



International Journal of Diplomacy and Economy

ISSN online: 2049-0895 - ISSN print: 2049-0887

<https://www.inderscience.com/ijdipe>

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DOI: [10.1504/IJDIFE.2024.10061021](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJDIFE.2024.10061021)

Article History:

Received:	14 May 2023
Last revised:	25 August 2023
Accepted:	15 September 2023
Published online:	20 January 2025

Igbo cultural diplomacy and peace building in pre-colonial Nigeria

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Abstract: Diplomacy establishes mutual and healthy relations among individuals and groups pursuing different socio-political and economic interests. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, diplomacy was mostly pursued through cultural means in the pre-colonial days. By that, the Igbo maintained cordial inter-group relations and attained good socio-political and economic heights in trade and their other engagements. Using the primary and secondary sources of data, this work considers how the pre-colonial Igbo nurtured peace with their cultural practices for socio-political and economic gains and the effectiveness of those practices in maintaining the peace of the time in Nigeria. The paper is analytic and thematic. It contends that the Igbo cultural approach to diplomacy, if incorporated into the business of the global community, could help the world since the approach successfully secured relative peace in socio-political and economic engagements as desired in contemporary international system.

Keywords: pre-colonial Nigeria; Igbo land; culture; diplomacy; global peace and security; peaceful co-existence; economic interests.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Odeke, F.C. (2025) 'Igbo cultural diplomacy and peace building in pre-colonial Nigeria', *Int. J. Diplomacy and Economy*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp.29–43.

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This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled 'Pre-colonial Igbo Diplomacy: Reasons, Means and Methods' presented at the 'Toyin Falola@65 International Conference', University of Ibadan, Nigeria, 18–21 January 2018.

1 Introduction

Man lives on earth by his labour. The fruit of man's labour determines his economic and social status in his society. All the efforts he puts up in life are to advance him economically, then socio-politically, if he chooses. But his first concern is to satisfy his basic needs of food, clothes and shelter. Whatever follows these three needs are out of a man's surplus achievements. Human needs are attainable only through interactions with neighbours and other peoples, far and near. These interactions bring about the creation of social systems and institutions that harmonise and regulate man's relations with himself and neighbours.

Among a homogeneous group of people these systems and institutions become the pivots that carry the customs and norms to guide proper behaviours, and in a complex setting of more than one group, they spell out the standards of inter-dependent relations in which each person and group competes to convince the other to accept his own ideas or products as the best. These efforts to satisfy the selfish ends of man soon gave rise to the idea of inter-national relations where economic interests alone brought about an increased interest in the socio-cultural and political lives of other peoples.

One factor that made the wide inter-dependent collaboration possible was the improved technologies in communication and transportation which enabled extensive exploration of far away environments. (Beatie, 1964) No one group of people was considered superior or inferior to other groups in the pre-colonial days. Social situations in which ideas about foreigners could be translated into attitudes towards them did not exist.

African international relations and diplomacy are yet to be accepted as real among modern day academics. But there is no doubting the fact that in pre-colonial Africa there were well formed means of cordial relationships among the different Kingdoms and groups throughout the continent.

These relationships were intentionally fashioned, nurtured and sustained for some economic, cultural and political reasons. There were occasions of peculiar misunderstandings, conflicts and even wars which were traditionally resolved in diplomatic manners for the benefit of all.

In every Kingdom in Africa, Kings of diverse categories with their Council of Elders, held sway at meetings to resolve conflicts within communities. Sometimes diplomatic emissaries were sent by Kings to relay the decisions of a Council of Elders to counterparts over certain disputes at hand. Most of the disputes were over trade, trade routes, trading centres and farmlands. Sometimes too, the conflict could involve the murder of a kinsman or woman by people of the other community or Kingdom. The deliberate and continuous neglect of all these African diplomatic efforts in pre-colonial times tempts the belief that diplomacy could mean different things in the West and other regions of the world, respectively.

In pre-colonial Igbo land where oratory and ability to negotiate counted for leadership qualities, diplomacy was a cultural behaviour common to men and women who could secure advantages to their communities in all inter-group affairs by tact. Since such accomplishment bestowed recognition, respect and honour, the Igbo strove to reach that height in his society to qualify him for membership of the decision-making group. Young women getting ready for marriage, especially to men outside the Igbo clime, were groomed as potential ambassadors of Igbo values and interests.

They were admonished to remain submissive to their husbands, committed to the socio-political and economic interest of their families and communities by steadily working hard to fend for members of their households and extended family members, and to relate steadily with their parents/ leaders of the communities giving them out for marriage. That way, marriages as socio-cultural practices, served as a Balm that smoothened inter-community relations in pre-colonial Igbo land, the same way the modern day ambassadors relate with their home States and their States of duty or service. Hardly were conflicts encouraged between an Igbo community and those of their in-laws.

In instances of conflicts, the Igbo were quick to adopt measures that restored peace in no distant time. It was rare for a particular conflict to linger between persons, groups or communities without the immediate intervention of the elders who persisted adroitly in negotiations until peace was visibly restored between the disputants. On such occasions, the settled disputants were taken on oath to remain in peace with each other for the rest of life, an approach that served as Preventive Diplomacy in pre-colonial Igbo land.

A good example of that preventive diplomacy was illustrated in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where Mbaino community was in conflict with the Umuofia community over the murder of a woman from the latter. Achebe said that an Umuofia emissary was sent to Mbaino to negotiate a proper compensation to avert a war between the two communities. Igbo pre-colonial diplomacy was fully manifested when the people of Mbaino accepted the peace options offered by the Umuofia emissaries instead of calling the bluff that would have meant they were ready for a war with Umuofia (Achebe, 1958, pp.21–22). If diplomacy is all about influence to reach a set target, then such a peaceful diplomatic approach that achieved lasting peace and security between groups could answer the same need in the present world of all talks without solutions.

2 The concept of diplomacy

Diplomacy is the skill of managing people's conflicts without offending the people or adding anything to their difficult situation. In international relations diplomacy manages the trend and flow of engagements between nations. In ordinary life, diplomacy involves the cordial manner of people to reach the favours of other people. Kurbalija (2023) noted that diplomacy is a 'non-violent approach to managing international relations that relies principally upon dialogue so that effective two-way communications, negotiation and compromises can be made'. Diplomacy uses subtlety in the pursuit of domination, influence and socio-economic and political power.

It will be wrong to subject the concept of diplomacy to academic theorisation when the needs of individual persons are not considered together with the needs of the States in the international community. Human actors in the international community have their personal needs which they serve through their services to their States. The diplomat, like the president of a country and other policy makers, serves his personal interests with his position as representative of his State in the international community.

For that reason, diplomacy is an encompassing skill that seeks the satisfaction of human needs through services to an employer or organisation. The employer may be in the private or public sector of an economy. Employees all over the world do the biddings of their employers; so also the diplomats do the biddings of their governments, otherwise they are recalled or sacked out rightly. Sharp (1998) stated emphatically that 'diplomats derive their authority from the fact that they represent States'.

The diplomat should, as a matter of necessity, learn to wrap his personal interests within the interests of his nation if he is to be called a diplomat. Kennan (1951), a former US Secretary of State (May 5, 1947 to May 31, 1949 under Harry S. Truman), recognised the conflict between personal interests and government interests in the pursuit of American foreign policy, when he wrote:

I find it hard to see how we can live up to our responsibilities as a great power (government) unless we are able to resolve, in a manner better than we have done recently, the great challenges to the soundness of government policy and to the claim of an administration to speak for the mass of the people in foreign affairs.

Kennan was saying that the foreign affairs of States are dependent on their domestic interests. Thus, diplomats representing their States in the international community are invariably serving their personal interests since they are part and parcel of the citizens of the States. Therefore, diplomats must serve well the interests of their home governments if they must satisfy their personal needs.

They have to be blunt when that is demanded of them by their governments, and soft in their approaches when that is required to securing the interests of their home governments. Quoting Palmer and Palmer (2015, p.83) stated that:

A diplomat's words must have no relation to actions – otherwise what kind of diplomacy is it? Words are one thing, actions another. Good words are a mask for the concealment of bad deeds. Sincere diplomacy is no more possible than dry water or wooden iron.

This position shows that subtlety and falsehood are the nature of diplomacy because the diplomat is bound to the expectations of his employers, whether or not the expectations agree with his personal world views. The aspirations of his government may differ from his traditional opinions but that does not count in diplomacy more than the dreams of a State. Thus, the dreams of the State and personal views of the diplomat are merged together in the pursuit of the foreign affairs of any State. But still, the traditional environment where the diplomat was born and grew up has a lot of influence on his personal world views.

If he belongs to an aggressive environment, he will naturally tend to be aggressive in his approaches to diplomacy; if he was bred in a peaceful environment where the dignity of man is cherished, he will naturally tend to be more humane in his diplomatic approaches. It is this last set of diplomats that are often seen pushing the frontiers of diplomacy towards friendly relations among the nations. Baker (1995), author of *The Politics of Diplomacy, 1989–1992*, accepted the effects of his own background on his duties to the USA, including his services as State Secretary, when he stated on his dedication page of the book:

To my great-grand father, my grandfather, and my father, the three generations of James Addison Bakers whose in God, integrity, and hard work gave me a remarkable heritage that inspired me ...

Diplomacy recognises the cultural backgrounds of practitioners in their articulated drives to win the favours of contemporaries. It may be in personal diplomacy where individuals strive to woo others to grant them certain favours that will satisfy their personal needs. Or it could be in group or national and international diplomacy where diplomats engage themselves in negotiations to exert influence and control in favour of their respective States. It was in recognition of this that Machiavelle (1532, pp.15–18), advised that

Princes who must dominate and control other States must not lose sight of the backgrounds – environments, governments and religions, of those they hope to dominate and control.

3 Cultural diplomacy

Culture is universal. Nations and groups engage in dynamic but different ways to advance themselves in unique ways. Culture evolves as nations or individual groups evolve. These cultural evolvments depend much on the nature and peculiarities of the environment that a nation or group has to overcome in order to find fulfilment and happiness in their settlement. In other words, culture is the answer attained by a people over the years in their unique environment.

Culture defines the approaches adopted by the ancestors of a people to overcome the challenges of their environment in the past. These approaches were therefore, passed on from the ancestors to their posterities as the acceptable ways of tackling certain obstacles of the societies. In that regard, culture is the way of life observed differently in different nations and/or practised among different groups of people pursuing same goals. Beattie (1964) noted that these differences in cultural practices are responsible for racial hatred and other challenges facing mankind in the present age because in the formative days of the different cultures, there were little or no possibilities of large-scale contacts as seen today.

The increased inter-group relations of today's nations encourage the pursuit of national interests through friendliness largely sustained by the cultures of the different peoples. As a result, culture becomes a tool in the foreign affairs drive of nations, giving credence to the relevance of culture in the game of diplomacy. Therefore, cultural diplomacy is the use of soft power approach in the exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples.

This in turn, according to Arndt (2022) fosters mutual understanding and co-operation in the inter-group affairs of the people involved. Since diplomacy is generally speaking, an instrument in the pursuit of a country's foreign policies, cultural diplomacy as an integral part of that instrument, uses exhibitions of the physical arts and values of a nation to participate in that pursuit. One target of cultural diplomacy is to market the ideals and institutions of a people in their efforts to attain broader economic and political advantages and acceptability over other people. In other words, cultural diplomacy exposes the soul of a nation and in return, ensures its influence in relation with other nations. It also helps in building national security which is indispensable to viable business life of nations.

In every society, culture is seen in two categories: high culture and the popular culture. The high culture creates meaning through art, literature and education and appeals mostly, to the elites of society; while popular culture appeal to the masses. Culture is regarded as 'soft power approach' because it pursues and achieves its target without force or payments but rather through attractions. The value of culture lies in its power to win the admiration of foreigners. Cultural diplomacy as an open or public diplomacy, demonstrates the best of a country, showcasing the society and its culture to the world. Arndt (2022) said that cultural diplomacy takes place when formal diplomats, serving the national governments, try to shape and channel the culture of their country to advance national interests.

It is important to note that while governments involve in cultural diplomacy to make known the culture of its people and to explain its impact on national policy, cultural diplomacy derives credibility from its closeness to traditional authorities rather than government institutions. The non-violent nature of culture attains influence and control over receiving nations and fosters mutual understanding, co-operation and greater gains among two nations or a group of nations. In the words of Satow (1917), culture was formidable in the intra and inter-group relations of peoples in the days when cultural diplomacy manifested in trade, cultural shows, cultural exchanges, visits, etc. Nonetheless, Satow noted that visitors to kingdoms in those early days were subjected to customary cleansing before they were allowed to see their hosts. That confirms cultural diplomacy in its traditional mode instead of its ethics which Kerr and Wiseman (2017) defined as ‘the accumulated communicative and representational norms, rules and institutions (of) relations and (to) avoid war(s) between interacting groups and entities’.

Adegbulu (2011) affirmed ‘the necessity of the customary cleansing of visitors to pre-colonial Kings before they were allowed to see them’ because such visitors were still believed to be dangerous and impure, thus the need to exorcise them of dangerous influences. Cultural diplomacy has always been a way of showcasing the heritage of a country to the outside world with the view of gaining acceptance and respect of the international community. In 1805, according to Palmer (1962), Britain organised an international exhibition to demonstrate its material prosperity, the result of its cultural achievements in technology, to show how science could enhance national development and prestige.

Harris (1987) revealed that in 1896, Ethiopia used cultural resilience as a source of inspiration to keep her sovereignty and to remain free from colonialism which gave the Ethiopians better deals in her international affairs. And in 1977, Nigeria (where Igbo land is located) organised the African Festival of Arts and Culture, FESTAC, under General Olusegun Obasanjo, then the Head of State, to showcase the cultural heritage of the country to the world and use that to attract global friendliness to the country after many years of military misrule that had resulted to severed diplomatic ties and sanctions from many Western countries.

Conclusively, cultural diplomacy seeks and wins the support of a foreign audience. It uses the elements of culture to prevent, manage and mitigate conflicts with target nations; and also changes the policies of its own government. Cultural diplomacy encourages viable co-operation among nations by ensuring its people, their culture and policies are seen by other countries as positive. Apart from fostering mutual understanding, cultural diplomacy is used to enhance the security relations of a country.

4 Igbo cultural diplomacy in pre-colonial African traditions and cultures

It is certain that pre-colonial Africa had viable strategies and diplomatic institutions that served as part of its traditions and culture. These worked in synergy to ensure peaceful co-existence among the people of the continent and all strangers coming to Africa. Every domestic and foreign need had a unique approach by which it was pursued and attained. The Kings, Chiefs, Elders and other opinion holders co-operated for defence, trade, politics and cultural exchanges. Harris (1987) noted that there were times when multilateral assemblies (conferences) were held between communities, clans and kingdoms to deliberate on matters of common interest. Resolutions at such assemblies

often ended in covenants (*igbandu* in Igbo parlance) to cement agreements and ensure the commitment and compliance of all parties. Spies (2016) wrote that in pre-colonial Africa:

Intra-African diplomacy was as vibrant as continental relations with the outside. We are aware, courtesy of early traders; missionaries and other travellers, of fascinating exchanges among many of the polities: Aksum, Buganda, Timbuktu, Mali, Ghana (Wagadu), Asante, (Ashanti Empire), Dahomey (now Benin), Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe, to name but a few.

Spies further maintained that pre-colonial Africa was set to evolve into a continental international society just as post-Westphalia Europe did but for the disruptive invasions of Western powers. The target of diplomacy is always peace negotiated and achieved through compromises for healthy inter-group relations. Diplomacy is an old human practice that cannot be said to have its origin in any particular society of the world. This is because in every society of human desires and needs, people interact diversely to reach their individual and group ends.

That practice obtains in all societies where there is a government or leadership in charge of public affairs like in pre-colonial Igbo land and other African nations where governments were mutually coordinated according to age. Johari (1986) posited that in the ancient times 'there were groups, clans, tribes, gens, villages, communities and the likes, that engaged in inter-group activities of war and peace.' These activities served the economic needs of people at that time.

In pre-colonial Africa, diplomacy thrived basically on economic needs through social, cultural and political means for optimal gains via economic interdependency of the societies. Each of these societies had one advantage or another over trade goods that were exchanged by barter for goods from relating societies. By that method, individual and societal needs were mutually attended to without visible differences between the haves and the have-nots.

There are oral proofs that pre-colonial Africans also related among themselves through wars and peace as Johari (1986) observed of the people of ancient Greece. In the view of Harris (1987), before the invasion of Africa by Europeans, African history was much of diplomatic and military struggles 'to maintain control over fertile land, trade and trade routes' which often led to the rise and fall of kingdoms and city-states. Asante (2007) averred that pre-colonial Yoruba people had an institution called *Iwarefa* or Chiefs, who were heads of their descent groups and had the responsibility of appointing the Oba.

The *Iwarefa* remained central to major decisions that were reached on behalf of the Yoruba confederation, and that included war decisions. While the *Iwarefa* was responsible for decision making, the Oba or Alaafin enforced the decisions through a retinue of servants. In Adegbulu (2011), it was noted that these servants were mostly slaves who were extensively used in the expansion of the foreign or diplomatic interests of the Alaafin or Oba of Yoruba kingdom.

Adegbulu opined further that though there were some differences in the practice of cultural diplomacy in pre-colonial African societies, there were still well managed institutions that made decent and dignified diplomatic relations possible among the people. The Yoruba granted strangers or foreigners in Yoruba land decent receptions and offered them 'land on which to farm;' just as the King of Dahomey and his subjects 'received strangers with the most remarkable courtesy' that encouraged the influx of foreigners into the Kingdom.

Nevertheless, as often known of unchecked opportunities in human societies, Stride and Ifeka (1982) maintained that the hospitality of many African Kings was many times abused by the benefiting foreigners. That happened when the populations of the strangers were ignored to grow out of proportion without the careful watch of the Kings. When that unexpected came about, it was often too late for the indigenous Kings to rise to the occasion of controlling the ill consequences, resulting to some powerful Kings applying harsh measures on the foreigners. For instance, the Fante Confederation of 1868, as noted in Harris (1987), was formed to check the excesses of Europeans at the coasts of Ghana (the then Gold Coast). The English and Dutch traders had reached a secret agreement known as the Anglo-Dutch treaty, to exchange their Forts in the Asante/Fante region.

The Confederation developed into a good multilateral diplomatic institution that were in many ways comparable to present day United Nations Organisation, UNO, with a three-man security council, a general assembly of member states, an International Court at Makessim and 47 articles as a Constitution. This kind of alliance was common in pre-colonial Africa. But the tolerance of African Kings and Chiefs were largely taken for weakness by their foreign guests who flooded the continent for individual and group interests. Asante (2007) held that that seeming complacency of many African leaders was the reason why many of them lost their authorities and territories to strangers, bringing African traditional diplomatic institutions under foreign intrigues. These changed most African social systems to alien systems that did not recognize anything African.

As in other African communities, the Igbo were also affected by the abrupt changes despite the healthy indigenous diplomatic approaches that had existed and amicably resolved all internal and external conflicts. The Igbo techniques in conflict resolution and peace building were in tandem with African traditions and cultures which had thrived largely on good conscience, truth, fairness and justice to all. The target was to ensure between individuals and communities peaceful co-existence that endured the test of time. This was expressed in the Igbo aphorism: *onye egbule madu ibe ya* (Let nobody kill his fellow human being).

Nonetheless, the alien systems disregarded the dictate without a care for the interest of the indigenes. That was the opinion of Palmer and Palmer (2015) when they opined that citizens of foreign nations hardly understood the traditions and culture of other nations and they zealously disrupt them because the 'foreign affairs (of nations) are too foreign to citizens of (other) States, and their implications are not adequately grasped' by the strangers. That irrational destruction of social systems of other nations by those who do not understand them is one major reason for the imbalance and disquiet in human inter-group relations.

5 Steps in Igbo cultural diplomacy

In pre-colonial times, diplomacy in Igbo land was expressed as a philosophy of tolerance, peace and togetherness. The saying *Onye biri, ibe ya biri* (Live and let another live) was used to underscore the people's belief that no man can be happy anywhere without a neighbour or neighbours. Thus, the Igbo took it as a duty to nurture their intra and inter human relations for purposes of peaceful co-operations that enhanced economic activities among themselves and with external communities. They travelled widely to foreign lands for purposes of trade and other economic activities, sometimes involving marriages and religion to attain maximum results in their interactions. The pre-colonial Igbo believed

that peaceful co-existence with neighbours offered the best condition for business growth and prosperity. That cordial interfacing was his definition of productive diplomacy.

Anyanwu (2017) said that the Igbo related among themselves and with others through their religions, marriages, festivals and wars. These thrived, according to him, to enhance Igbo trade relations all through Igbo territory and beyond. Arochukwu traders and Nri priests were prominent in the use of religion as a means of building peace for healthy trade relations with neighbours. While the Aro made use of their *Ibini Ukpabi* oracle (Long Juju), Nri traders were famous with their *Otonsi* oracle propagated through their priests. It was the exact approach adopted by European and Arab traders through their Christian missionaries and Islamic clerics, respectively, for trade gains in Africa. While the Europeans and Arabs secured external territories to expand their trading empires through religious diplomacy, the Aro, Nri and other Igbo trading communities engaged cultural diplomacy to reach the same goal.

Igbo communities equally sought and secured settlements outside Igbo land through oracle (religious) diplomacy. These settlements did not only ensure save and peaceful trade passages but later became permanent homes away from ancestral homesteads which are recognised as Diaspora Igbo territories. The territories contributed in no small way to the expansion of Igbo business interests and belief system by contributing to the peace of their host communities.

Apart from religion, friendship with Chiefs and prominent citizens of communities where Igbo traders plied their trade was of paramount consideration in the pre-colonial times. Because of the insecurity of those days, prominent Igbo traders engaged in friendships with Chiefs and other men who assured them of the security of their lives and trade goods while passing through such an external territory, especially if the territory was considered hostile. Ofonagoro (1979) observed that Igbo traders travelled widely for trade reasons but because of the dangers to security, they did engage prominent Chiefs and others who could secure them and their goods through merchant routes that were considered dangerous. Accordingly, he wrote:

There were other... useful safe guards...Leading elders of each community (supplied) travellers with escorts or guides who then, steered their charges away from disturbed areas and accompanied them to the next friendly village along the route to their destinations... (The escorts or guides often carried from their masters) a passport known as *Ofo Ije*.

The *Ofo Ije* passport was a symbol of authority recognised by a Nze title holder on presentation by a guide or an escort from another holder of the title requesting a safe guide of his traders and trade goods across a particular route. It was a form of defence alliance that ensured safety of goods and security of traders throughout Igbo land and other communities where Nze title holder lived. Pre-colonial Igbo traders made extensive use of the *Ofo Ije* system to maintain a smooth flow of their trade within and outside the Igbo region.

Marriage is a cultural practice everywhere. In pre-colonial Igbo land it was used to enhance inter-group relations for purposes of trade and other economic interests. Enemugwem (2017) classified marriages as a social diplomacy that strengthened pre-colonial Igbo relations with their neighbours. Marriages did not only help the Igbo and their neighbours to achieve intimate ties but raised their confidence in each other in such a way that many families in places like Bonny, Opobo, Nembe, Ndoni, Kalabari, Okrika, etc., still trace their ancestors to Igbo land. Enemugwem (2017) contended further that

the pre-colonial Igbo engaged in marriages with prominent Niger Delta families as a means of boosting their trade interests in the region.

Festivals are occasional celebrations of a people held to commemorate important events in the culture history of the group. Like in other societies, the pre-colonial Igbo used some of their cultural festivals to build good will in their relations with neighbouring communities and others, particularly in their trade relations. Through such festivals Igbo traders were able to cement existing relationships in favour of their trade and other economic engagements with all their friends. In Igbo land, festivals were held in commemoration of important events or to mark the end and beginning of seasons. Pre-colonial Igbo businessmen profited from the festivals by inviting friends from distant lands to celebrate with them, thereby ascertaining their confidence in the friends.

Rituals were another cultural step adopted by the Igbo to ensure peace with other people. Rituals are religious acts that are carried out as occasion demands without altering the methods but performed according to established order. As religious acts, rituals are often carried out as an invitation to a supernatural force to stand as witness to an agreement between two persons or two groups of people. A good example was the sacrificial ritual at Ekomtoro between King Jaja's group and the people of Andoni over the ceding of a piece of land in Andoni to King Jaja and his group.

The ceded land, Cookey (1974) said, was to become the powerful Opobo Kingdom. Rituals are often executed as a seal of a taken oath. Pre-colonial Igbo people sealed their rituals with oaths to ensure peace between them and their hosts for unbroken trade and economic rights. The practice was equally involved in acquiring lands for farm works and permanent settlements. Oath taking entailed swearing allegiance and commitment to the terms of an agreement as long as the reasons for the oath persisted. Oath taking was a common practice among the Igbo, especially in matters of land disputes, resolving allegations of theft, witchcraft or poisoning of people, and in situations where the sincerity of parties was viewed with suspicion. Oath-taking was a reliable means of trusted justice in Igbo traditional judicial system because the final judges and enforcers of justice were believed to be divine and invisible. Death after taking an oath was a sign that the dead were not innocent.

Covenants were also steps to formalising intimate relationships in pre-colonial Igbo land. They served as binding spiritual agreements that parties must abide to in an undertaking. Two or more persons and even communities went into a covenant for a permanent settlement of disputes or to mark compromises of parties on issues of common interest. Administration of covenants took different forms. Some were by rituals while others were by offering palm wine to all parties from the same palm wine pot and with only one gourd or tumbler. Confirmed honest elders conducted the administration of covenants after rigorous incantations. Covenants were commonly called *Igbandu* in pre-colonial Igbo land.

However, there were other covenants conducted in secrecy to admit new members into secret societies. The forms and methods of these secret covenants depended on the sect and the deity members were loyal to. In all, covenants were undertaken for commitment in bi-lateral or multi-lateral agreements between two or more persons or communities. In secret covenants, physical marks could be inflicted on new initiates as a symbol of 'belonging'. In such cases, secrecy or reticence was the rule. An example of a covenant mark in pre-colonial Igbo land was the *Igbu ichu* marks. It is important to note that there were differences between covenants and initiations in Igbo land. While

initiations were inductions of new initiates through some rites into a cult group or sect, covenants were simply a religious rite of bond.

Titles played a very important role in Igbo cultural diplomacy in the early days. They were social acquisitions that qualified men for exclusive rights and privileges. Igbo society was stratified or classified into men of wealth, oratory, wisdom and physical strength. People strove and acquired titles that differentiated their value from other people in their communities. Taking a title in Igbo land was a rigorous and expensive exercise, and only men ably ready for them dared taking them. It was not a project for wishful thinkers. Those who had the wherewithal to take titles were qualified to be part of the decision-making groups of their respective communities.

In Idigo (2001), it was noted that title taking in Igbo land began in the Eri days. Eri was the acclaimed progenitor of the Igbo race. He was said to have instituted the first known title in Igbo land called *Odoloma Eri* for the smooth running of the Igbo Kingdom of his times. Idigo (2001) said that Eri created the *Odoloma Eri* title as an institution of government to differentiate and qualify men of self-discipline, honesty and proven integrity as leaders in his government. Those that held the title were recognized as members of Eri's ruling cabinet. The group was commonly called *Odoloma Eri* Council. One important qualification for membership of the Eri cabinet was the fear of *Chi ukwu* (the Almighty God or Supreme Spirit).

Till date elders in Igbo land are expected to be upright in character and in deeds, not wavering in decisions and dispositions. No elder was an elder in pre-colonial Igbo land if he was not fair in judgments; disciplined, bold and courageous in condemning what was adjudged evil. In many Igbo clans, the Warrant Chief institution imposed by the British colonialists, for instance, was roundly rejected because those given the Warrants to rule did not pass through the Eri established spiritual process of tongue cleansing (*Isa ire*), according to Idigo, which qualified leading elders to adjudicate in disputes. Idigo held that Eri was a deeply religious man who inculcated in his followers the belief in truth, fairness and orderliness in their daily affairs. He maintained that:

It was with the fear of Chukwu Okike (God the creator) that (Eri) was capable of infusing discipline and enhance law and order among his children. It was the objective of his administration to bring up his subjects in the fear of Chukwu (God Almighty) and to die to qualify as (impeccable) Ancestors. The Igbo ... (believed) that ancestors were dead Ndichie who lived righteously and were still living in the land of the dead and from whom favours could be sought.

Igbo population increased after the death of Eri and the *Odoloma* Council was modified by the descendants of Eri in their separate new homes to suit their respective expectations. The *Odoloma* title became *Ozo* title in some clans where the availability of principled men resulted in the creation of the office of Priests who were commissioned to go about Igbo land and beyond to establish shrines, heal the sick, preach peace, settle disputes as well as creating traditional institutions. Those traditional institutions became incorporated into the socio-cultural life of the people and were used in regulating daily activities even in external relations.

The dynamism of cultural diplomacy in pre-colonial Igbo land was also explored in inter-state tours, in the exchange of oracles and masquerades between Igbo communities and their neighbours, particularly their partners in trade. State tours encouraged security of trade routes while oracles and masquerades were exchanged between communities as diplomatic measures to showcase the cultural heritage of the Igbo, to pursue peace and to preach religious tolerance. Anyanwu (2017) opined that those cultural exchanges

encouraged the high-level cultural diversity noticeable among the Igbo. All the same, Anyanwu added that in spite of the foregoing, wars were still possible, especially in post-Eri times when the position of one community became a threat to another or others.

6 Effectiveness of Igbo cultural diplomacy in peace building

Diplomacy was not just for business relations in pre-colonial Igbo land but served diverse purposes as noted in Falola et al. (1989). By turning all weapons of warfare into instruments of peace, the Igbo oracle Priests embarked on peace crusades, conflict resolutions as well as condemnations of all forms of violent acts within and outside Igbo land. The Igbo nurtured peace with all available resources since it was believed that peace and honesty were indispensable to economic success. They applied those principles to build cordial inter-group relations that prospered them wherever they were found.

These cordial inter-group relations enabled the opportunities for chiefs and leaders in Igbo land to assess the economic potentials of other communities for fruitful economic engagements. The assessment in turn, gave rise to profitable bi-lateral and multi-lateral economic diplomacy and agreements (Falola, et al., 1989). These healthy inter-group relations were responsible for the existence of many business opportunities between Igbo entrepreneurs and the communities they related with.

Enemugwem was of the view that the mutual trust built on blood ties or kinship by the Igbo was reasonably responsible for the formation of pre-colonial city-states as great trading centres, especially in the Niger Delta region. In the opinion of Ofonagoro (1979), the Aro, an Igbo trading community, used their Long Juju or *Ibini Ukpabi* oracle, to create many trading out posts or colonies through a well nurtured inter-group relations that were based on rituals and blood covenants. That was made possible through cordial relationships with influential men of different Igbo communities that were partners in trade with the Aro. The covenants apart from beefing up the confidence of traders in each other were used in protecting trading goods and fidelity, especially along trade routes considered dangerous.

Medicine men and Priests of oracles were equally used extensively to build peaceful relations among Igbo communities and their neighbours. The Igbo medicine men prepared war charms and divined in individual and communal issues, and in many instances, were required to settle with the communities for proper vitiation of the spirits as may be needed from time to time (see Odeke, 2011; Ngofa, 1988).

On the other hand, oracle Priests in Igbo land were responsible for the integration of communities for peaceful co-existence. They established and consecrated shrines of their oracles within and beyond Igbo communities, and raised the status of first settlers as Priests, mostly through the *Amadi* cult whose members were presumed the first settlers of the communities (Aja, 2005). Besides, Igbo priests visibly participated in the ordination of counterparts as well as the coronation of Kings of other Kingdoms. The cordial relationship between the pre-colonial Igbo and Benin Kingdom was made possible through rituals and artistic exchanges carried out by Nri oracle Priests. Afigbo (1987) explained that Nri priests also participated in the coronation of many Benin Oba as well as the Atah of Igala which were impactful in the peaceful trade and socio-economic relations of the groups.

Leaders of Mgbidi (in present day Imo State) were always invited to witness the coronation of ancient Benin Kings due to their socio-religious affinities with Benin Kingdom. Again, Ofonagoro (1979) had it that Aro agents of the *Ibini Ukpabi* (Long Juju) oracle secured all their 98 colonies by advertising the potency of the *Ibini Ukpabi* oracle in all communities where they intended to establish Aro trade hegemony. Agents of the oracle were said to be trusted as the true children of God who possessed the power to proffer solutions to all human needs. For that reason, people were often convinced to visit the shrine of the oracle in Arochuku for spiritual solutions to their pressing needs such as barrenness, justice in disputes and others.

The appreciation of the patrons, according to Okonkwo (1979), led to the naming of many people after the oracle which cemented Aro relations in the communities of the patrons. Names like Ukpabi, Uzoigwe, Igwe and many others, are common not only in Igbo land but in neighbouring Niger Delta communities like Ogoni, Eleme, Okrika, Etche, Ogbia, etc. Again, the agents of the Agballa oracle, according to Ofonagoro (1979), brought great respect and tolerance to Awka diviners and medicine men that turned those privileges to trade advantages and used same to secure better relationships for both Awka other traders as well as other Igbo traders of the period.

Although the efforts of the oracle Priests and medicine men in building healthy inter-group relations was appreciably great, their influence in many communities was restricted to religious and spiritual matters only. In many parts of Igbo land the Council of Elders remained the apex organ of government that was visibly in charge of Igbo foreign affairs. The elders' council formulated bilateral and multilateral relations that were ran through emissaries and other appointees of the Council. In some communities, the Priests and medicine men were used as part of a community's foreign diplomats.

In all, the Igbo approach to diplomacy in pre-colonial Nigeria through their cultural and traditional practices was so effective that they travelled very far into Northern, Western and Southern parts of the country for business, and were always found successful settlers among their hosts. That the Igbo were so accepted and comfortably accommodated across the different communities of Nigeria shows how effective the Igbo used culture to contribute to peace building in pre-colonial Nigeria.

7 Conclusions

Economic interest is the major force that drives human activities everywhere and in all ages. Man relates with fellow men in various climes to nurture and sustain his economic interest. In doing that man has evolved what the modern man calls *diplomacy*, a concept that defines the approaches adopted by man to reach his economic interest. In pre-colonial Nigeria, the Igbo involved their cultural practices to relate peacefully among themselves and with their neighbours. By that means they were able to achieve enviable heights in the socio-economic and political spheres of pre-colonial Nigeria.

Their extensive use of cultural exchanges in inter-group relations enhanced opportunities that satisfied their economic quests in all communities where they found themselves. They deliberately encouraged inter-community marriages, title taking, covenants and exchange of festivals, initiations, masquerades and other forms of cultural exhibitions that served as preventive diplomacy to secure them desired peace and healthy relations wherever they operated their trade.

These cultural exchanges and exhibitions were not only useful to Igbo socio-economic goals but equally served as bridges of peace between them and their hosts in all pre-colonial communities of Nigeria. This fact is proved with the indigenisation of Igbo settlers in all regions of Nigeria where they have been tightly assimilated into host cultures. In those communities, the Igbo have used their natural business acumen to contribute immensely to the socio-economic and political developments of their hosts.

The kind of relative peace achieved through culture by the Igbo in pre-colonial Nigeria is most desirable in the contemporary world where economic interest has led many nations into intractable wars that wasted both man and his property. Since the Medieval Age in Europe to the period of Alliance System until the days of the Thirty Years War that turned Europe into a 'theatre of war' before it was settled in 1648, different moves have been adopted by Western countries to resolve their conflicts and to build peace without success. The continuous designation of some cultures as primitive and superstitious in the face of widening global crises is not helpful to the international community where peace and security are most needed.

It is thus, part of the findings of this paper that the persistent elusive global peace and security could be better addressed in no small measure if a critical and objective review of the affected cultures, including that of the Igbo in Nigeria, is undertaken with a view to integrating their verified positive aspects into international politics. That, the paper also finds out, will effectively help the business of the international community.

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