

ASPECTS OF VERBAL TABOOS AND THEIR ALTERNATIVES IN IGBO: A FOCUS ON TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND MYSTERIOUS PHENOMENA.

Ihemamma U. Osonwa*

ihemamma05@gmail.com , +2348036259838

Abstract

The study investigated traditional institution-based and mysterious phenomena-based verbal taboos, as well as their alternatives in Igbo. It adopted the qualitative orientation which involved semi-structured interviews with a total of 20 participants drawn from four purposefully chosen communities. The study identified prohibitions associated with traditional institutions such as Okonko, Ekpe, and euphemisms used as alternatives to verbal taboos associated with the traditional institutions. In addition, the study analyzed some verbal taboos associated with mysterious phenomena including death, snake, shrines, and other entities of cultural significance, and their alternatives, such as euphemism, proverbs and idioms. It was concluded that traditional institutions and mysterious phenomena represent aspects of verbal taboos, and they differ in many cultures and represent critical aspects of the philosophy, thought and belief of the people.

Keywords: Taboo, verbal taboo, traditional institution, mysterious phenomena, Igbo

**Ihemamma U. Osonwa Ph.D is a Chief Lecturer in the Humanities Department, School of Social Sciences, Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria.*

Introduction

Verbal taboo is a [social groups](#)' ban, prohibition, or avoidance of something (usually an utterance) based on the groups' sense that it is excessively repulsive, offensive, sacred, or allowed only for certain people. Taboos may be prohibited explicitly, for example within a [legal system](#) or [religion](#), or implicitly, for example, by [social norms](#) or [conventions](#) followed by a particular culture or organization. Such prohibitions are present in virtually all societies including the traditional Igbo society.

Verbal taboos are associated with Igbo traditional institutions such as *Ọkọnkọ*, *Ekpe*, and *Mbọkọ*, as well as *Nzenaọzọ*. *Ọkọnkọ* secret society is divided into three: Ekpe, Akañ and Mboko. Ekpe is the highest, followed by Akañ, then Mboko (Emenike, 2017). These are institutions that are shrouded in secrecy, and are characterized by some prohibitions on the use of certain words and expressions. Similarly, some mysterious phenomena have prohibitive use among the Igbo. This is related to the belief, norms and values of the Igbo on and about such phenomena. It is the underlying belief that the Igbo holds about the phenomenon that translates to it being a taboo. This may be related to the effects or impacts such events, activities and entities have on people. The Igbo, therefore, devises some expressions to talk about them as a way of mitigating the effects and impacts on people and situations.

Existing studies have focused primarily on the most profound verbal taboo in Igbo which is sex or body-based terms, (Omego, 2013, Oyeka, 2015, Fakuade et al. 2018, Nwagbo, 2021), without considering other aspects of verbal taboo in traditional Igbo culture. This study focused on traditional institutions and mysterious phenomena as other aspects of verbal taboo in Igbo. This is significant as it provides a better understanding of verbal taboos in traditional Igbo society, as well as extends the discussion on alternative means of codification of verbal taboos in Igbo.

A major feature of verbal taboos is that certain words are deployed to codify them in the place of taboo terms. This study reports on terms and expressions related to some traditional institutions, and mysterious phenomena which include death among others, as well as analyzed the alternative means of codifying them. The paper begins with a brief literature review focusing on the concept of verbal taboo, and previous studies. This is followed by purpose and methodology, as well as verbal taboos associated with traditional institutions and some mysterious phenomena in Igbo culture.

1. Literature review

1.1 Verbal taboo

According to Nwagbo (2021), verbal taboos are based on verbal expressions, that is, words and expressions that people are constrained from using at certain times and contexts. The writer further holds that unlike the physical-based taboos that are not negotiable, the verbal-based taboos are negotiable. In other words, while women are strictly not allowed to climb palm trees at all, people are not completely barred from using prohibited words and expressions.

Verbal taboo is a special case of stylistics alterations under which words are avoided by speakers in particular situations like in the presence of visitors, opposite sex, children, adults and the public. Leech (1964), says that taboo is an expression that is prohibited while Ferb (1994), notes that any word is innocent collection of sounds until a community surrounds it with connotation and then decrees that it cannot be used in certain speech situations. It is a prohibition of avoidance of words, statements believed to be dirty, harmful, sacred, forbidden, dangerous, consecrated to members if mentioned or referred to avoid anxiety, embarrassment or shame.

One major feature of verbal taboos is that the use of such words is rather restricted to certain topics/subject, contexts and time of the day or period, as the case may be, and more often than not involve gender disparity. Some topics are considered sacrosanct so much so that certain words are abhorred while engaging in discussion on such topic. Also, in some cultures, some myth and folk beliefs surround certain times and context that the use of some words are banned. Here, context is considered the relevant constraints of the communicative situation that influence language use, language variation, and discourse summary. For language to be meaningful, individual characters (both male and female) interact in contexts with language being the mode of communication, creating impressions in the minds of good speakers and interlocutors. As a concept, "context" can be viewed broadly either in verbal or social terms. Verbal context refers to surrounding text or talk of an expression (word, sentence, conversational turn, speech act, et cetera). The idea is that verbal context influences the way one understands an expression; hence, the norm not to cite people out of context. Furthermore, most societies ascribe hierarchies to male and female gender that certain words/expressions are reserved for one gender and prohibited from use by another gender. These speak of norms, values, beliefs, thoughts and world view of communities and cultures. It further speaks of how words are assigned meanings and roles by individuals.

Another major feature of verbal taboos is that certain words are deployed to codify them in the place of taboo terms. The original expression i.e., taboo expression is deemed embarrassing or shameful and so warrants the use of an artificial substitute that is less embarrassing or not embarrassing altogether. Consequently, people tend to use sweet, soothing, and socially acceptable terms to replace words and expressions that are not acceptable. On the whole, taboo and means of codifying them are like two faces of the same coin; one face is positive (alternative words) while the other face is negative (taboo words). The positive face is a product

or consequence of the negative face, and not the other way around. The negative face is the original

construct which, however, the culture is not comfortable with, and therefore gives birth to the positive face. During interactions, people intentionally obscure the negative face and present the positive face in order not to cause offence or embarrassment to other interlocutors. The implication of the alternative means of codifying tabooed terms is that it may lead to language change. This is related to a positive and important merit of taboos in that they serve as a catalyst to language change (Nwagbo, 2021).

According to Nwobodo (2021), in the traditional Igbo cultural context, taboos refer to those prohibitions aimed at the promotion of moral values, religious sanctity, social cohesion and cosmic harmony. Further espousing the concept of taboo among the Igbo, Anedo (2019), observes that taboos are a set of prohibited actions, a set of morals binding on a people; the violation of which attracts a severe punishment which may include death penalty. The institution and observance of taboos in Igbo culture help in the peaceful co-existence of members of the community. It helps in the projection and promotion of social integration. Violators of taboos are seen as agents of socio-political disintegration and chaos. The institution of taboo targets the holistic orderliness of life and all human activities and interaction in Igbo land.

1.2 Previous Studies on Verbal Taboos in Igbo

Quite a number of empirical studies have been carried out on verbal taboos among the Igbo including Omego, (2013), Oyeka, (2015), Alia (2016), Fakuade et al. (2018), and Nwagbo, (2021). Omego (2013) examined taboo words and their corresponding euphemisms as it affects sex, adultery, and pregnancy in Igbo. The study found the following: *igbanaama* 'to operate outside', instead of *akwụnakwuna* 'prostitution'; *inweonyeobia* 'to have a guest' instead of *ihunsọ* 'menstruation'; *irijuafo* 'to be filled' instead of *idiime*, 'to be pregnant'; *imeapari* 'to engage in a stupid act' instead of *ikwaiko* 'fornication / adultery'; *irahu* ('to sleep with someone') instead of *iraptu* 'to have sex'. The present study differs from Omegos' (2013) as it expands on body-based verbal taboo, highlighting other alternatives to verbal taboos.

Oyeka (2015), examined verbal taboos and euphemisms in Igbo: The study examined and described the various categories of some of such words, the reason(s) behind their avoidance, and the strategies involved when the concepts referenced in such words or expressions must be employed. Data comprising one hundred and fifty of the taboo words/expressions were elicited through oral interviews from two hundred Igbo native speakers representing various individuals without recourse to age, sex, educational background, occupation, and location. The findings

show that the open usage avoidance of the words/expressions in question is conditioned by cultural and religious norms of the society; and that euphemisms are mostly used as replacements for the avoided lexemes in certain contexts. The adoption of new lexemes, however, also brings about changes in the context of use of the items in the language. Furthermore, Onyeka (2015), found that the Igbo uses *nkeihu* 'the front one' instead of *Ara* 'Breast'; *ifemgbada* 'the thing

down there' instead of female genitals; *Ikenga* 'a powerful Igbo totem', *mgbadike* 'a stubborn masquerade' instead of *Amụ* 'penis'. From a gender perspective, the writer made the claim that the Igbo uses powerful euphemisms to represent the male sex organ but do not use the same for the female sex, and relates the disparities to patriarchy. The present study shares some similarities with the study as it focuses on sex and sex organs and even much more aspects of the verbal taboos among the Igbo, as well as their alternatives other than euphemisms.

Alia (2015), examined pragmatic analysis of taboo constructions and euphemisms in Mbaise dialect of the Igbo language. *The study examined euphemisms used in place of taboo construction. It also identifies the socio-cultural context in which euphemisms can be used appropriately in the Mbaise dialect. Data for this study was gotten from a variety of sources, including several settings in which the native speakers use the Mbaise dialect freely as well as published works done in the Igbo language and some other languages of the world. It was observed that there are more euphemistic expressions than taboo constructions in the Mbaise dialect because most of these euphemisms have been instilled from childhood to the extent that the native speakers cannot remember the taboo words. Unlike Alia's study, the present study did not only expand the perspectives on alternatives to body-based verbal taboos.*

Fakuade et al. (2018), found three major linguistic taboos in Igbo as follows: morality-related taboos, veneration-related taboos and decorum-related taboos. Out of the three, the morality-related taboos were the ones that relate to sex and sex organs. The study did not investigate alternatives to these verbal taboos. The categorization of the taboo subjects as done in this study is of interest to the present study. However, the present study expands on body-based or sex-related verbal taboos, offering insights into alternatives to the verbal taboo.

Nwagbo (2021), focused on an anthropo-linguistic appraisal of sexual taboos and euphemisms in Igbo. The study examined euphemisms about sex or copulation in Igbo with a view to delineating the categories and strategies employed by Igbo to express them. Through participant and non-participant observation, data (11 conversations) were collected from twenty (22) participants comprising sixteen (16) men and six (6) women across six (6) different settings in Lagos State, Nigeria. The result showed that participants used two major strategies

(idiomatic expressions and symbols) and coinage to euphemize the act of sex. The data is divided into two with regards to euphemisms; explicit euphemisms and opaque euphemisms. The criteria for contrast are speakers' familiarity or otherwise with the lexemes used in the euphemistic expressions. The present study does not engage in anthropo-linguistic analysis of the verbal taboo associated with sex and sex activity. However, it shares some similarities as both examines sex-related verbal taboos, but while Nwagbo (2021), drew data from students, the present study expands the range of data through focusing on other Igbo natives, as well as the alternatives of expressing the verbal taboos.

What is evident from the review is that studies on verbal taboo in the Igbo culture have primarily focused on taboo subjects such as sex, sex organs, and their alternatives (primarily euphemisms) which are considered the most profound aspect of Igbo verbal taboos (Omego, 2013, Oyeka, 2015, Fakuade et al. 2018, Nwagbo, 2021), without considering other aspects of Igbo verbal taboos, and this gap represents the focus and context of the present study.

2. Purpose of the study

The study in broad terms examined verbal taboos and their alternatives in Igbo with a focus on traditional institutions and mysterious phenomena. In specific terms, the study had the following purposes:

- (a) To examine traditional institutions-based verbal taboos
- (b) To investigate mysterious phenomena-based verbal taboos in Igbo communities
- (c) To analyze alternatives of the verbal taboos associated with traditional institutions and mysterious phenomena in Igbo

3. Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative research approach involving semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with purposefully chosen 5 participants drawn from randomly selected four communities/areas namely: Uzuakoli (5), Owerri (5), Afikpo/Ehugbo/Edda (5), Awka (5) and Owerri (5) making a total of 20 participants involving male and female from ages 45- above. The choice of the age bracket was informed by the fact that the researcher did not want to mix data from young people who often use slang expressions in the place of some words not in recognition of such words as taboo expressions but for stylistic purposes. Similarly, the choice of the areas or communities was influenced by the desire to gather a representative sample from the five South-eastern states where Igbo is predominantly spoken namely, Abia (Uzuakoli), Imo (Owerri), Anambra and Enugu (Awka) and Ebonyi (Afikpo/Edda).

Adopting the snowball technique, the researcher established contacts with two participants (drawn from her prior contacts and network across family and jobties) in the areas who helped to recruit additional 3 research participants for each of the areas understudy. Interview questions focused on words, expressions and other aspects of prohibitions relating to traditional institutions, and mysterious phenomena. The study adopted the thematic and interpretative approach for data analysis. The thematic approach entailed that there corded interviews were listened to several times by the researcher in order to identify salient points or themes that emerge from them.

4. Traditional Institutions-Based Verbal Taboos and their Alternatives in Igbo

(a) Verbal Taboos Associated with Traditional Institutions

Verbal taboos are associated with Igbo traditional institutions such as *Ọkọnkọ*, *Ekpe*, and *Mbọkọ*, as well as title-taking organizations such as *Nze na Ozo*. *Ọkọnkọ* secret society is divided into three: Ekpe, Akañ and Mboko. Ekpe is the highest, followed by Akañ, then Mboko (Emenike, personal communication, 2023). These are institutions that are shrouded in secrecy, and are characterized by some prohibitions on the use of certain words and expressions. We also captured some prohibitions on the use of some words or expressions among other traditional groups like *Egbela* society in Edda Igbo, as well as masquerade group '*Ekpo*' group.

Ọkọnkọ as a traditional institution in Igbo is believed to originate back in the days as early as 14th century and emanate from the great shrine of Arochukwu (Ebe, 2000). It is predominately around the old Bende areas, as well as Ngwa areas in Abia state, Nigeria. The tradition is believed to stand against injustice and bind communities together. It is also well known to be a law-making organization, and decides on how communities are organized. *Ọkọnkọ* is the tradition that is being called upon during communal clash and land dispute to settle clashes between communities. This tradition cut across communities in Abia state. Among the Ngwa Igbo, *Okonko* seems prevalent while *Ekpe* seems prevalent in *Ọhụhụ* parts of Abia State. According to Nwogu (personal communication, 2023), *Ọkọnkọ* is being passed from generation to generation by initiating every male child born into the communities at the age of seven. This initiation is to teach them from young the real culture of the land and how things are being done. This includes how to stand for justice, fearless, dance traditionally, response to masquerades etc. The initiation ceremony involves taking the male children into the shrine for four days where they will be trained and initiated. They will tie them with white cloth, shave them and feed them with mix item or concussion, the children are prepared by their fathers or uncles for those that have lost their fathers. This occurs prior to the new yam festival which occurs between July and August every year. It is believed that any child born within the

community that has reach the age and did not participate in the initiation ceremony brings about calamity to the family as the anger of the deity will visit the family with sudden death, mental illness, bad luck, sickness etc.

According to Agha (personal communication, 2023), *Okonko* or *Akañ* Secret society is not mentioned by women or non-members rather they refer to it as *Ihe mmam* (*Ihe mmuo*) and the year it is celebrated is called by them *Ahwa hie mmam* (*Afo ihemmuo*) or *Afo Abamaba* (*Afo Abamaba*). Agha (personal communication, 2023), reported some words and expressions which are taboos among non-members, and they include names of initiates or members, non-initiates, place of meeting, initiation ceremony, as well as mode of greetings. Mentioning the names of the institutions particularly by non-members is considered a taboo. This applies more specifically when a non-member is among the group. This prohibition on the use of the name of the organization applies in basically Ngwa communities. These are secret organizations, and it is considered a desecration of what they stand for if a non-member mentions the name of the

organization. This is particularly so because non-members are considered to be of less social status than the members in the society (Nwogu, 2023, personal communication). Another aspect of the traditional institutions notable for some prohibitions is in mentioning the name of initiates or members. A non-member is prohibited from calling a member an “*Okonko* member” or in Igbo “*Onyeokonko*”. This is related to the perception of these people as high in the hierarchy of life. They are not seen as mere human beings, for this prohibition is the veneration attached to the institution among the Igbo (Ogbonnaya, personal communication, 2023).

As observed in most communities where this institution thrives, there is a common meeting point for the group. This is often a secluded place where they have regular meetings and deliberate on their affairs including making some rituals and sacrifices when the need arises. The meeting point is referred to as *Ulo Okonko* meaning “house of *Okonko*”. This term is exclusively used by members of the *Okonko* society, and non-members are prohibited from using them (Adibe, personal communication, 2023). Non-members avoid the use of this term as a form of respect extended to the society. It is reported that this prohibition is a way of other members of the society tacitly avoiding this group who they perceive with a lot of awe and reverence (Adibe, personal communication, 2023), but the extent of adherence to these practices among the contemporary Igbo remains a subject of another discussion.

The initiation act often referred to as ‘*Egwu*’, the ceremony referred to as ‘*Emume Egwu*’ as well as an initiate often called ‘*Ito Obong*’ are all prohibited by a non-member. These terms are elusively used by members. These appellations and designations are not solely used by members of the society but basically a taboo among the rest of the society. The death of their

members is not referred to as death. Also, females are not allowed to use the word death when a titled man dies, and this is common in some Igbo communities such as Awka, Uzuakoli and Edda communities.

Another prominent area of restrictive use is in their mode of greeting. As the Igbo greets their large audience “*Igbo Kwenu*” and they answer “*Iyaa*”, so *Ọkọnkọ* members greet their different groups which non-members/ women are prohibited to greet or answers. Ekpe greets:

1.

Ojei Ojei Ekpe Ekpe

Ojei Ojei Akañ Akañ

Ojei Ojei Mboko Mboko

Akañ and Mboko members can never greet or answer *Ojei Ekpe Ekpe* when their initiation is not up to *Ekpe* but an *Ekpe* man can greet in all because he has grown from *Mboko* to *Ekpe*. There are two other forms of greetings:

2.

Ojei Ojei mba Ekpe Mba Ekpe

Ojei ojei tugbum n'iyi Tugbum n'iyi.

Mba Ekpe is only greeted by someone who has used his money to initiate somebody or people and only those who have done so can answer them. Others are prohibited. The other form of greeting which goes thus; *Ojei Ojei Tugbum n'iyi.....Tugbum n'iyi*, is only used by those who have done the final initiation, who were given the final bath of *Okonko* and only the people can greet and answer too. The greetings and answering by any non-members or women are highly prohibited & attracts severe punishment.

On the *Ekpe* society, initiation takes place in *Ekpe* shrine especially built for *Ekpe* meetings. There is a big piece of stone (*Ekpe* stone) and stepping on it signifies admittance into membership at the initiation, the secrets relating to the particular grade or grades are revealed to the initiate *Ito obong* (Nduka, personal communication, 2023). The new member now leaves the shrine dressed only in wrapper or loin cloth; his body marked with white stripes with a peacock feather pin on his head. He carries a special drum that he beats as he moves round the

village announcing to the people that he is now an Ekpe member. People rush out to see him while Ekpe members salute him with Ekpe slogan and then exchange greetings with him, this initiation rite is meant for those who do not acquire all of the titles, and there are more elaborate rites for those who acquire all the titles (*Aburu*). These terms such as the *Ekpe* stone, initiation process, initiate (*Ito Obong*), and greetings are exclusive preserve of members, and are tabooed among non-initiates, as well as female members of the society.

Ekpe society attained such a degree of sophistication that it developed a complicated language system known only to the members. Members communicate to one another using the secret language. The symbol of the language is in a written form and this symbol is called *Nsibidi*. Suspecting that non-initiates may impersonate members in far away places, Ekpe society adopted and communicated with signs and every member is required to know, depending, of course, on one's rank (Onwuka, 2023, personal communication).

In Edda, a prominent traditional institution exists, and it is called *Egbela*. It is considered as a secret society, and exclusively a man's affair (Agha, 2023, personal communication). They have some prohibitions on mentioning where they have their meetings '*Ogo*', and non-members, and particularly women do not mention the name of their festival '*Olo Festival*'. Likewise, in

Afikpo/Ehugbo, women are not allowed to mention names of members of the traditional group during the *Mbe Festival* (Orji, personal communication, 2023).

Ekpo or masquerade group is prominent in many Igbo communities particularly those that border Ibibio, Efik-speaking communities of Akwa Ibom State. The masquerade (*Mmanwu*) embodies the spirit and human worlds. The mystique surrounding the masquerade is one of the key components of the Igbo culture that survived Western influences. The masquerades are classified into categories based on specialization. Each masquerade possesses particular attributes (warrior-like prowess, mystical powers, youthfulness, and old age) and specializes in one or more skills (dancing skills, acrobatics, and other ritual manifestations).

Some prohibitions are observed with regard to the use of some words or expressions. Notably, mentioning the names of the masquerades by non-members and women is highly prohibited. Some informants report that in their Enugu, Ohafia and Ngwa communities, the following names of *Ekpo* are prohibited by non-members and women, *Ijele* (the King of all Masquerades), *Izaga* (*Izaga* is the tallest of Igbo masquerades), *Agaba* (The *Agaba* masquerade as a character is that of a warrior represented in its name that literally connotes "let's go"), *Odo* (*Odo* masquerade represents a deity who affords the living a chance to commune with their dead in line with the Igbo Traditional belief. Ekpe, most Ekpe masquerade are used to enforce law in the

community and It's said to be the link to their ancestors, (Nwogu, personal communication, 2023, Ike, personal communication, 2023, and Kalu, personal communication, 2023).

Also mentioning the name of the human being wearing the masquerade is taboo among the *Ngwa, Ohafia, Enugu* and many other communities where the Ekpo group exists. They are considered to be spirits, and any attempt by anybody including members to mention the name of the bearer of the masks attracts severe punishment including placating the land with some rites. Members may mention the name of the bearer of the mask prior to wearing in the mask solely among the group. However, the moment the mask is worn, and some rites performed, such constitutes a taboo (Abum, personal communication, 2023).

(b) Euphemism as Alternatives to Traditional Institution-Based Verbal Taboos

Euphemistic expressions are also deployed as alternatives to traditional-institution-based verbal taboos. This is related to the fact that these institutions are revered, and their activities are shrouded in some secrecy. It is reported that in many Igbo communities, some alternative forms are used for some words associated with some traditional institutions like *Okonko, Ekpe, Nze na Ozọ* among others as a way of according respect and reinforcing the dignity of the institutions among the rest of the society (Okoro, 2023, personal communication).

As noted earlier, some prohibitions are placed on particularly non-members from mentioning titled names of initiates, initiation ceremony, place of initiation among others. Some alternatives

are deployed which involve euphemistic expressions and neologism. In place of these taboo terms, some euphemistic expressions are used such as *Ndi Oma (good people)*, as well as *Ndinwe Ala* (owners of the land). Nwogu (personal communication, 2023) reported that in his Ngwa community as with other communities where these institutions exist, that they use these terms to refer to initiates of *Okonko* group. An interesting prohibition is observed with mentioning the names of some persons such as names of Chief Priests, or Traditionalists of the *Nze na Ozọ* institution. This is more about reverence, and supports Onukawa's (2016) position that the Igbo transfers the reverence they have for some spiritual forces and deities to item/objects associated with them or institutions that promote them. For example, in Uzuakoli, *Okonko* or *Akan* secret society is not mentioned by women or non-members rather they refer to it as "*hie mmam*" (*Ihe mmụọ*) and the year it is celebrated is called "*Ahwa hie mmam*" (*Afo ihe mmuo*) or "*Ahwa Abamaba*" (*Afo Abamaba*). In the same vein, *Ekpe/Akan* rights are not discussed with non-members, and are not mentioned by women at anytime and anywhere.

Another traditional institution which we identified to be profound in particularly the Ngwa community is concubinage. The term for the male or female concubine is "*Iko*". Although it is

not considered taboo in such communities to address them by such term, but it is considered act of 'saving face' or to avoid jarring to denote them by other forms/terms such as "Onyenganga, Onyeoma, etc, and this is more common among contemporary folks. In traditional Ngwa society, concubinage 'Iko' is institutionalized just as marriage, and both are socially approved relationships in which sexual relations are practiced (Onwukwe, 2020).

5. Mysterious Phenomenon-Based Verbal Taboo and their Alternatives

Some mysterious phenomena have prohibitive use among the Igbo. This is related to the belief, norms and values of the Igbo on and about such phenomena. It is the underlying belief that the Igbo hold about the phenomenon that translates to it being a taboo. This may be related to the effects or impacts such events, activities and entities have on people. The Igbo, therefore, devises some expressions to talk about them as a way of mitigating the effects and impacts on people and situations. The paper identified some of these phenomena below based on the data elicited from my informants.

(a) Death

The most horrifying or mysterious event to the Igbo is death. Death is seen as the end of live, and something that cannot be reversed. The hope of an Igbo is dashed in death. This represented in the saying that '*Ihe na-enweghị ihe a ga-eme ya bụ ọnwụ*', meaning, "it is only death that has no solution or death defies any solution". This represents the innate fear of death among the Igbo. According to Agu, (oral interview, 2023), death as a taboo subject relates to the belief and perception of death among the Igbo. The fear of death among the Igbo seems to be transferred into fear of words having to do with death. Onukawa (2016, p15) describes the Igbo perception

of death thus; "*One thing that is easily noticeable among the Igbo is the appreciation and confession of the fact that reality is mysterious*". Reality includes the certainty of non-virtuous phenomena like death (*Onwu*). The Igbo believe that death is an inescapable fact of life. The believe in the inevitability of death as a necessity for reincarnation, they have an innate fear of death. The Igbo consider death as an elusive, mysterious, dreadful, very powerful, un-likeable and unstoppable phenomenon. They are almost tempted to consider it as being more powerful than their *chi* (portioned out-life principle), and *Eke* (agency of destiny), especially when death strikes in spite of all the people's spiritual and physical efforts, and irrespective of age, status, wealth etc. of its victims.

Death, *Onwu*, has some prohibitions on its use. For example, in almost all communities in Igbo land, when one dies, people tend to avoid the use of the term death to refer to the person's passing or demise. It is even believed in some Igbo communities that mere mention of the

word 'death' may be an invitation to spirit of death, (Kalu, oral interview, 2023). Even in some conversations or exchanges, when people mention the word death severally, people tend to appeal against it. A more prominent prohibition relates to the use of the word 'death' at night. Night time to the Igbo is perceived as sacred time often considered to be reserved for the spirits. The duality of patterning of the Igbo thought associates day to the living and night to the spirits. That is why some spiritual activities are reserved for the night time according to Kalu (oral interview, 2023). The restrictions on the use of the word 'death' at specific times and occasions is different, hence it speaks to the generic use of euphemistic expressions for death common in the Igbo. The prohibition on the use of death by the initiates as well as the use of death-associated euphemistic expressions common in Igbo relate to broader perception of death among the Igbo.

Euphemism, proverbs and idioms are deployed as alternatives to death. The innate fear of death results in some prohibitions on the use of word 'death' including the use of euphemistic expressions (Onukawa, 2018), as well as in naming to express their apprehension of death's awful activity, (Onukawa, 2016). In place of the word '*Onwu*', varied forms of euphemistic expressions are used such as *ojeena* (he/she has passed on), *ogafeela* (he/she has gone to the other side), *ijekwurundinnanna* (Gone to join the ancestors). These alternatives are ways of avoiding the effects and impacts of death among the Igbo.

Proverbs and idioms are also deployed as alternatives for death. Consider the following examples.

(a) *I gakwuru nnanna anyi ha bu oke, o ruo gi n'aka, i horo*

The idiom (a) means "death is meant for everyone, when it gets to your turn, you partake of it". The expression '*I gakwuru nnanna anyi ha*' meaning "to join our ancestors" is idiomatic expression of death. This is considered an indirect means of expressing the view or belief of the Igbo about death which is that death is a necessary end for every man, and that it is inevitable.

(b) *Uwa bu ije, onye mere ike ya, o laa.*

The idiom (b) means "Life is a journey, everyone plays his part, and leaves". The expression "*o laa*" meaning "He/she leave" is idiomatic of death. This is an indirect way of talking about the inevitability of death by the Igbo.

(c) *Ariji erigbuola nwanne m, onye ije batara ya n'ulo*

The idiom (c) means "Grief has overwhelmed my brother; a visitor came into his house". The expressions "*Onye ije*" meaning "a visitor" is idiomatic of death. It is an indirect way of talking

about or refereeing to death, which is perceived with a lot of awe among the Igbo. It is also considered a polite way of sharing a news that is otherwise very heart-breaking.

(d) Bie ndu gị nke ọma, maka na ị maghi mgbe ndi nnanna anyi ha ga-akpọ gị oku

The proverb (d) means “Live your life well for you do not know when our ancestors will summon you”. The expression “...when ancestors will summon you” refers to death. It is a form of admonition to one that lives a careless life. It is a subtle or polite reminder of an inevitable end of every man.

(b) Snake, Spirits, Shrine and other Entities/Objects of Cultural Significance

Snake (*Agwọ*) has some mysterious perception and nature among the Igbo. Snake ‘*Agwọ*’ is a reptile whose presence may be considered to be ominous, and has some spiritual connotations in some Igbo communities where it is also seen as a messenger of the spirits. In some Igbo communities, snake is revered and associated with the river goddess. Its association with the spiritual entities might be considered a reason for the awe associated both with mentioning the word, as well as its presence. Its venomous nature may also be related to the awe associated with the snake.

Some mysticisms are attached to the perception of spirits (*mmụọ*) among the Igbo. There are different categories of spirits among the Igbo, and some prohibitions are identified in the use of these terms particularly at some time and occasion. For example, in the night hours in most Igbo communities like Uzuakoli, people are prohibited from mentioning the word *mmụọ* at night, as well as during burial ceremonies in places like Ngwa communities (Nwogu persona communication, 2023). It is reported that during the funeral of a family member, one man went to use the rest hut usually built at the back of traditional homesteads, and repeatedly mentioned the word *mmuo* during a conversation with another, and was met by a strange reaction which is believed to signal the presence of the spirit of the deceased (Nwogu, personal communication 2023). Burial (*Olili* or *Ili Mmady*) particularly of a member of some sociocultural groups like *Ekpe*, *Okonko* and Masquerade groups has restrictive use among the Igbo. It is believed that such

people don’t die but are transfigured in preparation for reincarnation, hence their bodies or remains are not seen to be buried. It is only a means of aiding their transfiguration.

Some items/objects associated with spiritual forces are believed to have some mystical interpretations, thus, some prohibitions are placed on the use of such items/objects, and this applies to some Igbo communities like Edda. Some terms like some parts of yam particularly the root-head and root-tail for example have prohibitive use in some Igbo communities like

Edda (Agha, personal communication, 2023). *Isi ji* - head of yam, in Edda '*Isi Iji*' is a festival for men, women do not mention '*Isi ji*' when talking about the head of yam but they call it *Ekwo ji*. Likewise, the tail of yam is called *eke ji* in Edda, and women are not allowed to call *Eke ji* rather they will call *Okpu ji*. This explains how certain situations/contexts can impose restrictions on the use of some terms among the Igbo.

'Shrine' (*ihu ala, arusi, ihu agbara*), 'deity' (*Agbara*), 'ritual rites' (*ichu aja*), 'symbolic spiritual forces' (*ofo/ogu*) and 'twins' (*ejima*) are other terms believed to be shrouded in some mystics, and thus, they have some prohibitive use in some Igbo communities. This is related to the association of these terms with some spiritual entities, forces and supernatural beings. In Ukwu communities in Abia State for example, shrine, deity and ritual rites are not mentioned at night, and during certain festivals like, *Nwotam* festival by particularly non-initiates of the traditional groups (Nwabu, personal communication, 2023). Nwabu (oral interview, 2023) further reveal that these are believed to be a sacred time, and during which spirits are moving about, any mentioning of these terms could pass for an invitation, and thus prohibited in the community. In the same Ukwu communities and riverine communities around River State like *Egberi Omuṣama*, it is reported that, 'symbolic spiritual forces' (*ofo/Ogu*) and 'twins' (*Ejima*) are not mentioned by women during festive period (Abum, personal communication, 2023).

Euphemisms are predominantly used as alternatives to the mysterious phenomena mentioned earlier. Women are not allowed to use the word 'snake' at night in some communities like Edda and Afikpo as well as Uzuakoli. This may also be related to the commonly-held notion that the mention of the word at night might be an indirect invitation to the reptile which may not be desirable. At such time, some euphemistic expressions are deployed such as *Eri* (thread), *akalaka* (long/lengthy) both of which depict the long, slim nature of the reptile.

Euphemistic expressions are used to talk about burial (*olili* or *ili mmadu*) particularly to lessen the effects of the loss on the mourner. The use of euphemistic expression is also related to the belief of the Igbo about death and burial. The Igbo reinforces this belief by using euphemistic expressions that convey the message or belief. This belief is that death is a necessary condition for reincarnation, and that burial is a form of passage from human to spirit world hence, it is not believed that when a person is buried, he/she is gone for good but has transcended to the spirit world. It is believed that people are transfigured in preparation for reincarnation hence, the body

or remains is not seen to be buried. It is only a means of adding to their transfiguration. This belief, among other reason, may inform the use of alternative means to refer to the committal

of their remains to mother earth such as *ị kwanye ugwu* 'to honour', *ị gafe* 'to transcend', or *ị dezi* 'to prepare for something'.

The same applies to ghost (*mmụọ*) which in some Igbo communities like Owerri and Nkanu is not mentioned at night particularly by children and women. It is believed that mere mention of the word could be an indirect summon to the spirits, and this is abhorred. In place of the word, expressions like *ndi ọzọ*, *onye/ndi mba* 'other people/aliens' are used.

In place of these terms, some euphemistic expressions are used such as *Ebe mmụọ*, *ubom*, *ama mmụọ* for 'shrine', *Ndị ofe*, *onye ụwa* for deity, *Nkwanye*, *ihe mmụọ*, *I zi mmụọ ozi* for 'spiritual rites', *Nkpanaaka*, *ebube*, *ihe ike* for 'symbols of spiritual forces like 'ọfọ/ogu', and *Nwa gbara mkpi*, *abụọ abụọ* for 'twins'. The traditional Igbo associate procreation to the spiritual forces whose favorable disposition to a person may result in giving birth to twins. This belief varies across communities leading to twins being abhorred in such communities.

Another aspect of mysterious phenomenon which has varied euphemistic expressions is the name of river or stream among the Igbo. Some spiritual forces especially the goddess or water spirit is believed to possess most rivers and streams. They are seen as natural habitat of such spiritual forces. Mentioning the names of some rivers and streams in many Igbo communities like Uzuakoli is taboo, and in place of these taboo terms, some euphemistic as well as eulogizing names like *nwa mma* (beautify girl/baby), *onye oma* (good person) for some streams or rivers are used. The use of feminine gender for river or streams is related to the broader belief that water spirits are predominantly females, and goddesses. Also, in Awka for example, both men & women cannot mention the name of their local stream in the night. Similarly, an informant reported that sacred streams are not called by their names while in the stream for example *Iyi Nvuvu* is called *Nwa Ngele ka Imo* in Uzuakoli (Ehizu, 2023, oral interview).

These mysterious phenomenon as taboo could also be explained in the light of the Igbo traditional religion. The Igbo is traditionally religious, and they don't hide this fact. They believe that some social and supernatural powers are efficacious and in control of their existence, survival and prosperity (Onukawa, 2016). According to Ugonna (1984) cited in Onukawa (2016), "the Igbo religion has its main principle the monistic belief in spirits. Everything is reducible to spirit namely pure spirits, that is, spirits that have existed in the spirit world long before man was created and have never lived on earth as humans, and human spirits, that is spirit of dead human beings". It is further held that there is a covenant between all categories of spirits on the one hand and all human beings on the other, to the effect that spirits would protect and help humans while humans honor and offer prayers and gifts to the spirits. This manifests in different kinds of festivals, traditional activities and customs across Igbo communities. In

addition, the Igbo religion recognizes the importance and role of spiritual forces and these are considered highly sacrosanct.

The firm belief of the Igbo in the potency and powers of the spiritual forces and spirits which is the foundation of its religion is expressed in a number of ways including naming, (Ubahakwe, 1981, Onukawa, 2016), as well as reverence and sanctity accorded to items/objects associated with them as well as spiritual/supernatural events/entities (Agu, 2000). This reverence and sanctity could be manifested in some restrictions on the use of some words or expressions or even activities related to or deemed to depict the foundation of the Igbo religion. The prohibition is outrightly taboo or simply restricted across communities and may relate to certain statuses such as gender (male vs female) as well as initiates/insider vs non initiates/outsider disparities.

6. Summary and conclusion

This study set out to examine verbal taboos associated with traditional institutions and mysterious phenomena among the Igbo. It identified that some prohibitions relating to words, and expressions associated with traditional institutions such as *Okonko* and *Ekpe* societies. These are institutions shrouded in secrecy, and this may relate to some bans or prohibitions regarding using some words and expressions. It was revealed that the Igbo deploy euphemistic expressions as alternatives to the verbal taboos associated with the traditional institutions.

In addition, the study highlighted some mysterious phenomena such as death, snake, shrine, and others, and identified some verbal taboos associated with them. Euphemisms, proverbs and idioms are deployed as alternatives to the mysterious phenomena. For example, some euphemistic expressions, proverbs and idioms are used in the place of the word death to ameliorate the effect on people. Also, snake, shrines and other items that have cultural relevance and significance are indirectly made reference to using euphemisms and proverbs both to avoid the ban associated with their use, and in deference to the respect associated with such items or entities as objects of cultural significance. The study concludes that Igbo traditional institutions and mysterious phenomena represent a rich aspect of verbal taboos, and they differ in many cultures and represent critical aspects of the philosophy, thought and belief of the people. Taboos are not arbitrarily conceived but are representations of social norms, and values.

References

- Alia, L. (2016). Taboo: Origin and dimensions in Igbo. *Development Studies*, 3, 89-123
- Ezeigbo, G. (1990). Prohibitive practices in Igbo. *Journal of African Studies*, 3, 4-17

Fakuade, G. & Kemdirim, N. & Nnaji, I. & Nwosu, F. (2018). Linguistic taboos in the Igbo society: A sociolinguistic investigation. *Journal of Language, Discourse & Society* 2(2). 117–132.

Ferb, N. (1994). Culture: A historical explication. *Introductory notes*, 2, 8-21

Jespersen, O. (1992). *Language, its nature, development and origin*. London: Allen & Unwin

Leech, U. (1964). *African women: A study of the Igbo of Nigeria*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul

Nwagbo, O.G. (2021). Sexual taboos and euphemisms in Igbo: An anthropolinguistic appraisal. *Language in Africa* 2(3), 2021, 112–148. doi: 10.37892/2686-8946-2021-2-3-112-148

Nwaobodo, E.E.R (2021). A dialogic of taboo in traditional Igbo society and the 21st century mentality. *Trinitarian International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(2), 45-65

Omego, C. U. (2013). Sex variation in taboo expressions in Igbo speech community. *Journal of Igbo Language and Linguistics* 7. 75–86.

Onukawa, E.N. (2018). On abomination, Nemesis and Ominous in Igbo: A squib. *Ebonyi Journal of language and literary studies*, 3, pp34-56.

Onukawa, M.C (2016). *Gịnị bụ aha gị? Topical issues on naming in traditional Igbo society*. 24th Inaugural lecture, Abia State University, Uturu. Uturu: Abia State University Press.

Onwukwe, D.C (2020). Anthroponomastics of concubinage in Ngwa Igbo traditional society of Nigeria. *Nomina Africana: Journal of Name society of Southern Africa*. 34(1), 33-43.

Oyeka, C. N. (2015). Euphemisms as substitutes for verbal taboos in Igbo language dynamics. *Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies* 7(1). 117–138.

Ubahakwe, E. (1981). *Igbo names: Their structure and meaning*. Ibadan: Daystar

Wardhaugh, R. (2000). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.



Book Review: *TRADITIONS OF IGBO ORIGIN: A Study of Pre-Colonial Population Movements in Africa*

Title: *Traditions of Igbo Origin: A Study of Pre-Colonial Population Movements in Africa*

Author: John Nwachimereze Oriji

Publisher: Evans Brothers

Place of Publication: Ibadan

Date of Publication: 2006

Volume: Thirteen Chapters, spread across 212 pages

Reviewer: *Samuel N. Agu sam.agu@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng 08036779112

**Samuel N. Agu Ph.D is a Professor in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria*

Introduction:

Traditions of Igbo Origin: A Study of Pre-Colonial Population Movements in Africa by Professor Emeritus John Nwachimereze Oriji presents a comprehensive historical account of the origins and migrations of the Igbo people of Nigeria. Utilizing a variety of primary and secondary sources, Oriji meticulously analyzes and synthesizes different accounts of Igbo origin. Although the book is not exhaustive, it offers crucial insights into Igbo, African, and global population movements. It stands as one of the pioneering efforts in documenting the Igbo's historical journey.

Critical Analysis:

Oriji's work is well-structured, with 13 chapters spanning 212 pages. The book includes a comprehensive bibliography and index. The opening chapters provide an overview of the Igbo, their origins, settlements, and migrations, addressing controversies surrounding the etymology of "Igbo." Oriji asserts that the Igbo people recognized themselves as such before European contact, evidenced by legendary traditions and community names like Igbo-Ukwu and Ama-Igbo.

Chapters 3 through 12 track various migrations and expansions of Igbo sub-groups across different regions. The final chapter encapsulates the book as an expository analysis of major pre-colonial population movements in Africa. Oriji asserts that Igbo origins date back to the commencement of human habitation in West Africa, about a million years ago, attributing Igbo movement and expansion to various ecological, environmental, agricultural, social, economic, and political factors.

As a standard text, *Traditions of Igbo Origin* has a title page (p. i), dedication page (p. iii), table of contents (p. iv), a detailed and well-referenced endnote at the end of each chapter. In addition, it has standard bibliographical listing of abbreviations, intelligent reports, books, articles, dissertations, theses and monographs (pp. 187 – 200). It equally has a detailed and well-arranged index of maps and figures (p. v), as well as a chronological index of names, places, villages, communities, towns and subjects (pp. 201 – 212).

Surprisingly, the book does not have any acknowledgement page. This is not to say that the author did not acknowledge anyone in the book. The curious thing here is that our revered author, Emeritus Professor Oriji, ingeniously sandwiched his acknowledgements in the Preface to the Second Edition. Again, one had expected to see the Preface to the First Edition included here, and precedent to that of the second edition, but it is not. Could it be for reasons of brevity?

A few minor errors which are, most probably, typographical could also be seen on p.7, line 4; p. 9, paragraph 2, line 3; p. 15, lines 4 and 7; p. 45, paragraph 3, line 3; p. 46, line 4; p. 67, paragraph 2, line 4; p. 69, paragraph 3, line 2; p. 95, paragraph 4, line 4; p. 116, para. 3, lines 2

and 8; p. 153, para. 3, line 7; p. 159, para 2, line 5; p. 163, line 5; p. 164, para 2, line 3; p. 172, para 3, line 6; p. 175, para 3, line 2; p. 180, line 9; p. 183, para 2, line 14; p. 184, para 2, line 9; etc.

However, these typographical errors are minor. Hence, they pale into insignificance given the rich ideas, sound logic and fascinating discoveries contained in this book.

While Oriji's assertions are robust, it is crucial to critically appraise his contentions using the views of other scholars in the field, such as Professor Adiele Afigbo, Elizabeth Isichei, Dmitri van den Bersselaar, and G.T. Basden.

Adiele Afigbo's Perspective:

Professor Adiele Afigbo, a prominent historian, critically examines the migration theory of Igbo origin and supports the autochthonous theory, aligning with Oriji. Afigbo uses archaeological, linguistic, and ethnographic evidence to argue that the Igbo are indigenous to their current region in West Africa, dating back to prehistoric times. Sites like Igbo-Ukwu provide significant insights into early Igbo civilization, revealing a sophisticated society with advanced metallurgy and extensive trade networks. This view supports Oriji's contention that the Igbo have a long-standing presence in their current region, reinforcing the autochthonous theory.

Elizabeth Isichei's Perspective:

Elizabeth Isichei offers a more nuanced view, synthesizing archaeological, linguistic, and oral evidence to suggest that Igbo origins are likely a mix of indigenous development and interactions with neighboring cultures. Unlike Oriji, who leans towards an autochthonous narrative, Isichei's hybrid approach recognizes the limitations and potential biases of a single-origin theory. Her perspective encourages a broader understanding of Igbo history, acknowledging the complexities of cultural and population interactions over time.

Dmitri van den Bersselaar's Perspective:

Dmitri van den Bersselaar agrees with Isichei's hybrid approach, emphasizing the interplay between ethnic identity, historical events, colonial and post-colonial influences, and internal and external interactions. Van den Bersselaar's view challenges Oriji's focus on an autochthonous origin by highlighting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of Igbo history. He traces the Igbo's

origins to a blend of language, culture, and politics, suggesting that their history cannot be confined to a single theory of origin.

G.T. Basden's Perspective:

G.T. Basden subscribes to the migration theory, positing that the Igbo might have migrated from the north or northeast. Basden's view contrasts sharply with Oriji's autochthonous theory, suggesting that many African ethnic groups, including the Igbo, had origins in central and northern regions of the continent. Basden bases his argument on linguistic similarities and cultural practices, which he believes indicate a common origin with other groups around the Niger-Benue confluence. This perspective provides a counterpoint to Oriji's contention, advocating for a migration narrative.

Conclusion:

While *Traditions of Igbo Origin* provides a detailed and significant account of Igbo history, it is essential to critically engage with the diverse perspectives offered by scholars like Afigbo, Isichei, van den Bersselaar, and Basden. Oriji's autochthonous theory is compelling, supported by archaeological and linguistic evidence, but it is equally important to consider the hybrid and migration theories that acknowledge the complex and multifaceted nature of Igbo origins. This comprehensive approach enriches our understanding of Igbo history, recognizing the intricate interplay of indigenous development, migration, and cultural interactions over time.

Emeritus Professor John Nwachimereze Oriji deserves commendation for his invaluable contribution to Igbo, Nigerian, and global historical scholarship. *Traditions of Igbo Origin* is an indispensable compendium for anyone interested in the historical, social, economic, and cultural journey of the Igbo people.

References

Afigbo, Adiele E. *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1981.

----- *The Igbo and Their Neighbours: Inter-Group Relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953*. Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1987.

-----, *Igbo History and Society: The Essays of Adiele Afigbo*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005.

-----, "The Igbo and Their Neighbours: Intergroup Relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953." In *Nigeria Magazine*, no. 122, Lagos: Department of Culture, Federal Ministry of Information, 1977.

-----, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Culture History of the Igbo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria." In *Igbo Language and Culture*, edited by F.C. Ogbalu and E.N. Emenanjo, Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1975.

Basden, G. T. *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*. Seeley, Service & Co.; <https://archive.org/details/amongibosnigeria00basd>; Basden, G. T. (1938). *Niger Ibos*. Frank Cass & Co. 1921.

Isichei, Elizabeth. *A History of the Igbo People*. London: Macmillan Press, 1976.

Van den Bersselaar, Dmitri. *In Search of Igbo Identity: Language, Culture, and Politics in Nigeria*. Leiden: Brill, 2009.