



## **THE IKWERRE ETHNIC GROUP: HISTORY, CULTURE, AND ANCESTRAL REFLECTIONS IN ELECHI AMADI'S *ISIBURU***

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**Abstract** *Through the lens of Elechi Amadi's play Isiburu, this study explores the historical origin, cultural identity, and ancestral heritage of the Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study uses a qualitative approach, and Cultural Identity Theory as its theoretical framework to examine how the Ikwerre people assert a distinct identity rooted in their historical connection to the Bini Kingdom, despite linguistic similarities to the Igbo people. According to the study, the Ikwerre's language, festivals, ceremonies, and customs are essential markers of their distinctive heritage, reflecting their close ties to their ancestral homeland. The findings of an analysis of Isiburu highlight how important traditional festivals and ceremonies are in preserving cultural values and resisting the loss of identity due to modernization. To ensure the continuation of Ikwerre cultural practices, the research recommends deliberate efforts to document and promote Ikwerre cultural practices through literature, education, and community engagement. The study also emphasizes the value of celebrating and passing along cultural heritage through indigenous art forms like drama. By highlighting the relevance of ancestral traditions in contemporary society, this study contributes to the discourse on cultural preservation.*

### **Introduction**

One of Nigeria's most historically rich and culturally unique communities is the Iwhoruohna (Ikwerre) ethnic group, which is primarily located in the Niger Delta region. With roots tracing back to the Benin Kingdom, the Iwhoruohna people's heritage spans centuries of social, political, and cultural evolution, marking

their significant role in the complex tapestry of Nigerian history. The Ikwerre people's history is intricately linked to the strong legacy of their ancestral land, language, and customs, all of which serve to define their identity in the face of rapid modernization and external influences. The Ikwerre ethnic group has managed to preserve a unique cultural identity that is

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intimately connected to their land, ancestry, and spiritual beliefs despite the significant shifts that have occurred throughout history, including colonialism, the arrival of Christianity, the pressures of globalization, and the evolution of urban living.

The rich cultural practices of the Ikwerre people, who are predominantly found in Rivers State, Nigeria, have long been acknowledged. These activities include distinctive language, art, festivals, and rituals. Their social structures and daily lives are shaped by these elements of their culture, which serve as the foundation of their communal life. These elements are not merely remnants from the past. Historically, the Ikwerres are believed to have migrated from the Benin Kingdom, bringing with them elements of the rich heritage of the Bini people, that have since evolved and adapted to local circumstances. They have deep respect for their ancestors and an enduring bond with the land they occupy, which is reflected in their oral traditions, social structure, religious practices, and communal lifestyles.

In addition to being celebratory, cultural practices like the Ikwerre's festivals, initiation rites, and traditional music also serve as a means of maintaining social cohesiveness and continuity. The people's broader cosmological worldview, which closely connects the sacred and the mundane, is tied to these rituals. The belief that ancestral spirits still actively influence the lives of the living is fundamental to this

worldview. The Iwhoruohna people ensure that their ancestral legacies are passed down through generations by maintaining a sense of continuity with their past through these cultural expressions. However, the modern world poses serious obstacles to the preservation of such traditions, as is the case with many African ethnic groups. The question of how the Iwhoruohna people can preserve their cultural heritage in a world that is changing quickly has risen as a result of tensions between tradition and modernity brought about by the invasion of Western ideals, religious shifts, and the pressures of urbanization.

The works of Nigerian playwright, poet, and novelist, Elechi Amadi, who provides deep insights into the nuances of African culture, particularly in regard to societal values and identity, provide some of the most insightful portrayals of the cultural complexities of the Ikwerre people. With its engaging narrative and interesting character development, Amadi's play *Isiburu* (1973) provides a glimpse into Ikwerre life, painting a clear image of the traditions, conflicts, and interactions of the people with broader social forces. The play, which is set in a rural village, explores the difficulties faced by people who are caught between the allure of modernism and the ties of ancestral traditions. In addition to exploring Ikwerre cultural heritage, *Isiburu's* (1973) main theme—the conflict between tradition and change—also offers a broader commentary on the societal

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transformation taking place throughout Africa in the post-colonial era.

In *Isiburu* (1973), Amadi skillfully examines the intricacies of identity, the function of ancestral spirits, and the difficulties of adjusting to modern life while being true to one's roots. The moral and philosophical dilemmas that people face when they have to balance their personal desires with those of their community and ancestors are highlighted in the play. *Isiburu* (1973) encourages reflection on the universal struggle to protect cultural heritage in the face of modernization via the prism of Ikwerre customs and beliefs. The play's characters represent the internal and external conflicts that characterize the contemporary African experience, where the desire to maintain connection to one's heritage must be balanced against the realities of a world turning into a digital one, daily.

Drawing mostly from Elechi Amadi's *Isiburu* (1973), this paper aims to explore the history, culture, and ancestral reflections of the Ikwerre ethnic group. This study will offer a thorough analysis of how the Ikwerre people's cultural heritage continues to influence their identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by exploring their historical roots, cultural expressions, and the connection between tradition and modernity as portrayed in Amadi's work. This study will also look at the importance of *Isiburu* (1973) as both a literary work and a cultural artifact, showing how Amadi utilizes the play to convey and preserve the Ikwerre people's values and worldview.

It is clear from analyzing the Ikwerre people's historical trajectory that their cultural expressions are dynamic forces that still have an impact on the lives of contemporary Ikwerre people, rather than being static relics of the past. This paper seeks to clarify the manner in which cultural legacy is preserved, transformed, and contested in contemporary Nigerian society through an analysis of Amadi's *Isiburu* (1973) and its thematic exploration of ancestral beliefs, social conventions, and moral principles. In the end, this study will highlight the Ikwerre people's resilience in upholding their traditional practices despite the challenges of the contemporary world, providing important insights into the broader issues of identity and cultural preservation in post-colonial Africa.

## Theoretical Perspective

The Cultural Identity Theory (CIT) is the foundation for this study and provides a lens through which the history, cultural heritage, and ancestral reflections of the Ikwerre ethnic group can be analyzed. British cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, established the Cultural Identity theory, which focuses on how identity is constructed, preserved, and transformed via shared symbols, language, and cultural narratives (Hall, 1990, p. 223). According to Hall (1990), cultural identity is a dynamic concept that is constantly negotiated within specific historical, social, and political circumstances, rather than being a fixed or essentialist idea. A better understanding of how the Ikwerre people's traditions are sustained

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in spite of external influences and how they continue to evolve in the face of modernity, is made possible by this dynamic conception of cultural identity.

According to the Cultural Identity Theory, as put by Hall (1990), “identity is a product of the interaction between social, collective, and personal dimensions rather than a single fixed entity” (p. 225). In Hall’s view, the historical processes and societal structures that shape people and communities, as well as the narratives they employ to define themselves, have a significant impact on cultural identity. The preservation of cultural practices like festivals, traditional rites, and oral histories, can be understood by the Ikwerre ethnic group as a continuous process of creating and maintaining their cultural identity. This theory allows us to explore how the Ikwerre people’s connection to their land, ancestry, and customs is not only about a deep-rooted past but also a forward-looking engagement with the challenges of modernization.

Because it highlights the conflict between traditional values and the demands of modern life, Amadi’s *Isiburu* (1973) offers a complex representation of cultural identity within the context of the Iwhoruohna people. The characters in *Isiburu* (1973) demonstrate Hall’s (1990, p. 228) notion of identity as a place of tension and negotiation as they navigate the modern world, while contending with the expectations of their cultural history. This

struggle between preserving cultural identity and adjusting to societal changes supports Hall’s claim that identity is constantly changing due to a combination of internal and external factors.

In addition to Hall, other scholars who have made contributions to the field of cultural studies, like Edward Said, have also influenced the Cultural Identity Theory. Said (1978), stated that the dynamics of colonialism and postcolonialism frequently shape the concept of identity (p.55). Understanding how the Ikwerre people have preserved their cultural identity in the face of colonial and postcolonial pressures from both Western and neighboring African cultures requires an awareness of how identity is often constructed in opposition to the “Other,” as highlighted by Said’s work, *Orientalism* (1978). In the case of the Iwhoruohnas, the persistence of their customs despite colonial legacies and the encroachment of Westernization can be seen as a form of resistance to cultural erasure, where identity is reaffirmed in the face of external forces.

Additionally, Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity also informs Hall’s work on cultural identity. According to Bhabha (1994), “cultural identity is often formed by combining and hybridizing different cultural influences, rather than only upholding the purity of traditions” (p. 119). When analyzing the identity of the Ikwerre people in the modern world, where the combination of traditional and modern elements creates a redefined, hybrid cultural identity that

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reflects both the continuity of their heritage and their adaptation to new realities, the above viewpoint is especially relevant.

A thorough framework for understanding the Ikwerre people's struggles to maintain their cultural identity in the face of modernity is provided by the Cultural Identity Theory. Through the application of this theory to Amadi's *Isiburu* (1973), we can analyze how the play depicts the intricate process of cultural negotiation and identity creation, as characters attempt to maintain ties to their ancestral roots while navigating the pressures of societal change. In order to ensure that the unique heritage of the Ikwerre people is preserved during the modernization process, the theory also permits an analysis of how cultural expressions like language, rituals, and art function as instruments for asserting and preserving cultural identity.

In sum, the study's theoretical underpinnings are provided by the Cultural Identity Theory, which enables a critical examination of the Ikwerre people's cultural legacy as it is represented in Elechi Amadi's *Isiburu* (1973). This framework helps us understand how the Ikwerres continue to negotiate their ancestral history in the context of modern Nigerian society by emphasizing the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural identity.

## Historical Overview of the Ikwerre People

Despite certain linguistic and customary similarities, the Iwhoruohna (Ikwerre) people, an ethnic group in Nigeria's Niger Delta, have a

rich and unique history that distinguishes them from the larger Igbo group. The Ikwerre people maintain a distinct cultural identity, history, and social structure that reflect their specific ancestral lineage and experiences, while often being wrongly classified as belonging to the Igbo ethnic group because of their linguistic proximity. In addition to reflecting migration and settlement, the Ikwerre people's history demonstrates their ability to maintain cultural autonomy in the face of external influences like colonialism, modernity, and globalization.

The Ikwerre people trace their origins to the ancient Benin Kingdom, with oral traditions suggesting that they were originally part of the Bini people (Ogbonna, 2010, p. 15). A famous account within this tradition is the Akalaka narrative, which describes how the renowned ancestor Akalaka led his people out of the Benin Kingdom. Internal conflicts and the need for fertile land are blamed for this migration. According to Nwala (1997), "under Akalaka's leadership, new settlements were established in the Niger Delta region, setting the stage for the emergence of distinct ethnic groups. Iwhoruohna, Ogba, and Ekpeye were among his descendants who later founded communities that evolved into the ethnic groups that exist today" (p. 34). In what are now Ikwerre Local Government Area, Emohua, Obio/Akpor, and of course, Port Harcourt, Iwhoruohna and his descendants established themselves. The Ogba and Ekpeye ethnic groups were established by

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Akalaka's other descendants, and their separate territories—Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, and Ahoada East and West—are adjacent to the Ikwerres. In the view of Alagoa (2005), “despite their differences, these group’s linguistic, cultural, and religious practices show notable similarities, underscoring their shared ancestry” (p. 112). These areas developed became the heartland of Ikwerre traditions and culture. This narrative emphasizes the distinctive identity that the Ikwerre people developed by their historical journey and cultural practices, while also recognizing their Bini ancestry.

Despite being linked to the Bini people's larger historical movement, the Ikwerre migration led to the emergence of a unique ethnic group with its own set of traditions, social structures, and customs. Fubara (2012), would say that “due in significant part to their unique geographic location, historical experiences, and cultural practices, the Ikwerre people gradually established a distinct identity, even though some tribes in the Niger Delta region may trace their migration back to the larger Igbo ethnic group” (p. 120). Despite linguistic similarities, the Ikwerre people have long strived to define their identity and set themselves apart from the larger Igbo group, and this distinctiveness has played a crucial role in shaping their collective consciousness.

Another important factor that sets the Ikwerres apart from other ethnic groups, such as the Igbos, is their social structure. The *Ama* (village)

and the *Elder Council*, a governing body that supervises the community’s daily activities and ensures the preservation of cultural practices, are at the heart of the Ikwerre people's distinctive system of governance. As Aganbi (2009) would put it, “these villages' leadership is often based on respect and proven leadership abilities rather than being solely passed down through bloodlines” (p. 40). The Ikwerre's deep sense of community and value of collective decision-making are reflected in this system, which makes sure that the opinions of everyone are heard in the village.

The more centralized Igbo political organization, which historically depended on a council of elders but also had more formalized chieftaincies with more rigid hierarchical structures, stands in sharp contrast to this governance system of the Iwboruohnas. Contrarily, the Ikwerres place a strong emphasis on reaching a consensus, and uniting as a community when making decisions. This is consistent with their worldview, which places the community and the land at the center of their identity.

The Ikwerre people's relationship with the land is fundamental to their identity and is the basis of their cultural legacy. Although a large portion of their livelihood has come from agriculture, including the cultivation of crops like yam, cassava, and cocoyam, their connection to the land extends beyond mere subsistence. As a direct link to their ancestors, who are believed to have lived on the earth, the land is seen as sacred.

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The Ikwerres have maintained their traditional practices, such as festivals, rites of passage, and other ceremonies that honor the earth (*Eli*) and their ancestors, because of their spiritual ties to the land.

The Ikwerre maintain a more community-centered spiritual practice that is deeply tied to the land and the cycles of nature, in contrast to the Igbo people, who place a greater emphasis on ritual and formalized religious organizations. One significant cultural event that unites the community to celebrate their ancestral ties and reaffirm their connection to the earth is the *Egelege* wrestling festival (Eze, 2013, p. 75). In addition to providing entertainment, these festivals serve as potent expressions of cultural identity, allowing the Ikwerre people to strengthen their distinctiveness in the face of external cultural influences and modernity.

The history of the Ikwerre people was drastically altered by the advent of British colonization in the Niger Delta, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As new political, educational, and religious structures were imposed by the colonial government, the Ikwerres, like many other indigenous groups in Africa, suffered from social disintegration and cultural displacement. According to Alozie (2011), "because of colonial convenience rather than cultural identity, the British classified and grouped several ethnic groups together during this time, including the Ikwerres" (p. 104). The boundaries between various communities were blurred by this forced

classification, which often grouped the Ikwerres with other ethnic groups, such as the Igbos.

Nonetheless, in post-colonial Nigeria, the Ikwerre people have persistently fought to assert their independence and cultural uniqueness, as portrayed in the interview granted by Chief Barr. Nyesom Wike, the Honorable FCT Minister, where he said and I quote "I am an unrepentant Iwboruohna (Ikwerre) man, not an Igbo man. I don't have a problem with Igbo people, and will never have problem with them...the mere fact that you find yourself in Northern Nigeria, does it make you a Hausa or Fulani man? The fact we were all in the same old Eastern Region does not make Ikwerre to be Igbo" (Daily Post, 2025). I want to emphatically state that the position of His Excellency, Chief Barr. Nyesom Wike reflects the assertion by many Ikwerre people of a distinct ethnic identity, separate from the Igbos. The Ikwerre people started to feel proud of their identity in the post-independence era, separating themselves from the larger Igbo narrative. Ogbonna (2010), puts that "this was especially evident when Rivers State was formed in 1967, when the Ikwerres had a significant impact on the region's political landscape" (p. 18). The Ikwerre people passionately sought to reclaim their historical narrative and strengthen their cultural heritage in the face of industrialization and globalization during the post-colonial era, which was a time of self-discovery for them.

The Ikwerre people's history is a complex one of resistance to external influences, migration, and

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cultural preservation. Despite their undeniable linguistic ties to the Igbo ethnic group, the Ikwerres have always maintained a distinct identity that is based on their own unique history, social structure, and deep connection to the land. Throughout colonial rule and the post-colonial period, the Ikwerre people have demonstrated tenacity in preserving their cultural practices and asserting their unique identity, as seen by their historical trajectory. As the Ikwerre people continue to face the difficulties of modernity while maintaining close ties to their ancestral traditions, this continuous struggle for cultural autonomy continues to be essential to their identity.

## **Cultural Identity of the Ikwerre People**

The Ikwerre people's historical experiences, social institutions, and connection to the land, all play a significant role in defining their cultural identity. Despite having similar languages, the Ikwerres have developed a unique cultural framework throughout the centuries that sets them apart from other Niger Delta ethnic groups, especially the Igbos. Language, religion, festivals, and social organization are just a few of the customs that uphold this distinct identity and work together to protect, preserve, and strengthen the group's cultural heritage.

## **Language as a Cultural Marker**

One important aspect of their cultural identity is the Ikwerre language. The Ikwerre dialect differs from other Igbo dialects due to its distinct phonological and syntactical characteristics,

despite the language's resemblance to the Igbo language. In addition to being a means of communication, language is a symbol of identity that shapes how the Ikwerres see themselves and are seen by others. The Ikwerre language is mostly spoken within their communities, and its use is an essential component of their cultural continuity, in contrast to the Igbo people, who use their language more widely throughout various regions (Ogbonna, 2010, p. 16). Therefore, it is believed that the Ikwerre people's cultural survival and sovereignty depend on the preservation of their language.

## **Religion and Spiritual Beliefs**

The Ikwerre people's cultural identity is greatly influenced by their religion. The Ikwerres, traditionally, practice an indigenous spirituality that places a strong emphasis on a deep bond with the land and ancestors. They have an animistic belief system with a deep respect for the land's ancestors, spirits of nature, and deities. Eze (2013), puts that “the more formalized religious systems brought about by colonization, like Christianity, stand in contrast to this spiritual framework” (p. 76). According to the Ikwerre worldview, elders and spiritual leaders play a crucial role in guiding the populace in their day-to-day activities, and community rituals and ancestral worship are given top priority.

The Ikwerre people's religious landscape has changed in recent decades due to the influence of Christianity, resulting in syncretic practices where Christian teachings and traditional beliefs

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coexist. Nonetheless, traditional rituals like the *Egelege* wrestling festival continue to be a significant expression of cultural identity, giving the populace a platform to uphold historical continuity and reaffirm their ancestral beliefs (Aganbi, 2009, p. 42).

## Festivals and Ceremonies

The Ikwerre people's cultural expression depends heavily on festivals. These festivals, like the *Egelege* wrestling festival, are more than just celebrations; they are deeply spiritual events that strengthen the people's ties to the land and their ancestors. Eze (2013) puts that "the *Egelege* wrestling festival is an annual event that brings together the community to perform rituals, dances, and ceremonies that celebrate the harvest and seek blessings from the gods" (p. 79). The Ikwerre people's agricultural heritage and their long-standing bond with nature are significant reminders provided by this festival.

In addition to the *Egelege* wrestling festival, elaborate ceremonies are held to commemorate rites of passage including marriage, birth, and death. These rites according to Nwoye (2014), "reinforce the cultural continuity and social cohesiveness of the community, while transferring important knowledge and traditions to the younger generations" (p. 54). These ceremonies serve as both cultural landmarks and a reaffirmation of the Ikwerre people's identity, allowing them to assert their uniqueness in a world that is evolving rapidly.

## Social Organization and Community Life

The Ikwerre people's communal values and the importance they attach to kinship and ancestral heritage are reflected in their social structure.

Traditionally, the Ikwerres are organized into villages, each of which is run independently by a council of elders. The more hierarchical and centralized forms of governance observed in other ethnic groups, like the Igbos, in contrast with this system, which places an emphasis on consensus and collective decision-making (Aganbi, 2009, p. 43).

The Ikwerre people have a strong sense of communal responsibility, where everyone is expected to contribute to the welfare of the group. Their social gatherings, which frequently involve shared meals and celebrations, and farming practices, where families work together on agricultural tasks, exhibit this communal ethic. The Ikwerre's social structure is based on kinship relationships, with family units being crucial in determining an individual's identity and place in the community. According to Fubara (2012), "in some communities, inheritance and descent are traced through the mother's line, reflecting a matrilineal aspect of the Ikwerre's social structure" (p. 124). The Ikwerres are further distinguished from their Igbo neighbors by this matrilineal feature, since the latter typically follow patrilineal inheritance.

## Distinct Identity from the Igbo

The Ikwerres have long distinguished themselves from the Igbo ethnic group, despite the fact that they share language and cultural similarities. Outsiders' categorization of the Ikwerres as belonging to the Igbo group has caused tension,

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and a point of pride for the Ikwerres, who assert their separate identity. According to the information the researcher got via an interview granted by Pa. Emmanuel Nyeche Opara, the oldest in Obingele family, Nkpolu Oroworukwo community, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, during the time of this research, he said "the Igbos, motivated by economic opportunities, migrated to Ikwerre land in search of better opportunities as farmers and laborers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is when the Ikwerre people's identity struggle began. It is important to note that the Igbos exploited the traditional hospitality of the Ikwerre people to establish themselves in Ikwerre land, where they steadfastly upheld their own identity while refusing to interact with their hosts. They leased lands from their Ikwerre landlords to cultivate during the farming season. For the privilege, the Igbos were only requested to submit a bottle of local gin. The lands automatically returned to the Ikwerre owners at the conclusion of the farming season. Going further, the establishment of the Port Harcourt seaport in 1913 attracted various ethnic groups, including the Igbos, who came as traders and farm laborers. This migration significantly impacted the social and cultural landscape of the Ikwerre region. In the Ikwerre region, the Igbos worked as agricultural laborers and engaged in trade, dealing in textiles and other items throughout this time. Strong ties between the two ethnic groups were facilitated by the

economic activity" (E. Opara, personal communication, December 23, 2024).

The linguistic similarities between the two groups are often the basis for this classification, but the Ikwerre people's historical experiences, social organization, religious practices, and cultural expressions provide ample evidence of their unique identity.

While the Igbos have a strong historical presence in southeastern Nigeria, the Ikwerres are distinct from the broader Igbo group due to their historical connections to the Benin Kingdom and their own migration narrative. Through cultural practices like the *Egelege* wrestling festival, which differs from Igbo festivals in both form and purpose, the Ikwerres have long emphasized their distinctiveness. Their language, social structure, and religious practices all highlight this cultural distinction and demonstrate the Ikwerre people's dedication to preserving their unique identity (Ogbonna, 2010, p. 19).

The historical foundations, social structure, religious convictions, and cultural practices of the Ikwerre people all contribute to their intricate and multifaceted cultural identity. The Ikwerres have always affirmed their uniqueness through their traditions, festivals, and social structures, despite their linguistic similarities to the Igbo people. They are a distinct and important group within the Niger Delta because of their cultural identity, which is evidence of their tenacity in preserving their heritage while adapting to external influences.

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## Cultural Themes in *Isiburu*

Cultural themes are deeply interwoven throughout Elechi Amadi's *Isiburu* (1973), mirroring the customs, values, and struggles of the Ikwerre people. Amadi explores important facets of Ikwerre cultural identity through the narrative, such as traditional governance, social order, ancestral worship, and the role of women in the community. In addition to offering insight into Ikwerre culture, the themes explored in *Isiburu* (1973) offer a broader commentary on the conflict between tradition and modernity. Through these cultural themes, Amadi highlights the need of cultural preservation in an age of globalization and provides a critical commentary on the changes affecting the Ikwerre's traditional societal structure. They are the following;

### Ancestral Worship and Spirituality

The importance of spirituality and ancestral worship in Ikwerre society is one of the main cultural themes in *Isiburu* (1973). The belief that the ancestors actively influence the lives of the living is depicted by Amadi, throughout the play. Intimately connected to the people, the ancestral spirits guide their actions, ensure their prosperity, and shield them from misfortune. They are not remote creatures. The play's structure is based on the customs of ancestral worship, including offerings, prayers, and rites, which highlight the importance of religion in preserving cultural continuity within the community (Aganbi, 2009, p. 47).

The way that Amadi depicts ancestral worship is consistent with the Ikwerre people's traditional religious beliefs, which hold that their ancestors

are the custodians of their cultural heritage. The characters in the play often turn to ritualistic acts that show reverence for the spirits of the dead, in order to get divine protection and guidance. Fubara (2012) puts that "this theme emphasizes the Ikwerre people's strong ties to their past and their reliance on spiritual practices to maintain communal harmony" (p. 132).

### Traditional Governance and Social Order

The portrayal of traditional governance and social order is another important cultural theme in *Isiburu* (1973). The Ikwerre's governance system, which is hinged on the ideas of consensus, consultation, and the participation of elders in decision-making, is explored in the play. Because they are seen as the custodians of wisdom and cultural knowledge, elders play a critical role in maintaining social order and settling disputes. The character of the village leader, whose authority stems from the community's respect and trust rather than personal power, exemplifies this theme particularly (Eze, 2013, p. 81).

The governing system in *Isiburu* (1973) is contrasted with the growing influence of contemporary political structures that aim to undermine traditional practices. The community's struggles to retain their traditional practices in the face of encroaching external forces, illustrate the conflict between the old (tradition) and the new (modernity). According to Alozie (2011), "in using this theme, Amadi considers the role of leadership in maintaining

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cultural identity and questions the viability of traditional governance in the contemporary world (p. 116).

## Gender Roles and the Position of Women

Using *Isiburu* (1973) to explore gender dynamics and women's status in both traditional and contemporary contexts, Amadi also discusses the role of women in Ikwerre society. Although women are depicted in the play as being essential to the social structure, their roles are often limited to the domestic sphere. However, in the view of Nwoye (2014) “by presenting female characters who exhibit perseverance, wisdom, and agency in navigating the cultural and social expectations put upon them—despite having minimal societal influence—Amadi challenges these traditional gender roles” (p. 60).

The patriarchal society of the Ikwerres, where women are typically seen as caretakers of the home and family, is reflected in the play. But, *Isiburu* (1973) also shows how women's roles are evolving as they begin to make their voices heard in both public and home spheres. The way these women are portrayed reflects broader changes in gender dynamics throughout Nigerian society and emphasizes the conflict between tradition and the evolving roles of women in contemporary society. In addition to providing a critical commentary of the relationship between culture and gender, Fubara (2012) puts that “Amadi's nuanced treatment of gender in *Isiburu* (1973) suggests the possibility that women could

question and redefine their roles within the Ikwerre people's cultural framework” (p. 135).

## The Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity

The struggle between tradition and modernity is the main theme in *Isiburu* (1973). The play is used by Amadi to highlight the pressures the Ikwerre community faces in preserving their cultural heritage in the face of modernization. Traditional ways of life are challenged by the arrival of new concepts, political systems, and technologies, which causes conflict within the community. This theme is evident in the way the characters react to changes in their social, political, and economic environments. Ogbonna (2010), puts that “while some characters are dedicated to preserving the traditions and values of their forefathers, others welcome the new opportunities that modernization offers” (p. 23). Amadi's exploration of this struggle is important because it sheds light on the broader conundrum that many African societies face; how to strike a balance between preserving traditional practices and meeting the demands of modernity. The play offers a sophisticated view on the difficulties of cultural identity in a world that is changing rapidly through the struggles and dilemmas of the characters. Thus, *Isiburu* (1973) according to Eze (2013), “serves as a tool for reflecting on the resilience of African traditions and the difficulties of preserving cultural integrity in the face of external influences” (p. 82).



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The cultural themes in *Isiburu* (1973) offer a potent commentary on the Ikwerre people's cultural identity and societal struggles. Amadi offers a more comprehensive reflection on the challenges faced by indigenous African communities in a globalized world, while capturing the essence of Ikwerre culture through the exploration of gender roles, traditional governance, ancestral worship, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. These themes serve as a crucial reminder of the necessity of cultural preservation and the resilience of traditional values in modern society, in addition to adding to the play's richness.

## Conclusion

With an emphasis on the Ikwerre people's history, language, traditions, and cultural expressions as they are reflected in Elechi Amadi's *Isiburu* (1973), this study has explored their cultural identity. This work has attempted to highlight the distinctive elements of Ikwerre culture that distinguish them from other ethnic groups in Nigeria, especially the Igbos, by analyzing a number of cultural themes in the play. As often seen happening in both scholarly discourse and public perceptions, the paper has underlined the significance of viewing the Ikwerres as a distinct people with their own unique heritage, customs, and social norms rather than just incorporating them under the broader Igbo ethnic category.

According to the study's findings, the Ikwerre people are distinct from the Igbo ethnic group

due to their historical background, culture, and social structure. The Ikwerre have long maintained a distinct cultural identity through their unique social organization, religious practices, and festivals, despite the two groups' linguistic similarities, especially in the Igbo-Ikwerre language continuum. Their traditional values, governance systems, and relationship with the land are all fundamental to this cultural identity.

Once more, the study has emphasized the central cultural themes of gender roles, traditional governance, ancestral worship, and the conflict between tradition and modernity through its analysis of Elechi Amadi's *Isiburu* (1973). The dedication of the Ikwerre people to their cultural values and their ability to adapt to external influences without losing their uniqueness are reflected in these themes. Amadi's depiction of these themes in *Isiburu* (1973) offers a perceptive perspective that preserves and celebrates the Ikwerre people's cultural integrity. Furthermore, one of the most significant findings of this research is the widespread misclassification of the Ikwerre people as part of the Igbo ethnic group. The Ikwerres are different from the Igbo via their cultural practices, beliefs, and social systems, even though they speak similar languages. Through cultural expressions like the *Egelege* wrestling festival and their indigenous governance system, the Ikwerres have continuously emphasized their distinct identity and long resisted being categorized as Igbo.

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Again, one of the key findings made by this study is that, despite the conflict between the Ikwerre people and the Igbos over identity, both groups have continued to coexist harmoniously in many aspects of life. They marry each other, live together, and engage in business partnerships. This demonstrates that the identity struggle has not created an insurmountable barrier between them.

The study also emphasizes how resilient the Ikwerre people have been in maintaining their cultural identity in the face of modernization's demands. The tension between tradition and modernity is evident in *Isiburu* (1973), as some characters embrace modern concepts while others try to uphold their ancestral customs. The difficulties that many African communities encounter in striking a balance between traditional beliefs and the pressures of industrialization and globalization are reflected in this theme.

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

**Preservation of Cultural Identity:** It is essential to continue efforts aimed at preserving the cultural identity of the Ikwerre people. Promoting the Ikwerre language, religious practices, and traditional political structures can help achieve this. To ensure that future generations have the information necessary to preserve their cultural legacy, educational programs that teach the history, language, and customs of the Ikwerres should be implemented,

particularly in schools located in Ikwerre-speaking regions.

**Combatting Misclassification:** There is a need for greater awareness about the distinctiveness of the Ikwerre people. Policymakers, educators, and scholars should endeavor to dispel the misconceptions that conflate the Ikwerre people with the Igbos. The Ikwerres must be acknowledged and respected as a distinct ethnic group with a unique social, cultural, and historical identity. To correct this misclassification, academic discussions and public awareness campaigns should be promoted.

**Integration of Traditional and Modern Values:** The Ikwerre people now face both new opportunities and challenges as a result of modernization, but it is crucial to figure out how to combine traditional values with modern developments. This entails finding ways to address the decline of traditional political systems, while welcoming conventional governance structures that respect cultural values. The Ikwerres will be able to thrive in the face of changing societal dynamics if efforts are made to strike a balance between modernity and cultural preservation.

**Promotion of Cultural Celebrations:** Because they are essential to the Ikwerre people's cultural identity, traditional festivals like the *Egelege* wrestling festival ought to be promoted. These festivals give the younger generation a chance to connect with their roots, while also

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acting as expressions of cultural pride. To increase their visibility and promote participation from all societal members, the government and community organizations ought to support these cultural celebrations.

**Promoting Unity Amidst Diversity:** This study recommends that since the identity crisis between groups has not deterred the Ikwerre and Igbo people from maintaining shared social and economic ties, both groups should put aside the identity struggle for the betterment of their communities and the nation at large. By focusing on mutual understanding and collaboration, they can foster unity and contribute positively to the socio-economic development of Nigeria.

In conclusion, the Ikwerre people are a distinct ethnic group with a rich cultural legacy that is rooted in their unique historical experiences, religious convictions, social systems, and cultural expressions. This study has corrected the misconceptions that have resulted in the Ikwerres being classified as a subgroup of the Igbos, and has given a deeper understanding of their cultural identity. It is evident from an analysis of the cultural themes in *Isiburu* (1973) that the Ikwerre people maintain a strong sense of identity shaped by their ancestors, traditions, and way of life. The Ikwerre people's cultural resilience is still crucial to their survival and well-being as they continue to face the difficulties presented by modernization.

It is important the Ikwerre people's distinctive identity be acknowledged, respected, and

protected at all cost. The Ikwerres can continue to safeguard their cultural heritage for upcoming generations by addressing the misclassification of the Ikwerres as Igbos, encouraging cultural education, and cultivating the fusion of traditional and modern values.

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