful spiritual transition of the deceased into the ancestral world and serves as a cultural confirmation that the burial rites have been properly completed. This study examines the cultural significance of Tokilitokili and how adherence to the ritual influences the recognition of a complete burial in the community. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design using oral interviews, participant observation, and secondary sources of data. Findings reveal that Tokilitokili plays a critical role in preserving cultural identity, reinforcing communal solidarity, and ensuring the spiritual acceptance of the deceased among ancestors. The study concludes that Tokilitokili remains a vital cultural institution that promotes social cohesion and sustains indigenous heritage in Enugu-otu Aguleri.

Keywords: *Tokilitokili, Burial Rites, Ndi Ichie, Spiritual Transition, Cultural Heritage, Enugu-otu Aguleri, Igbo Tradition*

1. Introduction

Burial rites occupy a central position in the cultural and religious life of many African societies. These rites are not simply acts of disposing of the dead; rather, they represent deeply rooted cultural practices that express communal beliefs about life, death, and the relationship between the living and the ancestral world. In traditional African cosmology, death is viewed not as a final end but as a transition from the physical world to the spiritual realm where ancestors continue to exist and influence the lives of the living. Consequently, burial ceremonies are carefully structured to ensure that the deceased is properly integrated into the ancestral community and that the living maintain harmony with the spiritual world.

Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, burial rites are particularly elaborate and symbolically rich. The Igbo worldview places significant emphasis on the continuity of life after death and the importance of honouring ancestors. In this cultural setting, elderly individuals who have lived fulfilled lives, raised families, and contributed to community development are accorded special recognition in death. These respected elders are commonly referred to as *Ndi Ichie* or titled men, and their burial rites often involve elaborate ceremonies that reflect their status and contributions to society. Such rituals serve not only to mourn the deceased but also to celebrate their life, reaffirm community values, and reinforce social cohesion.

Funeral ceremonies among the Igbo typically involve several stages that may span days or even weeks. These stages include the announcement of death, preparation of the body, wake-keeping, traditional performances, and the final burial. Each stage carries symbolic meaning and reflects the community's cultural beliefs regarding respect for the dead and the transition to ancestral existence. Participation by family members, relatives, age grades, traditional institutions, and community members is often expected, demonstrating the communal nature of Igbo society.

In Enugu-otu Aguleri community, located in Anambra East Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria, burial rites for elderly men are marked by a unique traditional ceremony known as **Tokilitokili**. This ceremony takes place before the actual burial of the deceased and is regarded as an essential ritual in the burial process of *Ndi Ichie*. Within the cultural understanding of the people of Enugu-otu Aguleri, Tokilitokili performs an important spiritual and social function by symbolically preparing the deceased for entry into the ancestral realm. It also serves as a public affirmation by the community that the deceased has lived a worthy life deserving of traditional honor.

The Tokilitokili ceremony involves a number of distinctive rituals and symbolic activities. Participants may wear the clothes of the deceased while performing ceremonial dances accompanied by traditional music produced with a wooden instrument known as *Uvio*. The ceremony also involves a procession around the community, visits to the houses of *Ndi Ichie* and the ancestral assembly houses known as *Obu Ndi Ichie*. During the ceremony, important cultural symbols such as the elephant tusk, *nza* (horse tail), *mma ona* (native cutlass), and the traditional red cap (*ogbu ododo*) are displayed. These symbols represent authority, dignity, social status, and ancestral recognition within the Igbo cultural system.

Another important aspect during and after the Tokilitokili ritual is the participation of family members, particularly the widow and children of the deceased. Widowhood practices such as hair shaving, wearing of mourning clothes, and participation in symbolic rituals like the midnight market (*Afia Ndeli*) are often performed. These rituals signify mourning, purification, and the family's acceptance of the loss while fulfilling cultural obligations to the deceased.

Beyond its spiritual significance, Tokilitokili also performs important social functions within the community. It serves as an avenue for communal participation, reinforcing solidarity among community members and strengthening cultural identity. Through the gathering of elders, family members, and age-grade associations, the ceremony fosters unity and collective responsibility in honouring the dead. In this way, Tokilitokili contributes to the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage and ensures the transmission of traditional values from one generation to another.

However, contemporary African societies are experiencing rapid cultural transformation due to modernization, urbanization, and the influence of western religious practices. These changes have affected many traditional institutions and rituals, including funeral practices. In some cases, traditional ceremonies are shortened, modified, or abandoned altogether. Such developments raise concerns about the gradual erosion of indigenous cultural heritage and the loss of important traditional knowledge.

Despite these challenges, Tokilitokili continues to be practiced in Enugu-otu Aguleri as an important cultural institution that symbolizes respect for elders and the continuity of ancestral traditions. The persistence of this ritual demonstrates the community's commitment to preserving its cultural identity and maintaining its connection with the ancestral world.

This study therefore seeks to examine the significance of Tokilitokili within the burial traditions of Enugu-otu Aguleri. Specifically, it explores the rituals involved in the ceremony, the symbolic meanings of the cultural objects used, and the role of the ceremony in ensuring successful spiritual transition and cultural recognition of burial rites for *Ndi Ichie*. By documenting and analyzing this important cultural practice, the study contributes to the preservation and scholarly understanding of indigenous burial traditions in Igbo society.

Statement of the Problem

Burial rites are an essential component of cultural identity and spiritual belief systems in many African societies. Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, traditional funeral practices are closely tied to the community's worldview about life, death, and the ancestral realm. These practices serve not only to honour the deceased but also to ensure the spiritual transition of the dead into the world of the ancestors. For respected elders known as *Ndi Ichie*, burial rites are often elaborate and involve several ceremonial stages designed to recognize their social status and contributions to the community. One of such important rituals in Enugu-otu Aguleri community is the **Tokilitokili** ceremony, which is performed before the burial of elderly men.

Despite the cultural significance of Tokilitokili, there is limited scholarly documentation and academic analysis of the ritual and its role in the burial tradition of Enugu-otu Aguleri. Most existing studies on Igbo burial practices focus broadly on funeral customs across Igbo communities without paying specific attention to localized rituals such as Tokilitokili. As a result, important cultural meanings, symbolic representations, and the spiritual implications associated with this ceremony remain largely undocumented in academic literature.

Furthermore, contemporary African societies are undergoing rapid social transformation due to modernization, urbanization, western education, and the spread of Christianity and other religious influences. These developments have contributed to changes in traditional cultural practices, including funeral rites. In some communities, traditional ceremonies are gradually being modified, shortened, or abandoned entirely due to changing religious beliefs or the perceived cost and complexity of such rituals. Younger generations, in particular, may lack adequate knowledge of traditional burial practices, which poses a serious threat to the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage.

In Enugu-otu Aguleri, although Tokilitokili continues to be practiced, the increasing influence of modern lifestyles and religious doctrines has raised concerns about the sustainability of the tradition in the future. The lack of adequate documentation and scholarly research on Tokilitokili further contributes to the risk that the cultural knowledge associated with the ritual may gradually diminish over time. Without proper study and documentation, valuable aspects of the community's cultural identity and spiritual worldview may be lost.

Another important issue is the limited understanding of how Tokilitokili contributes to the recognition of a complete and culturally acceptable burial within the community. While members of the community acknowledge that the ritual is necessary for the spiritual transition of the deceased into the ancestral world, there is little academic exploration of how the ceremony functions socially, culturally, and spiritually within the community structure.

Therefore, the problem that this study seeks to address is the lack of systematic academic examination of the Tokilitokili burial ritual and its significance in ensuring successful spiritual transition and cultural recognition of burial rites for *Ndi Ichie* in Enugu-otu Aguleri. By examining the rituals, symbols, and communal participation associated with Tokilitokili, this study aims to provide scholarly insight into its cultural importance and contribute to the preservation of indigenous burial traditions in Igbo society.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine the significance of Tokilitokili in the burial tradition of Enugu-otu Aguleri.

Specific objectives include:

1. To identify the major rituals involved in the Tokilitokili ceremony.
2. To examine the cultural meanings of the symbols used during Tokilitokili.
3. To analyze how Tokilitokili influences the community's recognition of a complete burial.
4. To assess the role of community participation in the Tokilitokili ceremony.

Research Questions

1. What are the major rituals involved in the Tokilitokili burial ceremony in Enugu-otu Aguleri?
2. What cultural meanings do the symbols used during Tokilitokili represent?
3. How does Tokilitokili influence community recognition of a completed burial?
4. What role does community participation play in the Tokilitokili ceremony?

Review of Related Literature

Burial rites have long been recognized as important cultural institutions in African societies. Scholars in African studies, anthropology, and religious studies have examined the functions of funeral rituals in maintaining social order, expressing cultural identity, and facilitating the spiritual transition of the deceased. Within the Igbo cultural context, burial rites serve not only as mourning ceremonies but also as symbolic processes through which the dead are incorporated into the ancestral realm.

One of the most influential scholars on African religious beliefs, **John S. Mbiti**, argues that African traditional societies view death as a transition rather than an end. According to Mbiti (1969), the dead continue to exist as “living-dead” within the ancestral community and maintain spiritual relationships with the living. Proper burial rites therefore play a crucial role in ensuring that the deceased is successfully integrated into the ancestral world. Failure to perform appropriate funeral rites may result in the spirit of the deceased becoming restless or unable to gain acceptance among the ancestors.

Similarly, **Uchendu** (1965), in his study of Igbo society, explains that burial ceremonies among the Igbo are closely connected to lineage, social status, and communal recognition. Uchendu notes that elders and titled men are accorded elaborate funeral rites as a mark of honour and respect. These ceremonies not only celebrate the life of the deceased but also reinforce social cohesion within the community.

Another important contribution to the understanding of Igbo culture comes from **Afigbo** (1981), who highlights the significance of rituals and traditional institutions in maintaining social stability in Igbo society. Afigbo argues that ceremonies such as burials function as mechanisms through which communities reaffirm their cultural identity and transmit traditional values from one generation to another.

Isichei (1976) also provides valuable insights into the religious and social dimensions of Igbo culture. According to Isichei, Igbo traditional religion places strong emphasis on the relationship between the living, the dead, and the unborn. Burial rituals therefore serve as an important link that connects these three realms of existence. Proper funeral rites are believed to ensure that the deceased joins the ancestral community and continues to guide and protect the living.

In addition, **Ottenberg** (1971) emphasizes the importance of rituals and ceremonies in maintaining social order within Igbo communities. He observes that traditional ceremonies often involve collective participation by members of the community, including age grades, kinship groups, and traditional leaders. Such participation reinforces communal unity and shared responsibility.

Literary scholar **Chinua Achebe** (1958), through his novel *Things Fall Apart*, also provides an important cultural representation of traditional Igbo burial practices. Achebe illustrates how burial ceremonies for respected individuals involve elaborate rituals, music, and communal participation. His work reflects the deep respect accorded to elders and the importance of funeral rites in maintaining cultural continuity.

Research on funeral practices in southeastern Nigeria further highlights the symbolic nature of burial rituals. Chidiobi and Ibekwe (2024) observe that burial ceremonies among the Igbo are considered a moral obligation of the living toward the dead. They argue that proper burial rites ensure the peaceful transition of the deceased to the ancestral realm and prevent spiritual imbalance within the community.

Similarly, Okeke (2024) notes that ceremonial attire, mourning clothes, and symbolic objects are important aspects of traditional funeral practices. Items such as red caps, horse tails (*nza*), traditional cutlasses (*mma ona*),

and elephant tusks often signify authority, honor, and social status within Igbo society. These objects are frequently displayed during burial ceremonies to symbolize the dignity of the deceased.

Scholars have also examined the role of music, oral performances, and ritual expressions during funerals. Nwosu (2018) observes that funeral songs, chants, and oral poetry are used to express grief, celebrate the life of the deceased, and guide the spirit toward the ancestral world. These performances serve both emotional and symbolic functions within the community.

Another important area of discussion in the literature concerns the impact of modernization and Christianity on traditional burial practices. According to Ekeopara (2010), many African communities are experiencing cultural changes due to the influence of western education and religion. In some cases, traditional burial rites are being modified or replaced by Christian funeral practices. However, many communities continue to preserve essential aspects of their cultural heritage despite these changes.

Okafor (1992) also argues that although modernization has introduced new practices into funeral ceremonies, traditional burial rites remain an important expression of cultural identity among the Igbo. Community members often combine modern religious practices with traditional rituals in order to maintain cultural continuity.

Gap in Literature

While existing literature provides valuable insights into burial traditions in Igbo society, most studies focus broadly on funeral practices across different communities rather than on specific localized rituals. As a result, unique ceremonial traditions such as the **Tokilitokili ritual in Enugu-otu Aguleri** have received little scholarly attention.

Therefore, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by examining Tokilitokili as a distinctive burial ritual within the Enugu-otu Aguleri tradition. By documenting its rituals, symbols, and cultural meanings, the study helps preserve indigenous knowledge and provides a deeper understanding of how traditional burial ceremonies facilitate spiritual transition and cultural recognition of the deceased in Igbo society.

Conceptual Clarifications

Conceptual clarification is important in academic research because it provides clear explanations of the key concepts used in a study. It helps readers understand how certain terms are used within the context of the research. In this study, important concepts such as Tokilitokili, Ndi Ichie, burial rites, spiritual transition, ancestors, and cultural recognition of burial are explained in relation to Igbo traditional belief systems and practices.

Tokilitokili

Tokilitokili is a traditional pre-burial ceremony practiced in Enugu-otu Aguleri community in Anambra East Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. The ceremony is performed before the burial of elderly respected men known as *Ndi Ichie*. Tokilitokili involves ritual performances such as wearing the clothes of the deceased, ceremonial dancing, musical performances using the wooden instrument known as *Uvio*, and the display of important cultural symbols such as elephant tusk, *nza* (horse tail), *mma ona* (native cutlass), and the traditional red cap (*okpu ododo*). Within the cultural belief of the people of Enugu-otu Aguleri, Tokilitokili symbolizes the final preparation of the deceased for entry into the ancestral world. It also serves as a public confirmation that the deceased lived a socially recognized life worthy of traditional honour. Rituals such as Tokilitokili illustrate what anthropologists describe as rites of passage, which are ceremonies that mark transitions from one stage of life to another (Van Gennep, 1960). In this context, Tokilitokili represents the transition from earthly existence to ancestral existence.

In addition to Tokilitokili, the burial of *Ndi Ichie* in Igbo communities often involves other significant traditional rites. The process typically begins with *Ikwu Ozu*, the formal announcement of death to family members, kindred, and the wider community, signaling the start of the mourning period and funeral preparations. This is followed by *ula ezi* (wake-keeping), where relatives, age grades, and community members gather to celebrate the life of the deceased through storytelling, drumming, and dancing. The main burial ceremony, known as *Ini Ozu*, involves

the actual interment of the body, usually adorned in traditional regalia that reflects the status and title of the deceased, in Enugu-otu Aguleri community, *onye ndi ichie* is buried in the midnight. During this ceremony, masquerades (*Mmanwu*) may appear to represent ancestral spirits guiding the deceased into the spirit world.

Collectively, these rites underscore the Igbo belief that death is a passage rather than an end, ensuring that *Ndi Ichie* are properly honoured and welcomed into the ancestral world while strengthening social cohesion, moral values, and cultural identity among the living.

Ndi Ichie

Ndi Ichie refers to elderly respected men in Igbo society who have attained social recognition, authority, leadership status and above the age of 60 and above, they person's age mates must have been the members of the ruling council within their communities. These individuals are often elders, titled men, or community leaders who have fulfilled important social responsibilities during their lifetime. Because of their contributions to the community, they are accorded special respect both in life and in death.

According to Uchendu (1965), elders occupy a central position in Igbo social organization because they serve as custodians of tradition and mediators between the living and the ancestral world. Similarly, Afigbo (1981) explains that titled men and respected elders are symbols of authority and continuity within the Igbo political and cultural system. Consequently, their burial ceremonies are often elaborate and involve traditional rituals that reflect their status within the community.

Burial Rites

Burial rites refer to the traditional ceremonies and rituals performed by a community to honour and bury the deceased. In African societies, burial rites often involve several stages including mourning, ritual purification, ceremonial performances, and final burial. These rites are designed to ensure that the deceased is properly integrated into the ancestral world and that harmony is maintained between the living and the dead.

Mbiti (1969) emphasizes that burial rites are essential in African traditional religion because they ensure the continuation of relationships between the living and the dead. According to him, the failure to perform proper burial rites may prevent the deceased from joining the ancestral community. In the Igbo cultural context, burial rites also serve social functions such as reaffirming family ties, strengthening communal solidarity, and preserving cultural traditions (Isichei, 1976).

Spiritual Transition

Spiritual transition refers to the movement of the soul from the physical world to the spiritual or ancestral realm after death. In many African traditional belief systems, death is not regarded as the end of existence but as a transformation into another form of life within the spiritual world.

Mbiti (1969) describes this process as the transformation of the deceased into the "living-dead," individuals who continue to exist spiritually and maintain a relationship with the living members of the community. Similarly, Isichei (1976) notes that the Igbo believe that the spirit of a deceased person can only become an ancestor if proper burial rites are performed. Rituals such as Tokilitokili therefore play an important role in facilitating this transition and ensuring that the deceased is accepted among the ancestors.

Ancestors

Ancestors are deceased members of the community who lived honourable lives and are believed to continue existing in the spiritual world. In many African societies, ancestors are highly respected and are considered guardians of family traditions and community morality. They are believed to influence the lives of the living by providing protection, guidance, and blessings. Before my father died, he instructed he must be buried at the entrance of our hour as *ogbu na eche ndo* (the tree that gives protection)

In agreement with the request of my father, Mbiti (1969), states that ancestors occupy an important position in African religious thought because they serve as intermediaries between the living and the spiritual world.

Similarly, Isichei (1976) explains that the Igbo maintain strong spiritual relationships with their ancestors through rituals, prayers, and ceremonial observances. Burial rites therefore serve as an important mechanism for ensuring that the deceased joins the ancestral community and continues to participate in the spiritual life of the family.

Cultural Recognition of Burial

Cultural recognition of burial refers to the acceptance by the community that the deceased has been given a complete and culturally appropriate burial according to traditional customs and values. In many African societies, burial ceremonies are not merely private family events but communal responsibilities that involve participation by community members, elders, and traditional institutions. There was a time in the past when a noble man from Enugu-otu Aguleri community was asked to repeat the burial rites of his late father because he did not do the Tokilitokili ceremony and also because he did the burial of his late father in another community within Aguleri due to communal war that year. The elders from Enugu-otu Aguleri believed that without the Tokilitokili ceremony, the dead will not get to his destination.

Okafor (1992) explains that funeral ceremonies among the Igbo serve as public acknowledgments of the life and social status of the deceased. When burial rites are properly performed, the community recognizes the deceased as having received a befitting burial. This recognition is important because it affirms both the dignity of the deceased and the cultural obligations of the family.

In the case of Tokilitokili in Enugu-otu Aguleri, the performance of the ritual signifies that the deceased has been honoured according to tradition and is ready to join the ancestral world. The ceremony therefore represents both a spiritual and cultural validation of the burial process.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the **Structural Functionalism Theory by Durkheim (1858–1917)**. The theory is a sociological perspective that explains how different institutions, practices, and cultural traditions contribute to the stability and functioning of society. Structural functionalism views society as a complex system composed of interconnected parts, each performing specific functions necessary for the survival and continuity of the whole social structure.

Durkheim argued that social institutions, beliefs, and rituals perform important functions that maintain social cohesion and collective consciousness within society. According to him, rituals and religious practices are essential for reinforcing shared values and strengthening solidarity among members of a community.

Durkheim emphasized that social rituals, including religious and ceremonial practices, help societies maintain order by reaffirming collective beliefs and moral values. He argued that such practices create a sense of unity and belonging among members of society. In this sense, rituals surrounding life events, such as birth, marriage, and death serve as mechanisms through which societies preserve their traditions and social structures.

Similarly, **A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952)** expanded the structural functionalist perspective by emphasizing that social institutions function to maintain the structure of society. According to him, customs, traditions, and rituals are not random practices but organized systems that help sustain social relationships and maintain equilibrium within communities.

Within the context of African societies, structural functionalism has been widely used to explain the role of traditional institutions, rituals, and cultural practices. Scholars have applied this theory to understand how indigenous traditions contribute to the maintenance of social order and the preservation of cultural identity. Ritual practices, particularly those associated with death and burial, are seen as mechanisms through which communities reaffirm shared beliefs about life, death, and the spiritual world.

Application of the theory to the study

Applying this theoretical perspective to the present study, the **Tokilitokili burial ritual** in Enugu-otu Aguleri can be understood as an important cultural institution that performs several social and spiritual functions within the community.

First, the ritual reinforces cultural values related to respect for elders and recognition of social status. By performing Tokilitokili for deceased *Ndi Ichie*, the community publicly acknowledges the contributions of respected elders and affirms the importance of traditional leadership structures.

Second, Tokilitokili promotes social cohesion by bringing together family members, community elders, age-grade associations, and other social groups in a collective ceremony. Through participation in the ritual, community members reaffirm their shared cultural identity and strengthen social relationships.

Third, the ritual also performs a spiritual function by facilitating the transition of the deceased from the physical world to the ancestral realm. Within the Igbo worldview, proper burial rites are necessary for the deceased to be accepted among the ancestors and continue their spiritual relationship with the living.

From a structural functionalist perspective, Tokilitokili therefore contributes to the stability and continuity of the Enugu-otu Aguleri community by preserving cultural traditions, strengthening communal solidarity, and maintaining the spiritual order between the living and the ancestors. The theory helps explain why such rituals remain important even in the face of modernization and cultural change.

Relevance of the Theory

Structural functionalism is relevant to this study because it explains how traditional rituals contribute to the stability and continuity of society. Tokilitokili performs several important functions within the Enugu-otu Aguleri community.

First, it reinforces cultural values related to respect for elders and ancestral reverence. Second, it strengthens communal bonds by bringing together family members and community participants.

Third, it preserves indigenous knowledge and cultural identity across generations.

Through these functions, Tokilitokili contributes to the maintenance of social order and cultural continuity in the community.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research approach** to examine the Tokilitokili burial tradition in Enugu-otu Aguleri. The qualitative method allows for an in-depth understanding of cultural beliefs, rituals, and symbolic meanings associated with traditional ceremonies.

A **descriptive research design** is used to explain the rituals, symbols, and cultural significance of Tokilitokili.

Area of Study

The study was conducted in **Enugu-otu Aguleri**, located in **Anambra East Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria**. **Enugu-otu Aguleri** is a traditional Igbo community located in Aguleri, within Anambra East Local Government Area in Southeastern Nigeria. The community is historically linked to the lineage of Eri, who is regarded in Igbo tradition as one of the earliest settlers and the progenitor of many Igbo communities.

Enugu-otu Aguleri consists of seven villages: Umuamuleri, Umugama, Umuokpoto, Umuakwu, Umuakwe, Umuezunu, and Umueni. The community operates under traditional Igbo socio-political structures that include the Igwe (traditional ruler), councils of elders, titled men (*Ndi Ichie*), the ruling council, and age-grade associations that collectively manage community affairs and preserve cultural traditions.

The people of Enugu-otu Aguleri are predominantly farmers, fishermen, and hunters due to the fertile floodplain environment of the area. The community also maintains strong cultural institutions such as **Obu Ndi Ichie**, which serve as traditional assembly houses where elders meet and important cultural ceremonies are conducted.

Culturally, Enugu-otu Aguleri is known for preserving traditional Igbo practices, including ancestral reverence, traditional festivals, and elaborate burial rites for respected elders. Rituals such as the Tokilitokili ceremony

demonstrate the community's strong belief in the spiritual transition of the deceased into the ancestral world and the importance of communal participation in cultural traditions.

Despite the influence of modernization and religious changes, Enugu-otu Aguleri continues to uphold its indigenous cultural heritage, maintaining strong traditional institutions that reinforce social cohesion, cultural identity, and respect for ancestors

Population of the Study

The population of the study consists of:

- Community elders
- Traditional leaders
- Family members of deceased Ndi Ichie
- Cultural custodians and participants in Tokilitokili ceremonies

Sample Size

A purposive sample of **30 respondents** was selected from the seven villages for the study. Umuamuleri 3, Umugama 4, Umuokpoto 4, Umuakwu 4, Umuakwe 5, Umuezunu 5 and Umueni 5. These respondents included elders, cultural custodians, and family members who possess knowledge about the Tokilitokili ceremony in Enugu-otu.

Method of Data Collection

Data for the study were collected using the following methods:

1. Oral Interviews: Interviews were conducted with the Igwe (the King) community elders, traditional leaders, and individuals who have participated in Tokilitokili ceremonies.
2. Observation: The researcher participated and observed burial practices and ceremonies to understand the rituals and symbolic activities involved.
3. Secondary Sources: Relevant information was obtained from books, journals, and academic publications on Igbo culture and traditional burial practices.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews and observations were analyzed using **descriptive thematic analysis**. Responses were organized into thematic categories including:

- Ritual practices
- Cultural symbols
- Community participation
- Spiritual beliefs

These themes were analyzed to interpret the cultural meaning of Tokilitokili practices.

Presentation of Data and Analysis

The data for this study were obtained through oral interviews with community elders, traditional leaders, and individuals who have participated in Tokilitokili ceremonies in Enugu-otu Aguleri. Additional information was gathered through direct participation and observation of burial activities and secondary sources on Igbo burial traditions. The data collected were organized into thematic categories in order to understand the structure, meaning, and significance of the Tokilitokili ritual.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The study involved thirty (30) respondents selected through purposive sampling. The respondents included traditional elders, family members of deceased Ndi Ichie, community leaders, and cultural custodians who possess knowledge of the Tokilitokili ceremony.

Out of the 30 respondents interviewed:

- 18 were community elders who had directly participated in Tokilitokili ceremonies.
- 6 were family members of deceased Ndi Ichie who had organized burial rites.
- 4 were traditional leaders or custodians of cultural institutions.
- 2 were younger community members who had observed the ceremony during family burials.

The demographic distribution of respondents ensured that information was collected from individuals in the seven villages with direct cultural knowledge and experience of the ritual.

Major Ritual Activities in Tokilitokili

Analysis of interview responses revealed that Tokilitokili involves a series of symbolic activities performed before the burial of respected elderly men. The most commonly mentioned ritual activities include:

- **Wearing the Clothes of the Deceased:** One of the key rituals identified by respondents is the wearing of the deceased's clothing by participants during the ceremony. Where the deceased clothes are not sufficient, other elders clothes can be borrowed. According to respondents, this act symbolizes the continuation of the deceased's legacy and represents the community's acknowledgment of his social identity.
- **Traditional Music and Dancing:** Participants also engage in ceremonial dancing accompanied by traditional music performed with the wooden instrument known as *Uvio*. The music serves both a spiritual and social function, as it is believed to guide the spirit of the deceased while also bringing the community together in collective participation.
- **Community Procession:** Another important aspect of Tokilitokili is the procession around the community. Participants move through different parts of the village, including visits to the houses of *Ndi Ichie* and the ancestral assembly houses known as *Obu Ndi Ichie*. This procession symbolizes communal recognition of the deceased and reinforces the social status he held during his lifetime.
- **Display of Cultural Symbols:** Several cultural objects are displayed during the ceremony, including: Elephant tusk, *Nza* (horse tail), *Mma ona* (native cutlass), Traditional red cap (*ogbu ododo*). These items represent authority, honour, and leadership within the Igbo cultural system.

Widowhood Rituals

The study also revealed that the wife and daughters of the deceased play significant roles in the ceremony. Widowhood practices such as seating on the locally made mats for twelve days, hair shaving, participation in the midnight market ritual (*Afa Ndeli*), deepening of hands seven times in the river and wearing of mourning clothes for six months. The daughter may not wear any special clothe, but may put on white ear rings and necklace for either three to six month, they will also shave their hair, these symbolize mourning, purification, and the transition of the family after the loss of the deceased.

Cultural Meaning of Tokilitokili Rituals

The responses from interviewees indicate that Tokilitokili is not merely a ceremonial event but a ritual deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual beliefs. Respondents explained that the ceremony serves three major purposes:

- Preparation of the deceased for entry into the ancestral world
- Recognition of the social status of the deceased
- Reinforcement of communal solidarity

Community elders emphasized that failure to perform Tokilitokili for any ndi ichie could result in the deceased not being properly recognized and accepted among the ancestors.

4. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study highlight the significant cultural and spiritual importance of the Tokilitokili ceremony in the burial traditions of Enugu-otu Aguleri.

First, the study revealed that Tokilitokili serves as an important **rite of passage** that facilitates the transition of the deceased from the physical world to the ancestral realm. This finding aligns with the observations of **Arnold Van Gennep (1960)** who described rituals associated with life transitions as rites of passage that mark movement from one social state to another.

Second, the findings confirm that burial ceremonies among the Igbo are strongly connected to social status and community recognition. The elaborate rituals performed during Tokilitokili reflect the respect accorded to elderly men who have achieved social recognition during their lifetime. This observation supports the arguments of **Uchendu (1965)** and **Isichei (1976)** that elders occupy an important position in Igbo society and are therefore given elaborate burial ceremonies.

Third, the study found that Tokilitokili promotes **social cohesion and communal participation**. The involvement of family members, friends, traditional leaders, and community groups demonstrates the collective nature of burial ceremonies in Igbo society. Such communal participation reinforces social bonds and strengthens community identity.

These findings also support the principles of **structural functionalism**, which emphasize that social rituals and institutions perform important functions that maintain the stability of society. As suggested by **Durkheim (1912)**, rituals serve as mechanisms for reinforcing shared beliefs and strengthening social solidarity.

Finally, the study reveals that Tokilitokili contributes to the **preservation of indigenous cultural heritage**. Despite the influence of modernization and western religious practices, the continued performance of the ceremony demonstrates the community's commitment to maintaining its cultural identity.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the cultural significance of the Tokilitokili ceremony in the burial tradition of Ndi Ichie in Enugu-otu Aguleri. The research explored the rituals involved in the ceremony, the symbolic meanings of the cultural objects used, and the role of the ritual in ensuring successful spiritual transition and cultural recognition of burial.

The findings show that Tokilitokili is an essential component of the traditional burial system in Enugu-otu Aguleri. The ceremony serves both spiritual and social functions within the community. Spiritually, it prepares the deceased for transition into the ancestral realm and ensures acceptance among the ancestors. Socially, it reinforces communal solidarity, affirms respect for elders, and preserves cultural traditions.

The study also demonstrates that Tokilitokili is a powerful cultural institution that reflects the values, beliefs, and worldview of the Enugu-otu Aguleri people. Through rituals such as ceremonial dancing, symbolic objects, and communal participation, the ceremony affirms the dignity of the deceased and strengthens the cultural identity of the community.

Although modernization and religious influences have altered some aspects of traditional burial practices in many African societies, Tokilitokili continues to remain an important cultural tradition in Enugu-otu Aguleri. Its continued practice highlights the resilience of indigenous cultural systems and the importance attached to honouring ancestors and respected elders.

In conclusion, the Tokilitokili ceremony represents more than a burial ritual; it is a cultural expression of respect, identity, and continuity that connects the living with their ancestral heritage. Documenting and studying such traditions is therefore essential for preserving indigenous knowledge and ensuring that future generations understand the cultural values embedded within their heritage.

6. Recommendations

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

1. **Documentation of the Tokilitokili Ritual:** Scholars, cultural historians, and community leaders should undertake systematic documentation of the Tokilitokili ceremony. Proper documentation through academic

research, audiovisual recording, and archival preservation will help safeguard the ritual from gradual disappearance and ensure that its cultural knowledge is preserved for future generations.

2. **Promotion of Cultural Education:** There is a need to promote cultural education within the community, particularly among younger generations. Elders and cultural custodians should actively transmit knowledge about the rituals, symbols, and meanings associated with Tokilitokili in order to sustain the continuity of indigenous burial traditions.
3. **Strengthening the Role of Traditional Institutions:** Traditional institutions such as councils of elders and custodians of **Obu Ndi Ichie** should continue to supervise and guide the performance of Tokilitokili ceremonies. Their involvement will help maintain the authenticity of the ritual and ensure that burial rites for Ndi Ichie are carried out in accordance with established cultural norms.
4. **Encouraging Community Participation:** Community members, age-grade associations, and kinship groups should continue to actively participate in Tokilitokili ceremonies. Such participation reinforces communal solidarity, preserves shared cultural values, and strengthens the collective responsibility of honouring respected elders.
5. **Encouragement of Further Academic Research:** Researchers and academic institutions should conduct further studies on localized burial traditions within Igbo communities. More ethnographic and interdisciplinary research will contribute to a deeper understanding of indigenous cultural practices and their relevance in contemporary society.
6. **Cultural Heritage Support by Government and Institutions:** Government agencies and cultural organizations should recognize and support traditional ceremonies such as Tokilitokili as part of Nigeria's cultural heritage. Policies that promote cultural preservation, community festivals, and heritage education can contribute to sustaining these important traditions.

These recommendations, if implemented, will contribute to the preservation of Tokilitokili as an important cultural institution that ensures the spiritual transition of Ndi Ichie while reinforcing cultural identity and communal cohesion in Enugu-otu Aguleri.

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