

Reawakening Ọkọnkọ: Indigenous Peace Architecture and Violence Prevention amongst the Ngwa-Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: This study examined Ọkọnkọ as an indigenous peace architecture and its potential contribution to violence prevention amongst the Ngwa-Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. Against the background of urbanisation, cultural transformation and the weakening of indigenous institutions, the study explored Ọkọnkọ's historical peacebuilding functions, contemporary community perceptions and prospects for responsible revitalisation. Guided by Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Restorative Justice theories, the study adopted a qualitative exploratory design. Fieldwork was conducted across four core Ngwa communities between October 2025 and January 2026. Participants were purposively and snowball-sampled and comprised traditional rulers, Ọkọnkọ members, community elders, youth leaders, security personnel and historians. Data were generated through 32 semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation and historical/documentary analysis. Data were analysed using content thematic analysis, with triangulation across individual narratives, observed practices and historical/documentary evidence. Findings indicate that Ọkọnkọ historically functioned as a multidimensional peace institution through mediation, customary adjudication, moral regulation, communal accountability and non-lethal sanctions. Its authority was rooted in cultural legitimacy and collective norms. Although its contemporary institutional influence has declined,

participants perceived selected practices as potentially relevant to violence prevention and restorative community governance. The study contributes to decolonial peacebuilding scholarship by repositioning Ọkọnkọ as an endogenous peace architecture whose critically adapted principles can complement formal justice and security institutions.

Keywords: *Ọkọnkọ; indigenous peacebuilding; restorative justice; violence prevention; Ngwaland.*

Introduction

The persistence of violent conflict, communal insecurity, organised crime, forced displacement and social fragmentation in the twenty-first century has exposed important limitations in conventional approaches to peace and security. Despite advances in democratic governance, international peacebuilding and formal security institutions, insecurity remains widespread, while many interventions continue to privilege state authority, institutional formalism and coercive responses. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) argues that contemporary human insecurity is multidimensional and increasingly interconnected, requiring approaches that move beyond narrow state-centred conceptions of security. This challenge is particularly significant in contexts where formal institutions possess limited local legitimacy and where conflict is embedded in social relations, cultural identities and community-level grievances. Consequently, renewed attention has been directed towards indigenous knowledge, local institutions and community-based mechanisms as complementary resources for sustainable peacebuilding.

African societies historically developed diverse institutions for maintaining social order, regulating conduct and managing disputes before the consolidation of colonial and modern state structures. These institutions were embedded in kinship, communal authority, customary norms, moral obligations and collective accountability. Their approaches to justice frequently emphasised mediation, restitution, reconciliation and restoration of social relationships rather than punishment alone. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that peacebuilding interventions are more likely to achieve local legitimacy and sustainability when they engage with indigenous institutions and culturally embedded practices rather than treating communities merely as recipients of externally designed solutions. In Nigeria, traditional institutions continue to exercise considerable informal

influence despite the formal predominance of state institutions. Igbokwe-Ibeto and Ogbuagu (2021), for example, demonstrate that traditional authorities retain substantial community legitimacy and can contribute to local security, although their formal enforcement powers have been significantly weakened.

The marginalisation of indigenous institutions is historically connected to colonial transformations of African governance. Colonial rule reconfigured indigenous political and judicial systems through administrative centralisation, missionary influence and the imposition of European legal frameworks. These processes weakened or redefined indigenous authorities and created enduring tensions between formal institutions and locally embedded systems of social regulation. The consequence was not simply institutional change but the erosion of some mechanisms through which communities historically produced legitimacy, accountability and social cohesion. The contemporary challenge, therefore, is not to romanticise precolonial institutions, but to critically examine whether elements of their authority and restorative practices can be adapted to contemporary peacebuilding without reproducing exclusionary or harmful practices.

This question is particularly relevant in southeastern Nigeria, where Igbo social organisation historically incorporated councils of elders, age grades, assemblies and title institutions into systems of communal governance. Within this institutional landscape, the Ọkọnkọ Society occupied an important position among the Ngwa-Igbo. Historical scholarship identifies Ọkọnkọ as part of the decentralised authority structures that evolved within Ngwaland, while more recent research has examined its contribution to conflict management and cultural preservation (Aniga, 2024; Oriji, 1981). Evidence also indicates that Ọkọnkọ exercised authority over social, judicial and security matters and was associated with the enforcement of customary norms, particularly in disputes involving land and community relations (Chiniaobi, 2019). These functions suggest that Ọkọnkọ should be examined not merely as a cultural or ritual association but as an institution through which authority, social control and communal order were historically produced.

However, the contemporary relevance of Ọkọnkọ remains insufficiently theorised within peace and conflict scholarship. Existing studies have predominantly examined its cultural, ritual, environmental or historical dimensions, with comparatively limited attention to its potential as an indigenous peace architecture for violence prevention and restorative

community governance (Aniga, 2024; Nwosu, 2010; Oriji, 1981). Moreover, the erosion of traditional authority through colonial transformation, Christianity, urbanisation, political change and modern state institutions raises an important analytical question: whether the weakening of indigenous institutions has also diminished locally legitimate mechanisms for regulating conflict and sustaining communal cohesion. This gap is particularly consequential in an era in which African peacebuilding increasingly seeks locally owned and culturally grounded approaches.

Against this background, this study investigates *Ọkọnkọ* as an indigenous peace architecture in Ngwaland, Abia State, Southeastern Nigeria. It examines how the institution historically contributed to conflict mediation, social regulation, customary justice and communal peace, while critically assessing its potential contemporary relevance. The study argues that revitalising selected restorative and community-accountability practices associated with *Ọkọnkọ* could complement formal justice and security institutions, rather than replace them. Its contribution lies in repositioning *Ọkọnkọ* within contemporary peacebuilding scholarship as an endogenous institutional resource through which culturally legitimate authority, restorative justice and communal responsibility can potentially be mobilised towards sustainable and zero-violence communities.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Indigenous Peacebuilding

Indigenous peacebuilding refers to locally rooted processes through which communities prevent violence, manage disputes, repair relationships and sustain social order through culturally embedded knowledge, norms and institutions. It differs from externally driven peacebuilding by locating legitimacy, participation and problem-solving capacity within affected communities. Recent scholarship increasingly questions the assumption that sustainable peace must be constructed primarily through formal state institutions, arguing instead that traditional and community-based mechanisms can provide locally legitimate resources for conflict prevention and resolution (Lamidi, 2024; Okpevra, 2023). Traditional peacebuilding can draw upon communal history, customary knowledge and social relationships to promote restorative justice, trust and social cohesion.

The analytical significance of indigenous peacebuilding lies in its emphasis on relationships rather than conflict termination alone. Peace is conceptualised not simply as

the absence of violence but as the restoration of social equilibrium, mutual obligations and communal coexistence. Rwanda's Gacaca illustrates this orientation. Although the post-genocide Gacaca courts were criticised for procedural shortcomings and political constraints, their community-based character demonstrated the potential of locally embedded institutions to facilitate accountability, participation and the reconstruction of fractured social relationships (Clark, 2010). More recent scholarship similarly continues to examine Gacaca as an important example of community-based transitional justice while recognising the tensions between local participation, justice and political authority (Nyseth Brehm et al., 2020).

Ubuntu provides another influential African framework. It emphasises relational personhood, interconnectedness, human dignity and reconciliation. Recent scholarship cautions, however, against treating Ubuntu as a universally applicable or inherently harmonious African philosophy. Its peacebuilding potential depends on the social and political conditions within which its principles are interpreted and institutionalised (Chitando & Kilonzo, 2023). Likewise, the African palaver tradition demonstrates the value of dialogue, collective deliberation and consensus-building, but its application requires attention to gender, age and status inequalities. These examples establish an important analytical principle: indigeneity does not automatically guarantee justice. Indigenous peace institutions must therefore be critically assessed in terms of legitimacy, inclusiveness, accountability and compatibility with contemporary human rights standards.

Traditional Institutions and Community Security

Traditional institutions are culturally embedded structures of authority that derive legitimacy from customary norms, historical continuity and community recognition. They include traditional rulers, councils of elders, age grades, lineage institutions, customary courts, title societies and ritual organisations. Their relevance to community security arises from their proximity to local populations and their capacity to regulate behaviour, mediate disputes, mobilise collective action and enforce socially recognised norms.

Recent Nigerian scholarship demonstrates that traditional institutions continue to possess significant potential for local conflict management despite the expansion of formal governmental and security institutions. Lamidi and Olaleye (2023), for example, found that

traditional institutions remain complementary to modern governance structures, particularly in intra-communal disputes involving land, inheritance, chieftaincy and family relations. Their effectiveness derives partly from accessibility, familiarity and community legitimacy. Similarly, Igbokwe-Ibeto and Ogbuagu (2021) argue that traditional institutions retain a role in addressing insecurity in Nigeria, although their authority has been constrained by constitutional arrangements and the growing dominance of formal state institutions.

This literature nevertheless reveals a significant governance dilemma. Traditional institutions can provide culturally legitimate alternatives to formal justice, but their authority may be weakened by politicisation, competition with elected authorities and changing social values. They may also reproduce exclusionary practices. Consequently, the contemporary relevance of traditional institutions is better understood through hybrid governance, in which indigenous mechanisms complement formal justice and security institutions while remaining subject to constitutional and human-rights safeguards. This position is supported by recent scholarship showing that traditional peacebuilding can provide community-oriented mechanisms for dispute resolution while strengthening restorative justice, inclusiveness, trust and social cohesion (Lamidi, 2024).

Ọkọnkọ and Its Institutional Functions

Ọkọnkọ refers to an indigenous Igbo institution historically associated with customary authority, social regulation, adjudication, cultural identity and communal governance. In Ngwaland, its institutional significance extends beyond the description of a secret or ritual society. Historical scholarship established Ọkọnkọ as an important component of decentralised Ngwa authority structures (Oriji, 1981), while recent research provides empirical evidence of its continuing cultural and conflict-management significance.

Aniga (2024) specifically demonstrates that Ọkọnkọ in Umuahia operated as a cultural sentinel, conflict mediator and mechanism of social regulation. The study shows that its practices incorporated Igbo language, cultural symbols, ritual processes and communal authority into conflict management. This evidence is significant because it challenges interpretations that isolate ritual identity from institutional governance. Instead, Ọkọnkọ

can be understood as an institution in which cultural authority and social regulation were interconnected.

Earlier research provides further evidence of its judicial functions. Aniga (2017) identifies Ọkọnkọ as an appellate institution where disputes unresolved at lower lineage or kindred levels could be referred for further determination. Its authority was derived principally from communal recognition and symbolic legitimacy rather than formal state coercion. Such authority enabled the institution to employ cultural communication, moral persuasion and communal sanctions in regulating behaviour.

The use of Igbo proverbs is particularly relevant to understanding this institutional process. Proverbs communicate social expectations through culturally intelligible language and can facilitate persuasion, indirect criticism and reconciliation. Rather than functioning simply as rhetorical devices, they can constitute part of the normative resources through which communities interpret wrongdoing and negotiate acceptable settlements. This supports the broader argument that indigenous peace institutions operate through multiple forms of authority—including symbolic, moral, social and customary authority, rather than through coercion alone.

Ọkọnkọ, Peace Architecture and Violence Prevention

Peace architecture refers to the interconnected institutions, relationships, norms and processes through which societies prevent conflict, manage disputes and sustain peaceful relationships. An indigenous peace architecture, therefore, refers to a culturally legitimate configuration of local institutions, customary norms, collective values and conflict-management practices that work together to prevent violence and maintain social cohesion.

This conceptualisation provides a stronger analytical framework for understanding Ọkọnkọ. Rather than viewing it merely as an institution that intervenes after conflict has occurred, its historical functions suggest a combination of reactive and preventive peacebuilding. Mediation and adjudication addressed existing disputes, whereas moral regulation, communal accountability, symbolic authority and sanctions potentially discouraged behaviour that could generate or escalate violence. Recent research on traditional peacebuilding similarly argues that indigenous systems can perform preventive

as well as settlement functions by strengthening trust, social cohesion and community-based mechanisms of regulation (Lamidi, 2024).

The concept of violence prevention is consequently central to this study. Violence prevention involves identifying and addressing the social, behavioural and institutional conditions that generate or escalate violence before destructive outcomes occur. From this perspective, Ọkọnkọ's significance lies not simply in its capacity to settle disputes but in its potential to establish norms, expectations and accountability structures that reduce the likelihood of violent escalation.

Restorative Justice and Indigenous Institutions

Restorative justice refers to an approach to justice that prioritises repairing harm, accountability, reconciliation, restoration of relationships and reintegration rather than punishment alone. Its relevance to indigenous peacebuilding derives from the emphasis many African community-based justice systems place on restoring relationships between offenders, victims and the wider community.

Recent African scholarship cautions against simply equating indigenous justice with Western formulations of restorative justice. Murambadoro et al. (2020) argue for recognition of African restorative justice as a distinctive field because local African justice processes may share restorative principles while reflecting particular cultural, communal and relational understandings of justice. This distinction is important for analysing Ọkọnkọ. Its practices should not be retrospectively classified as restorative merely because they involve mediation or reconciliation. Rather, the study must examine empirically whether its procedures actually prioritised restoration, accountability, reintegration and communal healing.

Critical Gaps in Existing Literature

Four interconnected gaps emerge from the literature. First, although recent scholarship has renewed interest in traditional peacebuilding in Africa, Ọkọnkọ remains underrepresented in contemporary peace and conflict scholarship. Existing research has tended to emphasise its cultural, ritual and historical dimensions, while Aniga's (2024) recent study represents an important step towards examining its conflict-resolution functions.

Second, existing research gives greater attention to reactive dispute resolution than preventive peacebuilding. The literature establishes that traditional institutions can mediate disputes, but insufficient attention has been paid to how moral regulation, communal accountability, customary sanctions and symbolic authority may prevent disputes from escalating into violence. This distinction is central to the present study.

Third, limited interdisciplinary scholarship connects Ọkọnkọ with Indigenous Knowledge Systems, restorative justice, community security and contemporary peace architecture. Recent studies increasingly advocate the integration of traditional institutions into modern peacebuilding frameworks, but the institutional conditions under which such integration can be legitimate and effective remain insufficiently examined (Okpevra, 2023; Lamidi, 2024).

Finally, the policy and institutional implications of revitalising Ọkọnkọ remain underdeveloped. The critical issue is not whether Ọkọnkọ should simply be restored in its historical form, but which elements of its peacebuilding architecture can be ethically and institutionally adapted to contemporary communities. Such adaptation must preserve cultural legitimacy while addressing exclusion, accountability, gender equality and constitutional rights.

Accordingly, this study positions Ọkọnkọ as an indigenous peace architecture rather than merely a cultural institution. It examines how its historical mechanisms of mediation, customary adjudication, moral regulation and communal accountability contributed to peace and assesses their potential contemporary relevance for violence prevention in Ngwaland. The study thereby connects a relatively underexplored Ngwa institution to broader debates on indigenous knowledge, restorative justice, hybrid governance, community security and decolonial peacebuilding. Its central analytical proposition is that the revitalisation of indigenous peace institutions should be understood as critical institutional adaptation, not cultural restoration, to combine local legitimacy and communal ownership with contemporary principles of justice, inclusion and human rights.

Theoretical Framework

Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Theory emerged from efforts to challenge the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge frameworks and recognise knowledge generated within local communities as legitimate resources for governance, development and social transformation. Hoppers (2002) is particularly influential in articulating an African-centred approach that views indigenous knowledge as historically produced through community experience, cultural practices, spirituality and intergenerational transmission. IKS is therefore understood not simply as a collection of traditional beliefs but as a dynamic knowledge system embodied in institutions, customs, oral traditions, symbols, rituals and social practices. Recent research further demonstrates the relevance of indigenous knowledge to conflict resolution and transformative peacebuilding, particularly where local institutions possess cultural legitimacy (Tesfaye, 2021).

The theory is directly relevant to this study because Ọkọnkọ represents an institutional expression of Ngwa-Igbo indigenous knowledge. Its authority, sanctions, rituals, proverbs, mediation practices and communal accountability mechanisms were embedded in locally shared understandings of morality, social order and collective responsibility. IKS therefore provides an analytical basis for explaining why Ọkọnkọ's decisions could command compliance without depending exclusively on formal state coercion.

More importantly, the theory enables this study to examine indigenous peace practices as knowledge-based institutional processes rather than cultural relics. It explains how locally transmitted knowledge can regulate behaviour, facilitate reconciliation and preserve communal cohesion. However, the study does not assume that indigenous knowledge is inherently equitable or universally applicable. Instead, it critically examines which elements of Ọkọnkọ's knowledge system can be responsibly adapted to contemporary peacebuilding. Thus, IKS Theory positions Ọkọnkọ as a potential source of culturally legitimate knowledge for violence prevention and sustainable, community-owned peacebuilding in Ngwaland.

Restorative Justice Theory

Restorative Justice Theory developed as a critical alternative to predominantly punitive approaches to crime and conflict. Zehr's *Changing Lenses* (1990) was foundational in reframing wrongdoing as harm to people and relationships rather than simply an offence

against the state. Restorative justice consequently emphasises repairing harm, accountability, dialogue, reconciliation, restoration of relationships and reintegration. Contemporary African scholarship, however, cautions against simply imposing Western formulations of restorative justice on African customary practices. Murambadoro et al. (2020) argue that African restorative justice has distinctive communal and relational dimensions and should be understood through endogenous knowledge while remaining attentive to human dignity, customary law and human rights.

This perspective is particularly useful for analysing Ọkọnkọ because its historical functions appear to have extended beyond determining wrongdoing towards restoring communal equilibrium. Mediation, reconciliation, restitution, moral correction and communal participation potentially enabled disputants to remain members of the same social community after settlement. From a restorative perspective, sanctions can therefore be examined not only in terms of punishment but also according to whether they promoted accountability, behavioural correction and social reintegration.

The theory also provides a basis for analysing the relationship between individual wrongdoing and communal wellbeing. Because conflicts occurred within interconnected social networks, their resolution potentially required repairing relationships rather than merely isolating offenders. This makes restorative justice particularly relevant to the study's conception of zero-violence communities, where sustainable peace depends on preventing recurrence as well as settling existing disputes.

Therefore, Restorative Justice Theory guides this study in examining whether Ọkọnkọ's mediation, sanctions, communal participation and reconciliation practices functioned to repair harm and restore social relationships. It also provides a critical framework for assessing how selected restorative principles might be adapted to contemporary Ngwaland without reproducing practices inconsistent with constitutional rights, equality or human dignity.

Methodology

Brief Historical Background of the Ngwa People of Southeastern Nigeria

The Ngwa, known locally as Nde Ngwa, are an Igbo ethnic group located predominantly in the southern part of Igboland, particularly in present-day Abia State, southeastern Nigeria.

They constitute one of the major Igbo subgroups and occupy a historically significant territory extending across several communities in the region. Ngwa people occupy nine Local Government Areas, which include: Aba North, Aba South, Isiala Ngwa North, Isiala Ngwa South, Obi Ngwa, Osisioma, Ugwunagbo, Ukwu East, Ukwu West. Historical accounts identify Ngwaland as covering approximately 1,328 square kilometres, although population estimates from earlier censuses should be treated cautiously because they do not reflect contemporary demographic realities (Amankulor, 1977; Oriji, 1981).

Ngwa society developed distinctive political, social and cultural institutions that regulated communal life before colonial rule. Authority was largely organised around villages, lineages, elders and indigenous institutions, among which *Ọkọnkọ* and *Ekpe* played important roles in social regulation, dispute settlement and enforcement of communal norms. These institutions were embedded within broader systems of customary authority, kinship, moral obligations and collective responsibility.

The geographical position of Ngwaland also contributed to its historical interactions with neighbouring Igbo and non-Igbo communities. Its location within the southern Igbo region facilitated agricultural production, trade and cultural exchange. The Ngwa economy historically depended substantially on farming, including the cultivation of yam, cassava and other food crops, while palm produce later became increasingly important to regional and external trade (Oriji, 1981; 1991).

The arrival of colonial rule significantly transformed Ngwa political and institutional structures. The expansion of colonial administration, formal courts, Christianity and state security institutions progressively altered the authority and functions of indigenous institutions. Nevertheless, important elements of Ngwa cultural identity—including language, oral traditions, communal values and indigenous institutions no doubt have persisted. This historical context is important for understanding the emergence, functions and subsequent transformation of *Ọkọnkọ* as an indigenous institution of social regulation and peacebuilding in Ngwa society.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to examine *Ọkọnkọ* as an indigenous peacebuilding institution and assess its potential contribution to violence

prevention and community governance in Ngwaland, Abia State, Nigeria. An exploratory design was appropriate because the contemporary peacebuilding relevance of Ọkọnkọ remains underexamined and requires attention to culturally situated meanings, experiences and institutional practices rather than testing predetermined causal relationships (Rendle et al., 2019). The study was conducted in four purposively selected Ngwa communities, including Umuode-Nsulu, Nvosi, Ezianya-Ntigha and Eziala, selected because of the historical and continuing cultural significance of Ọkọnkọ in indigenous authority, social regulation and conflict management.

The study involved 32 information-rich participants, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants comprised four traditional rulers, eight Ọkọnkọ members, eight community elders, four women leaders, four youth leaders, two security personnel and two historians. This composition provided institutional, generational, gendered and professional perspectives on customary authority, conflict management and its relationship with formal security structures. The selection strategy prioritised participants with direct knowledge or experience of Ọkọnkọ and indigenous governance rather than statistical representativeness, consistent with the exploratory purpose of the study.

Fieldwork was conducted between October 2025 and January 2026 by the researcher and four trained research assistants, one from each community. Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation and historical/documentary analysis. Interviews examined Ọkọnkọ's historical functions, mediation, customary adjudication, sanctions, rituals, moral regulation, communal accountability and contemporary relevance. Non-participant observation provided contextual evidence concerning social interactions, culturally meaningful symbols and practices, while historical and documentary materials helped situate participants' accounts within the broader institutional development of Ọkọnkọ. The combination of these sources enabled triangulation between participants' narratives, observed practices and historical evidence.

The researcher is a Ngwa/Igbo scholar with strong proficiency in the Igbo language. This insider positionality facilitated linguistic accuracy, culturally informed interpretation, community access and rapport. However, reflexive attention was maintained to the possibility that cultural familiarity could influence questioning, interpretation and

representation. Such reflexivity is important in indigenous research because insider status can simultaneously enhance access and shape knowledge production (Ademolu, 2024; Folkes, 2023). The research assistants supported data collection, field documentation and data organisation, while the researcher retained responsibility for methodological decisions and interpretation.

Data were analysed using content thematic analysis. Interview, observational and documentary materials were systematically reviewed, coded and categorised to develop themes concerning mediation, customary adjudication, moral regulation, sanctions, reconciliation, communal accountability, cultural legitimacy and violence prevention. The analysis explicitly distinguished between historical institutional functions, contemporary perceptions and potential future applicability. Participants' recollections of Ọkọnkọ's historical functions were therefore not treated as direct evidence of its current institutional operation. Similarly, proposed revitalisation was interpreted as a potential peacebuilding strategy rather than an established outcome.

Credibility was strengthened through methodological and source triangulation, involving comparison of individual interview narratives, observed practices and historical/documentary evidence.

Ethical procedures included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and adherence to community entry protocols. Culturally sensitive information was handled with appropriate discretion, while the contemporary applicability of indigenous practices was assessed critically in relation to inclusion, human dignity, gender equality, accountability and constitutional protections. These procedures enhanced methodological transparency, credibility and ethical rigour in accordance with established qualitative reporting standards (O'Brien et al., 2014).

Results and Discussion

The findings are discussed thematically in line with the study objectives.

Ọkọnkọ as an Indigenous Security and Social Regulation Institution

Indigenous security and social regulation pertains to a traditional, community-based entity that employs culturally ingrained norms, values, authority, and practices to uphold security, govern behaviour, and sustain social order. The findings from Umuode-Nsulu, Nvosi,

Eziama-Ntigha and Eziala demonstrated that Ọkọnkọ historically functioned as an indigenous security and social regulation institution, employing moral regulation, communal accountability, culturally legitimate sanctions and dispute intervention. Its authority rested primarily on shared values, ancestral legitimacy and collective acceptance rather than physical coercion. A traditional ruler from Nvosi explained:

“Before government police became common, Ọkọnkọ represented the voice of the ancestors and community; people avoided wrongdoing because they anticipated shame, sanctions and collective disapproval.”

This account indicates that Ọkọnkọ promoted compliance through internalised norms and collective accountability, extending security beyond physical protection to the preservation of social order and communal harmony. The finding therefore indicates that indigenous security was embedded within everyday social relations, where conformity to communal norms was reinforced through shared expectations, social shame and culturally recognised sanctions. Such an arrangement demonstrates that security, within the traditional context, extended beyond the prevention of physical violence to include the preservation of social order, moral conduct and harmonious relationships. This finding supports Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory, which recognises locally generated knowledge, values and institutions as legitimate mechanisms of social governance (Pophiwa & Saidi, 2022). It also aligns with African scholarship emphasising the contribution of indigenous institutions to contemporary peacebuilding and social governance (Thovoethin & Akpotu, 2026).

The findings further showed that Ọkọnkọ's sanctions were corrective and restorative rather than exclusively punitive. An elder from Eziama-Ntigha stated:

“The purpose was not to destroy the offender but to correct the person, repair relationships and restore peace so that the individual could return to the community.”

This orientation reflects Restorative Justice Theory, particularly its emphasis on accountability, repairing harm, reconciliation and reintegration. Similar evidence from Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo demonstrates the relevance of indigenous restorative mechanisms to community justice and conflict management (Murhula, 2022;

Salihu & Gholami, 2022). Thus, Ọkọnkọ combined prevention, correction and restoration, demonstrating how culturally legitimate indigenous institutions could support communal security and peacebuilding beyond formal coercive structures.

Ritual Authority and Social Control

Ritual authority and social control involve the employment of culturally acknowledged rituals, symbols, beliefs, and ceremonial practices to create legitimate authority and govern individuals' behaviour within a community. Findings indicate that ritual authority was central to Ọkọnkọ's historical capacity to regulate behaviour and legitimise communal decisions. Participants identified the ọmụ palm frond, ritual drums, masquerades, sacred chants and ritual objects as culturally intelligible symbols through which authority was communicated and social expectations reinforced. An Ọkọnkọ member in Umuode-Nsulu explained:

“The power of Ọkọnkọ was not only in its members but in the belief that the institution carried spiritual authority; when the drum sounded, everyone understood its seriousness and responded accordingly.”

This suggests that Ọkọnkọ's authority operated through culturally internalised knowledge rather than coercion alone. From an Indigenous Knowledge Systems perspective, symbols and rituals function as repositories of collectively transmitted knowledge through which communities interpret authority, morality and acceptable conduct (Ottoh, 2022).

Observation further indicated that public ritual performances reinforced collective consciousness and communicated moral expectations. However, participants also identified exclusionary dimensions. A woman leader observed:

“Ọkọnkọ maintained order and discouraged wrongdoing, but women were often observers rather than participants in important decisions affecting communal governance and conflict resolution.”

This qualification is analytically important: indigenous institutions should be critically revitalised rather than romanticised. Their contemporary value depends on preserving culturally legitimate peacebuilding practices while addressing exclusion and inequality.

Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Conflict resolution includes the identification and management of the underlying causes and effects of disputes through various methods, including dialogue, mediation, negotiation, reconciliation, and restitution, aimed at addressing grievances, mending relationships, and fostering enduring peaceful coexistence. Within indigenous societies, these processes are often embedded in culturally legitimate institutions, norms and practices. The findings demonstrate that mediation, dialogue, compensation and reconciliation constituted important historical mechanisms through which Ọkọnkọ managed interpersonal, family, land and communal disputes. A historian in Umuode- Nsulu community explained:

“The strength of Ọkọnkọ was its ability to prevent conflicts from becoming violent; elders mediated carefully because disputants would remain neighbours and continue their relationships after settlement.”

Contemporary research on indigenous restorative justice in Nigeria similarly shows that community members continue to recognise culturally grounded mechanisms where formal institutions are perceived as inadequate (Salihu & Gholami, 2022). This finding reflects Restorative Justice Theory because the objective extended beyond determining culpability towards repairing relationships and restoring communal equilibrium.

Compensation also served restorative rather than merely economic purposes. An elder in Eziala stated:

“Compensation was important because it demonstrated remorse, acknowledged the harm suffered and helped rebuild trust between families after disputes had damaged their relationships.”

Thus, material or symbolic restitution functioned as a mechanism of social repair. Recent research on customary dispute resolution in southeastern Nigeria similarly identifies reconciliation, sanctions and indigenous knowledge as significant components of community-based conflict settlement (Okeke & Okoli, 2026).

Proverbs and culturally embedded dialogue also facilitated restraint and reflection. A participant in Nvosi explained:

“Proverbs made people think deeply before responding, allowing disputants to reconsider their anger and listen carefully rather than immediately escalating disagreements into confrontation.”

Overall, Ọkọnkọ's historical mechanisms reveal a peacebuilding process centred on dialogue, restitution, reconciliation and reintegration rather than adversarial victory. This illustrates Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory: oral traditions can transmit normative knowledge and provide culturally intelligible resources for regulating behaviour and managing conflict.

Why the System Declined

The findings indicate that Ọkọnkọ's decline resulted primarily from broader historical and socio-cultural transformations rather than inherent institutional failure. Colonialism, Christianity, Western education, the expansion of modern state institutions, urbanisation, migration, generational change and weakening communal solidarity progressively displaced indigenous authority with formal policing, courts and administrative structures. Concurrently, changing religious beliefs, gender expectations and perceptions of traditional practices diminished Ọkọnkọ's cultural legitimacy, authority and community participation. A historian in Eziama-Ntigha explained:

“Colonial authorities regarded institutions such as Ọkọnkọ as threats because they exercised considerable influence over local governance, justice and communal behaviour before colonial administrative structures were imposed.”

Research on African peacebuilding similarly argues that sustainable security requires meaningful recognition of locally grounded knowledge and agency rather than exclusive reliance on externally imposed institutions (Namakula, 2022). Religious transformation reinforced this process. A community elder stated:

“Many converts abandoned traditional institutions because they feared being labelled idol worshippers, and gradually the rituals, symbols and practices that sustained Ọkọnkọ lost their communal legitimacy.”

Therefore, the decline of Ọkọnkọ is most accurately interpreted as a result of institutional displacement, epistemic marginalisation, and socio-cultural change, rather than as an

indication that indigenous peacebuilding was inherently ineffective. The replacement of indigenous authority by colonial courts, warrant chiefs, and formal policing exemplifies the marginalisation of locally developed knowledge and governance frameworks. Additionally, urbanisation and migration have further eroded kinship networks and the transmission of knowledge across generations, while the centralisation of the state has shifted the responsibility for security and justice to formal institutions. Moreover, political interference has undermined the perceived impartiality of certain traditional structures. This observation aligns with Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory, which posits that colonial epistemic frameworks often displaced or diminished the value of indigenous institutions and knowledge (Pophiwa & Saidi, 2022).

Reawakening Ọkọnkọ for Contemporary Peacebuilding

The findings indicate that participants perceived selected principles of Ọkọnkọ as potentially relevant to contemporary peacebuilding, particularly its emphasis on mediation, communal accountability, moral regulation, reconciliation and collective responsibility. Rather than advocating a wholesale restoration of the traditional institution, participants envisaged the selective adaptation of its functional principles to complement existing formal security and conflict-management structures. This perspective is significant because contemporary peacebuilding increasingly recognises that sustainable peace depends not only on formal state institutions but also on locally legitimate actors, social relationships and community-based capacities for preventing and managing violence. A security official in Nvosi observed:

“Government security agencies cannot succeed alone; communities continue to trust traditional institutions, particularly when resolving local disputes before disagreements become wider conflicts requiring formal intervention.”

Recent scholarship similarly argues that African indigenous knowledge can strengthen locally owned peace and security strategies when integrated critically with contemporary institutions. Participants nevertheless emphasised that revitalisation should involve institutional adaptation rather than historical replication. A youth leader in Eziala explained:

“Young people know social-media conflicts more than traditional peacebuilding practices, so preserving indigenous knowledge requires deliberate education that connects younger generations with communal responsibility and peaceful coexistence.”

This suggests that intergenerational knowledge transmission should form part of any revitalisation strategy. Community-based indigenous restorative justice in Nigeria has also demonstrated that locally trusted mechanisms can coexist with, and potentially complement, formal justice where institutional legitimacy is weak (Salihu & Gholami, 2022). This finding supports Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory by demonstrating the continuing value of culturally legitimate knowledge in community governance.

However, revitalisation must address historical exclusion, particularly restrictions on women's participation, secrecy, and practices inconsistent with contemporary rights standards. Consequently, the study conceptualises Ọkọnkọ not as a replacement for state security institutions but as a potential complementary peacebuilding resource whose restorative and culturally legitimate elements can be critically adapted for contemporary community governance and violence prevention.

Conclusion

This study established that Ọkọnkọ historically functioned as an indigenous peace architecture in Ngwaland, regulating behaviour, mediating disputes, enforcing communal norms and promoting peaceful coexistence. Its authority derived from cultural legitimacy, ritual symbolism, moral regulation, communal accountability and restorative practices. Through mediation, customary adjudication, corrective sanctions and reconciliation, Ọkọnkọ provided locally legitimate mechanisms for maintaining social order and preventing conflict escalation. These findings challenge the assumption that effective peacebuilding in Africa depends primarily on formal state institutions or externally derived models.

The study further established that Ọkọnkọ's decline was shaped by colonial institutional displacement, Christian missionary influence, urbanisation, state centralisation and political transformation, which weakened indigenous authority and disrupted intergenerational knowledge transmission. Nevertheless, participants identified continuing

value in its principles of mediation, communal accountability, moral regulation and restorative reconciliation. Indigenous Knowledge Systems Theory explains the cultural legitimacy of these practices, while Restorative Justice Theory highlights their emphasis on repairing relationships and restoring communal harmony.

The study concludes that Ọkọnkọ's contemporary relevance lies in critical revitalisation rather than wholesale restoration. Its constructive principles can complement formal security and justice institutions through community mediation, early conflict prevention and peace education, provided that their application respects constitutional rights, gender inclusion, human dignity and democratic accountability. The study therefore contributes to African-centred peacebuilding scholarship by demonstrating the potential of endogenous institutions to inform contemporary violence prevention and community governance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study proposes the following recommendations for the responsible revitalisation of indigenous peacebuilding in Ngwaland and comparable African communities:

❖ **Institutionalise indigenous peacebuilding within a complementary governance framework.**

Local and state governments should formally recognise culturally legitimate institutions such as Ọkọnkọ as complementary actors in early conflict prevention, mediation and restorative settlement. Such recognition should establish clearly defined mandates, referral procedures and communication channels between indigenous peace actors, justice institutions and security agencies. The purpose should be to connect local knowledge and culturally legitimate authority to formal governance without transferring coercive state powers to indigenous institutions.

❖ **Create inclusive and accountable community peace structures.**

Community peace councils should provide a structured platform through which traditional authorities, elders, women, youth, religious representatives and relevant state actors can participate in early warning, dialogue, mediation and post-conflict reconciliation. Their institutional design should incorporate gender and generational

inclusion, transparent procedures, procedural fairness and accessible accountability mechanisms. This would enable the participatory strengths evident in indigenous peacebuilding to operate within a contemporary framework of legitimacy and rights protection.

❖ **Embed rights-based adaptation, capacity development and knowledge transmission.**

Revitalisation should critically adapt rather than uncritically reproduce historical practices. Universities, cultural institutions and community organisations should document oral histories, proverbs, symbols, mediation practices and institutional experiences through community-based oral-history projects and appropriately governed digital archives, subject to community consent where knowledge is culturally restricted. At the same time, indigenous peace actors should receive appropriate training in mediation, restorative justice, conflict prevention, human rights and procedural safeguards, while educational and youth programmes facilitate responsible intergenerational transmission of peacebuilding knowledge.

❖ **Develop an evidence-based framework for hybrid peacebuilding.**

Policymakers and research institutions should develop and evaluate hybrid peacebuilding arrangements that clearly specify the respective roles, responsibilities and referral pathways of indigenous and formal institutions. Such arrangements should include safeguards against discrimination, coercion and abuse and should be assessed through systematic comparative research across African indigenous peace systems. This would shift indigenous peacebuilding from an informal or symbolic resource towards an evidence-informed component of contemporary peace governance, while ensuring that its integration strengthens rather than undermines formal justice, constitutionalism and human dignity.

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