Traditional Cultural Dance as a Purveyor of Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding: A Study of Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu Clan, Rivers State.

By

Godspower J. Irikana
Department of Sociology
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt.

&
Ogwu Beatrice Ihuoma
Department of Sociology
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt.

Abstract

This study examines the enduring significance of Eri Nde Riya Eli in promoting social cohesion and peacebuilding despite the current context of modernity, urbanization, and Christianity in Rukpokwu Clan, Obio Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. Through a qualitative research approach, 21 key informant interviews were conducted, involving purposively selected participants such as male community members, married women dancers, royal family members, and community chiefs among others. The study delves into the multi-faceted aspects of the dance's three stages: pre-festival rehearsals, the dance festival, and the post-dance festival, and their roles in fostering unity, conflict resolution, community cohesion and by extension peacebuilding. Findings reveal that the dance practice transcends age and social affiliations, unifying married women across generations. Amid modern influences, the practice has evolved its dynamics while preserving its cultural essence. Above all, the married women cultural dance known as Eri Nde Riya Eli in the traditional dialect of the Rukpokwu people provides enabling conditions and environment for unity as well as peacebuilding amongst families, communities and hence villages. Challenges stemming from misconceptions and urbanization were identified, leading to recommendations for cultural education campaigns, modern platforms for coordination, and adaptability in rehearsal practices. Furthermore, the study highlights the need to empower women leaders within the community to ensure the dance's

sustainability. The research underscores the pivotal role of Eri Nde Riya Eli Rukpokwu in bridging traditional heritage and contemporary challenges. Through the voices of key informants, the study sheds light on how the dance remains a potent tool for promoting peace and understanding, even in the face of changing societal landscapes.

Keywords: *Married Women, Cultural Dance, Peacebuilding, Modernity, Christianity, Rukpokwu Clan.*

Introduction

Human beings are intricately linked to their culture, with culture encompassing the complete array of thoughts and actions through which a community shapes and reshapes its identity, commemorates its existence, progresses, and introduces itself to history and the world (Karenga, 2019). Culture not only offers the substance and backdrop for interpersonal connections but also stands as a crucial foundation for human survival and the ongoing presence of a society, steering the behaviours within a specific community (Otite & Ogionwo, 2006).

The diverse cultural expressions of societies span from the realms of music and language to culinary traditions. Amidst these variations, the traditional communities in Nigeria share a common thread in their preference for festivals as pivotal occasions, often marked by celebrity dances. Despite the unique nature of each culture's festivals, all segments of Nigerian society exhibit their distinct festivals accompanied by their own characteristic dance forms.

Festivals in Nigeria, frequently accompanied by dances, are a fusion of ritualistic, ceremonial, artistic, and leisurely pursuits, orchestrated at different locations as stipulated by a predefined timetable (Nketia, 2018). These festivals constitute periodic or occasional festivities, rejoicing, or momentous days of significance within the cultural timeline of the participants (Amankulor, 2015). A recurrent presence in the traditional African way of life, festivals find their roots in the cultural and religious customs of the people, revolving around natural forces, deities, supernatural occurrences, myths, and legends (Anigala, 2016). Notably, dance serves as an age-old art form deeply entrenched in Africa's heritage, intricately interwoven with various facets of cultural traditions and festive

occasions. Traditional dances, as described by Akomeah, Asante and Arthur (2019), derive their prominence and value primarily from the cultural heritage they are linked to, thereby becoming a portrayal of the values and identity upheld by the performing community. Among the Rukpokwu people in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria, an assortment of traditional dances has existed in the past, with that of Eri Nde Riya Eli (married women cultural dance) being particularly noteworthy.

However, in an era marked by rapid urbanization, technological advancement, and the pervasive influence of modernity, the rich tapestry of traditional cultural practices often finds itself threatened by the currents of change (Akomeah et. al., 2019). The vibrant traditions that once formed the bedrock of community identity and unity are gradually eroding, leaving voids in the social fabric of societies across the world. Rukpokwu, a picturesque clan nestled in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria, has not been immune to this phenomenon. However, amid the encroaching tides of change, a remarkable resurgence of a cultural practice has taken root, orchestrated by the royal family in a bid to rekindle the flames of unity and harmony.

For generations, Eri Nde Riya Eli had been a revered tradition in Rukpokwu Clan, embodying not only artistic expression but also a profound sense of togetherness among the community members. Yet, the relentless march of urbanization and the allure of modernity had chipped away at the foundation of this cultural pillar, causing its significance to wane. This clearly suggests the fragility of traditional cultural values amidst the ravaging presence of modernity driven largely by western education, Christianity and most recently the one-culture drive associated with the social media (Makinde, 2021). Hence, as younger generations embraced the allure of contemporary lifestyles, the threads binding the community together continues to grow fragile, giving rise to concerns about the disintegration of age-old bonds and traditional values.

In response to this disheartening trajectory, the organizers of Eri Nde Riya Eli took a bold step ◎ to resurrect the fading tradition of Eri Nde Riya Eli. Recognizing the potential of this cultural practice to foster social cohesion and catalyze peacebuilding efforts, the organizers became torchbearers of a movement aimed

at uniting their community under the banner of shared heritage. Their efforts were rooted in the belief that by revitalizing this cultural gem, they could reignite a sense of pride and belonging among the people, transcending generational divides and reestablishing the interconnectedness that had defined Rukpokwu clan for centuries prior to colonial incursion and by extension the menacing hands of modernity.

This endeavor was not without challenges. The rapid shifts brought about by urbanization had altered the landscape of the community, influencing the aspirations and priorities of its inhabitants. However, the dedication of the organizers of Eri Nde Riya Eli and the resilience of the community members became the driving force behind the revival of social cohesion and peacebuilding amongst the people. Through meticulous collaboration, and a commitment to preserving their heritage, the community embarked on a journey to reclaim their cultural identity. One way to do this is through the married women cultural dance known as Eri Nde Riya Eli, which today constitutes a source of social cohesion and by extension peacebuilding for the people of Rukpokwu clan in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The rich cultural landscape of communities across the world is woven with traditions and practices that have long served as a foundation for social cohesion and unity. However, the relentless march of urbanization, modernization, and external influences has threatened the very fabric of these age-old customs. Within this context, Rukpokwu clan in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria, has experienced a significant erosion of its traditional cultural values, particularly manifested in the fading practice of Eri Nde Riya Eli. Despite the importance of cultural practices in fostering community spirit, unity, and peaceful coexistence, Rukpokwu's once-vibrant tradition faces the risk of fading into oblivion due to the allure of modernity.

The works of scholars such as Anigala (2016), Akomeah et al. (2019), and Makinde (2021) have highlighted the multifaceted challenges posed by urbanization, modernization, and the spread of foreign influences on traditional cultural practices. Anigala's study showcased the erosion of traditional dance in the eastern

region, underscoring the overarching threat posed by modernization. Akomeah et al.'s research emphasized the pivotal role of culture and festivals in uniting communities and nurturing a shared sense of identity and belonging. Meanwhile, Makinde's study shed light on the influence of modernity, particularly Christianity, in eroding the cultural values that have long defined Nigerian communities.

Despite these insightful contributions to the discourse surrounding the erosion of traditional cultural values, there remains a critical gap in the literature: an in-depth examination of how the revival of specific cultural practices can serve as a conduit for restoring social cohesion and promoting peace within a community. Rukpokwu's endeavour to resurrect Eri Nde Riya Eli presents a unique and compelling case study that warrants scholarly attention.

In other words, the study examines the revival of Eri Nde Riya Eli as a tool for bringing about social cohesion and peacebuilding in Rukpokwu clan in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. By focusing on this specific context and cultural practice, the study aims to contribute significantly to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical insights into the potential of cultural revitalization as a strategy for enhancing social unity and peaceful coexistence. Essentially, the study provides answers to the following questions:

i. How has urbanization and modernity impacted the practice of Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu clan in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria?
ii. What role does the revival of Eri Nde Riya Eli play in fostering social cohesion and promoting peaceful coexistence within the communities/ villages of Rukpokwu clan?
iii. In what way has the revival of Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu clan presented a viable framework for peacebuilding, considering the challenges posed by modernity and the changing cultural landscape?

It is within the foregoing context that this study was undertaken.

Material and Methods

The study was conducted in Rukpokwu clan which belongs to the Ikwerre speaking people located in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. It employs the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) design. The population

of the study is the entire married women and men in Rukpokwu clan that comprises three major villages (Rumuapu, Eledo and Elikpokuodu) and they are made of up different closely knitted communities. However, it targeted participants and none participants in Eri Nde Riya Eli (including their husbands) to have a balanced view of the impact of the dance on community cohesion and peacebuilding. The study adopted the data saturation technique and stopped at 21 interview participants as its saturation point. This number therefore constituted the sample size for the study. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) formed the basic source of primary data collection. Participants where targeted purposively with the selection of key informants from the royal family, community leaders, cultural custodians, and individuals actively involved in Eri Nde Riya Eli as elite samples. The interviews were conducted using semi-structured guides, allowing participants to share their perspectives on the motivations, challenges, and outcomes of the cultural dance. Case-studies were applied to the interview transcripts, involving a systematic process of coding and categorization to identify recurring cases related to the role of Eri Nde Riya Eli in fostering social cohesion and promoting peace within the community.

Theoretical Underpinning

The study anchors its analysis on the cultural resilience theory advanced by scholars like Julian Steward, Roy Rappaport, and Ester Boserup (Halidu, 2018). This theory emphasizes the dynamic interplay between cultures and their environments, focusing on how societies adapt to ecological challenges while upholding their cultural identity. At its core, Cultural Resilience Theory assumes that cultures are not fixed entities but rather dynamic systems that interact with their environment, societies have the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, whether ecological, economic, or social, ensuring their survival. The theory also highlights the existence of feedback loops between culture and environment, wherein changes in one sphere influence adaptations in the other. Sustainable practices that prevent resource depletion and ecological degradation are integral to cultural resilience.

The theory suggests that cultures are not static entities but rather adaptable systems that respond to changing circumstances. By examining how the community has revitalized Eri Nde Riya Eli, one can explore how this revival

represents an adaptive response to the challenges posed by urbanization and modernity. The study considered how modifications to the dance tradition have been made to ensure its relevance and resonance in the changing cultural landscape. Furthermore, Cultural Resilience Theory emphasizes the resilience of cultures in the face of external pressures. Hence, its focus is on how communities demonstrate resilience against the erosion of cultural values caused by modern influences and how they navigate the tension between tradition and change, showcasing their determination to uphold their cultural heritage.

The theory's focus on sustainable practices is also pertinent to our study, especially as it will help to illuminate how Eri Nde Riya Eli takes into account the long-term viability of the practice as a basis for its resuscitation and how the community's reviving Eri Nde Riya Eli is a reflection of the need for integration of traditional elements as well as the people◎s way of promoting peaceful coexistence. As a result, the Cultural Resilience Theory provides a framework to examine how the revival of Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu clan reflects the community's adaptability, resilience, and commitment to preserving cultural identity. By understanding how the community responds to the challenges posed by urbanization and modernity while reviving their cultural practices, as well as show the dynamic interplay between culture and environment in fostering resilience and continuity.

Overview of Modernization and Cultural Heritage of Some Nigerian People

This segment of the study examines key studies that have addressed the erosion of traditional cultural values, the unifying aspects of culture and festivals, and the impact of modernity on cultural heritage in various regions of Nigeria. These works provide essential insights into the context of the current study on Eri Nde Riya Eli, social cohesion and peacebuilding in Rukpokwu clan in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State, Nigeria.

The first of these studies is the one conducted by Anigala (2016) which revealed a significant erosion of traditional dances in the eastern region of Nigeria due to the influence of urbanization and modernization. This study underscores the relevance of understanding how cultural practices are impacted by external factors and how they contribute to the decline of cherished traditions. Similarly, Akomeah

et al. (2019) demonstrated the unifying power of culture and festivals in their research. They emphasized that such events serve as sources of community spirit and cohesion. This finding is crucial for the current study as it suggests that cultural practices, like Eri Nde Riya Eli, have the potential of fostering unity and peace among community members.

Furthermore, Makinde's (2021) study sheds light on the role of modernity, and by extension Christianity, in eroding the cultural values of Nigerians. In the same vein, the study by Halidu (2018) investigated the loss of cultural heritages due to urbanization in northern Nigeria. It provides a broader context for understanding the challenges faced by traditional practices in different regions of the country. It also highlights the need to explore how cultural resilience can be maintained amidst urban development. Olakunle (2019) and Fajola (2020) focused on the western part of Nigeria, examining the impact of traditional cultural rituals on conflict resolution and how festivals unite community members, respectively. These studies underscore the multifaceted roles cultural practices play in maintaining harmony and unity within communities.

Ekpenyong, Raimi and Wabah (2011) focused on traditional cultural knowledge in Rivers State through qualitative research involving 18 key informants. The study highlighted how modernization has contributed to the loss of viable cultural practices, with implications for community sustainability. Again, its findings offer insight into the potential consequences of failing to safeguard cultural heritage, emphasizing the need for initiatives that preserve cultural practices in the interest of the community well-being. In a study conducted by Akubor (2018) in Kogi State, Nigeria, on exploring the connection between urban space expansion and the loss of traditional cultural heritage, the survey made use of 1,340 participants. Its finding revealed a substantial negative impact of urbanization on cultural conservation. The study◎s finding is an addition to the notion that urbanization can erode cultural practices and heritage, emphasizing the urgency of cultural preservation. In another breath, Wuyep (2021) investigated over 52 cultural practices among the people of Plateau State, and found out that there is the extinction of a significant number of cultural practices, indicating the vulnerability of cultural heritage to the forces of change. Again, as in other studies, its finding underscores the importance of addressing cultural erosion through revival efforts,

similar to the initiative undertaken in Rukpokwu clan which is the focus of the current study.

In all, these studies attempt to provide a comprehensive perspective on the challenges posed by urbanization and modernization to traditional cultural practices and heritage. They highlight the negative impacts of urban expansion on cultural conservation, the loss of valuable cultural practices due to modern influences, and the potential extinction of cultural practices if not actively preserved. In the context of the current study, these findings resonate strongly. The foregoing experiences documented mirror the potential challenges faced by Rukpokwu clan in their efforts to revive Eri Nde Riya Eli. They underscore the importance of such revival initiatives as a means to counteract the negative effects of urbanization and modernization, safeguard cultural heritage, and promote community sustainability through the preservation of cultural practices.

Modernization, Eri Nde Riya Eli and Social Cohesion and Peacebuilding

Case I: *Impact of Urbanization / Modernity on Eri Nde Riya Eli Rukpokwu*

The purpose of this key informant interviews was to explore the impact of urbanization and modernity on Eri Nde Riya Eli Rukpokwu. Rukpokwu clan located in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, has a rich cultural heritage that includes various traditional dances. However, with the influence of urbanization and modern lifestyle changes, these cultural practices have started to undergo huge transformations. The key informants interviewed for this report have deep insights into the local culture and the participants are respected members of the clan. The interviewees who are mostly between the ages of 50 and 75 years old are all members of the Rukpokwu clan either by birth or marriage. They have been actively involved in preserving and promoting local cultural practices, including traditional dances. With a deep understanding of the clan's history and cultural changes, they were selected as key informants to provide valuable insights into the study◎s subject matter. One of the key informants noted that:

> *Traditional dances hold immense cultural significance for Rukpokwu people. These dances have been passed down through generations and are often performed during important events such as festivals, weddings, and other community gatherings. They are seen as a way to connect with*

> *ancestors, express collective identity, and transmit cultural values to younger generations (Female KII Participant/Aged 68 years).*

Beyond the above, participants believe that cultural dances in Rukpokwu clan rest on **c**hains of friendship and relationship that rests on socio-economic status, family lineages and community lines. The dances are mostly done for leisure but organized around some cultural norms. A good number of these dances are done at the end of the year and during festive seasons. The structure of the dance depends largely on the group involved which may be a mixture of males and females or distinctively male or female based. Some are professional organizations while others are done according to how women are married into the clan. In the view of one of the informants:

> *Urbanization has brought about significant changes in the clan's way of life. As the clan becomes more connected to the outside world, there has been a shift in priorities and lifestyles. Younger generations are increasingly exposed to modern influences through media, education, and interaction with neighbouring urban areas. This exposure has led to a gradual decline in interest and participation in traditional cultural dances (Female KII Participant/Aged 60 years).*

Quite a good number of the interview participants noted several challenges that have contributed to the decline of cultural dances. The fast-paced urban lifestyle often leaves little time for community gatherings and cultural activities. This perhaps explains why The Tide (2010) reported the extinction of the Iregbu Dance of Rukpokwu Clan which has been a centre of attraction and unity for the entire Ikwerre ethnic group of Rivers State. Additionally, the perception among the youth that traditional dances are "old-fashioned" or "backward" (or even fetish, especially for those who are Christians) compared to modern forms of entertainment has affected their enthusiasm to learn and perform these dances. Despite the challenges, the Rukpokwu clan, including individuals like the key informants have been making efforts to revive and preserve their cultural dances. This is perhaps why the resuscitated Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu clan was hitherto jettisoned.

Case II: *Eri Nde Riya Eli, Social Cohesion and Peaceful Coexistence in Rukpokwu Clan*

The key informant interviews under case 2 provided valuable insights into the Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu clan and its relationship with peacebuilding within the clan despite the incursion of modernity. The dance is not only a traditional practice but also a means of fostering unity and social cohesion among married women who are members of the married women's community meetings. The dance is organized into three distinct stages: pre-festival rehearsals, dance festival, and post-dancing festival. Informants noted that the dance presents an avenue for the clan to have social decorum because it creates conditions for peaceful coexistence. One of the interview participants noted that:

> *Participation in the cultural dance is not limited by age or social club membership, but rather open to all married women who are also registered members of their various communities'/village meetings. This approach promotes inclusivity and ensures that the dance serves as a unifying factor across various age groups and social strata within the clan. This practice reinforces a sense of shared identity and belonging among the women dances (Female KII Participant/Aged 55 years).*

According to some of the participants, the Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu festival is structured into three different stages which are the pre-festival rehearsals; the dance festival proper; and the post-dance festival. Each of these phases is believed to have its own unique way of contributing to peacebuilding in the clan. For instance, the interviewees noted that the significance of the pre-festival rehearsals, lies in its intensive rehearsals lasting for four to five months in a communal space that is a little bit hidden. The choice of a central communal space for rehearsals reflects the communal ownership and engagement with the dance practice. These spaces provide a neutral ground for women from various backgrounds to gather, rehearse, and bond. Prior to modernity, the rehearsals were conducted at night (7pm to 11pm), adding an element of secrecy to the practice as this conceals the dance-steps of the women until the real public display during the festival itself.

Furthermore, the insights shared during the key informant interviews reveal a deep connection between the pre-festival rehearsals of Eri Nde Riya Eli Rukpokwu

and the promotion of peacebuilding and community cohesion. This discussion highlights the significance of this stage and its impact on social dynamics within the clan: The fact that the pre-festival rehearsals are open to all married women who are registered members of the married women's community meetings emphasizes inclusivity. Regardless of age or social club membership, this practice encourages a sense of unity among diverse women in the clan. This inclusivity acts as a bridge between different generations and social strata, fostering a shared sense of purpose and identity. Similarly, it creates opportunities for cultural bonding and unity of purpose which further enables peaceful coexistence. In addition, some of the participants argue that the use of cultural attires like George, Blouses and beautifying/designing the surface of the body using Odo, Oro, Ihie, Ezizi-eli, Edeli, Palm Oil, Indigo Ihe, Ink, etc., Native Gold and Coral Beads on the neck, hands and ears, enhances the cultural significance of the dance. Adorning themselves with these symbols not only connects the women to their heritage but also creates a visual representation of their collective identity. This reinforces the idea that the dance is a means of celebrating cultural roots while fostering social bonds. In fact, one of the interviewees noted thus:

> *One of the most interesting aspects of the role of the pre-festival rehearsals in peacebuilding is that during this period, no community is allowed to engage in conflict or anti-peace activities. This prohibition is remarkable as it demonstrates how the cultural dance becomes a unifying factor that transcends historical divisions. The dance preparations serve as a reference for conflict resolution, with the youth mediating conflicts and curbing any anti-peace activities (Male KII Participant/Aged 70 years).*

The example of how different villages within Rukpokwu clan come together to pursue peace during the rehearsals period is noteworthy. Instances such as combating robbery or external threats shows how the cultural dance unites these communities in times of crisis. This collective effort to maintain security and protect their community indicates a strong bond formed through the practice of the dance. It is in the light of this, one participant had this to say;

> *The fact that the youths in the community serve as night watchmen during the pre-festival rehearsals highlights their active role in safeguarding the*

> *peace and security of the community. This responsibility stems from the understanding that their mothers, sisters, aunties, wives and community members are engaged in the dance preparations. The dance rehearsals indirectly encourage the youth to be vigilant and committed to maintaining a peaceful environment (Female KII Participant/Aged 73 years).*

Similarly, during the second phase which is the dance festival itself holds special importance within the clan. It serves as a culmination of the efforts put into rehearsals and a celebration of cultural heritage. The act of coming together to perform the dance promotes a strong sense of camaraderie and shared purpose among the participants and further strengthens the connection to their cultural roots. The dance's role in peacebuilding and social cohesion is evident. By providing a platform for women of different backgrounds to come together, the dance fosters a sense of unity and understanding. The shared experience of preparing and performing the dance creates strong bonds, which can contribute to conflict resolution, mutual support, and overall community harmony. Hence, the festival stage marks a crucial point in Eri Nde Riya Eli Rukpokwu, characterized by the participants donning agreed-upon beautiful attires. Notably, this period holds a unique power in resolving family conflicts. One interviewee had this to say:

> *During the festival, men tend to support their wives, seeking to avoid being perceived as "bad men" within the clan. To uphold their reputation and not appear negatively in the eyes of the people within and outside the clan, men often make efforts to buy exquisite jewelries for their wives and provide them with funds for entertainment. Marital and family disputes are often settled during this time to avoid public perception of disharmony between couples (Male KII Participant/Aged 59 years).*

Additionally, some of the participants shared the view that the festival's atmosphere creates an environment where families invite friends, including those from different communities. This practice fosters a network of appreciation, with gifts exchanged among attendees. Even when there are existing tensions or conflicts between different communities, the festival acts as a unifying force. It

transcends historical differences and promotes harmonious coexistence. This network of appreciation and gift exchange becomes a foundation for peaceful relations and resolution of ongoing conflicts. This period of celebration has a transformative effect on households, fostering unity within families and between families and communities. It becomes an opportunity for women to approach their husbands and request the resolution of existing conflicts, particularly those with neighbouring communities that impact pathways to their farmlands.

Interestingly, the post-dancing festival stage which marks the aftermath of the dance performance, also presents opportunities for peaceful coexistence. This stage provides an opportunity for reflection and continued bonding among the participants. It's a time to share experiences, stories, and memories from the festival, further solidifying the social connections established through the dance. Some of the participants point out that after the main festival, the women come together once again to express gratitude in a designated church, and they also extend invitations to their friends. This gathering creates another networking opportunity among the women, strengthening social ties and promoting peace. An interviewee noted thus:

> *During this phase, a decision is made collectively to utilize some of the funds generated from the dance for future entertainment. The women agree to organize a gathering where they can celebrate and socialize together. This decision reflects another aspect of how the dance festival contributes to peaceful coexistence in the community. The notion that some of the funds will be used to bring people together in a joyful setting emphasizes unity and collaboration (Female KII Participant/Aged 65 years).*

One of the core norms of the women's dance group plays a significant role in fostering peaceful coexistence during this phase. Regardless of any existing conflicts between members and attendees, the norm dictates that everyone shares in the merriment, including eating and drinking together. This practice has a remarkable effect on diffusing tense situations and facilitating a sense of reconciliation. The act of sharing food and drinks creates an atmosphere of camaraderie and warmth, which in turn contributes to promoting peace among

those who might have been at odds. In essence, the post-dance festival of Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu serves as an additional platform for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The gathering after the festival, combined with the decision to use some of the funds for future joyful events, reinforces the sense of unity and common purpose among the women. The foundational norm of sharing in the merriment further consolidates the peacebuilding process by encouraging reconciliation and understanding, ultimately contributing to sustainable peace within the clan.

Case III: *Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu and Sustainable Peacebuilding Amidst Modernity*

Although case 3 comes close to case 2 discussed above, they are nevertheless different because of the emphasis on sustainable peace-building despite proliferation of modernity. According to the participants, Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu plays a crucial role in promoting sustainable peacebuilding within the community, especially in the context of modernity. Despite the changing times, the dance practice remains a powerful instrument for fostering unity, understanding, and conflict resolution. One of the interviewees noted that:

> Despite the adverse effects that modernity has had on our people, reviving our cultural dance shows that we can managed to adapt and thrive in the face of modern influences. The dance is a huge dynamic force that continues to promote peace and social cohesion as long as we remain steadfast in doing it. While the stages of the dance have evolved, the underlying principles that drive unity remain strong and this can promote sustainable peace in Rukpokwu clan" *(Female KII Participant/Aged 57 years)*.

In this era of modernity, the dance practice has shifted its dynamics. Rehearsals, once held secretly at night, now take place in different settings. However, the essence of the practice◎bringing women together to celebrate their culture◎persists. "Modernity has challenged some aspects of our traditional practices, but we are finding ways to adapt without compromising our cultural identity. We understand the importance of maintaining our heritage, especially in

promoting peace within our community" *(Female KII Participant/Aged 51 years)*. The dance's influence on sustainable peacebuilding is particularly evident during the festival itself. Men's support for their wives, mothers, sisters, aunties during the festival stage fosters harmony within families. Resolving family conflicts becomes a priority and this aggregates into community peacebuilding. This probably explains why one participant noted that:

> *During the festival, men actively engage in supporting their wives,* mothers, sisters, aunties*. This support sends a powerful message of unity and cooperation. Family conflicts are set aside, reflecting a collective desire to present a harmonious front to the clan. The festival's atmosphere creates an environment where people from different communities come together. This gathering allows us to appreciate each other's presence and strengthens our ties. It's a time when historical divisions take a backseat to our shared cultural heritage (Female KII Participant/Aged 75 years)*.

The fact that any conflicts that arise within the clan during the rehearsal period are temporarily set aside and moved to another time for resolution shows that if the dance is sustained, peacebuilding will also be sustainable amidst modern practices. This underscores the significance of the dance as a time for fostering positive interactions and prioritizing peace. It showcases the clan's commitment to addressing conflicts in a constructive manner.

The foregoing notwithstanding, most of the interviewees mentioned that the traditional dance has evolved in response to modernity. Thus, while the dance maintains its traditional essence, the informant indicated a willingness among the community to adapt the practice to contemporary contexts. The inclusivity and unity promoted by the dance are seen as valuable tools for addressing modern challenges, as they strengthen relationships and provide a space for open dialogue. Nevertheless, some challenges have emerged that undermine the strong traditional beliefs tied to Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu. There are women who refrain from participating in the dance due to varying reasons. Some view it as having fetish connotations, while others attribute their non-participation to the erosion of traditional cultural values.

It is important to clarify that Eri Nde Riya Eli is distinct from dances like the Oboni cultural dance, Masquerades dances, among others. that might be perceived as having fetish elements. The Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu carries cultural significance and unity-building traits rather than any fetish attributes. Urban space expansion has introduced additional obstacles to the practice. Many women now reside at a distance from each other, making it challenging to gather at the same way as in the past. These shifts highlight the complexities brought about by modernity. While some individuals have reservations about the dance due to misconceptions or the evolving cultural landscape, it is important to continue educating and dispelling misconceptions about the dance's true nature. The expanding urban space poses logistical challenges to maintaining the same level of togetherness that the dance once facilitated. However, these challenges also present an opportunity for creative solutions, such as adapting rehearsal schedules or utilizing technology for coordination. In all modernity has indeed introduced certain hurdles, but it is essential to address misconceptions and leverage on new approaches to ensure that Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu continues to thrive as a symbol of sustainable peace and cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The study of Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu and its role in peacebuilding has revealed a rich tapestry of traditions, challenges, and adaptations. This cultural practice serves as a powerful tool that unites married women across generations and backgrounds, transcending age and social affiliations. The three stages of the dance festival◎the pre-festival rehearsals, the dance festival, and the post-dance festival◎have a collective impact on fostering unity, conflict resolution, and peaceful coexistence within the community. Despite the encroachment of modernity, the dance practice maintains its core values and objectives. Adapting to changing times, the dance continues to symbolize cultural identity and heritage, facilitating intergenerational bonding and a sense of belonging. However, the influences of modernity have not gone unnoticed. Challenges arise from misconceptions that associate the dance with fetish elements, as well as the spatial constraints of urban expansion, which hinder the traditional close-knit gatherings. Nevertheless, the community's commitment to preserving its cultural legacy remains unwavering. Efforts to educate and dispel misconceptions about the dance's nature are essential to its continued relevance. Moreover, the dance's

adaptability is evident as the community navigates the logistical challenges posed by urbanization. These challenges, in fact, present an opportunity for the community to creatively overcome obstacles, demonstrating the resilience of their traditions in the face of change. The Eri Nde Riya Eli exemplifies the delicate balance between tradition and modernity. Its ability to promote peacebuilding and unity while adapting to new circumstances underscores its enduring importance. As the community moves forward, maintaining and celebrating this cultural practice can be a source of pride, a means of conflict resolution, and a testament to the strength of shared values within the Rukpokwu clan.

Recommendations

The following modest recommendations have been proffered:

1. *Cultural Education and Awareness Campaigns:* Launch comprehensive cultural education and awareness campaigns within the Rukpokwu clan. These campaigns should aim at dispelling misconceptions surrounding the dance, emphasizing its cultural significance and dispelling any notions of fetishism. Workshops, seminars, and informational sessions can educate community members about the historical and social importance of the dance, helping them understand its relevance in the modern context.
2. *Integrate Modern Platforms for Coordination:* Leverage modern technology to facilitate coordination and engagement among participants. Develop a centralized digital platform or social media group where women can connect, share updates, and coordinate schedules. This would address the challenges posed by urbanization and the spread of community members across different locations, allowing them to stay informed about rehearsals, events, and other related activities.
3. *Community Festivals and Showcases:* Organize community festivals and showcase the prominently feature of Eri Nde Riya Eli in Rukpokwu These events can be designed to celebrate the people◎s heritage, while also incorporating contemporary elements that attract younger audiences. By incorporating music, dance, art, and storytelling, these festivals can serve as platforms for cultural exchange and an opportunity to demonstrate the dance's unity-promoting aspects to a wider audience.
4. *Cultural Exchange Programmes:* Establish cultural exchange programmes with neighbouring communities or schools. By showcasing the Eri Nde

Riya Eli in a wider context, participants can gain a renewed sense of pride in their heritage. Such programmes also allow for cross-cultural understanding and could attract interest from a diverse audience, potentially reviving the practice.

5. *Empower Women Leaders:* Encourage and empower women leaders within the community to take ownership of the dance's preservation. By entrusting respected community members with leadership roles related to the dance, there's a higher likelihood of sustaining the practice, advocating for its significance, and ensuring its continued relevance amidst changing times.

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