

Voices Beneath the Surface, Reclaiming Igbo Oral Tradition as Historical Method and Archive

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>Rooted in the cosmology, performance, and kinship systems of the Igbo people, oral tradition serves as a living archive through which history is not merely remembered but ritually enacted, spatially grounded, and socially authorized. Far from being anecdotal or supplementary, these oral forms, shrines, genealogies, naming practices, and women's institutions like the Umuada function as legitimate modes of historical production and communal governance. Drawing on oral interviews with elders, shrine custodians, and women in Nnewi, Owerri, and Umuahia, this study illuminated how Igbo oral practices transmit memory, adjudicate disputes, and assert identity across generations. Framed within decolonial and feminist epistemologies, and informed by the works of Jan Vansina, Ifi Amadiume, Walter Mignolo, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the paper challenges Eurocentric historiographical hierarchies that equate writing with truth and orality with absence. It foregrounded the embodied, gendered, and spiritual dimensions of Igbo memory, particularly as preserved in women's dirges, shrine performances, and genealogical recitations. The analysis further reflects on the disruptive impact of colonialism and Christianity, which sought to displace oral systems through textual domination, while tracing how communities resisted through concealment, adaptation, and ritual resilience. Igbo oral tradition emerged not as a vanishing relic of the past, but as a dynamic, ethical, and intellectually rigorous framework for historical knowing one that demands a rethinking of what constitutes evidence, authority, and archive in African historiography.</i>
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Introduction

Oral tradition occupies a central, albeit contested, space in the landscape of African historiography. For decades, it has been subjected to the biases of colonial epistemologies that privilege the written word as the exclusive vessel of historical truth. In the case of the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, whose historical consciousness is embedded in performance, ritual, and communal memory, oral tradition has often been reduced to folklore, myth, or anecdote. This reductionist framing is a legacy of colonial and missionary interventions, which actively delegitimized indigenous modes of remembering and knowing. Yet, oral tradition in Igbo society constitutes not merely a supplement to written archives but an autonomous and rigorous system of historical production. It is a living archive dynamic, performative, and anchored in a deeply spiritual cosmology

(Vansina, 1985; Taylor, 2003). This article examines the epistemological depth and historical utility of Igbo oral tradition, arguing that its performative, gendered, and spatialized forms manifest in shrines, genealogies, naming practices, and institutions such as the Umuada are foundational to the construction, preservation, and contestation of history in Igbo communities. Drawing on oral interviews with elders, shrine custodians, and women leaders in Nnewi, Owerri, and Umuahia, the study foregrounds how oral traditions serve not merely as memory banks but as instruments of governance, social regulation, and spiritual accountability. These oral practices are not static relics of the past but resilient, adaptive frameworks that mediate identity, authority, and legitimacy in contemporary Igbo life.

The paper situates its intervention within ongoing scholarly debates about the place of oral tradition in historical methodology, particularly in African contexts. Jan Vansina's foundational work, *Oral Tradition as History* (1985), laid the groundwork for treating oral narratives as legitimate historical sources, provided they are critically contextualized and methodologically examined. Ruth Finnegan (1992) expanded this understanding by offering a taxonomy of African oral forms, emphasizing their literary and aesthetic dimensions. Yet, even these foundational scholars operated within paradigms that sought to validate oral traditions by measuring them against written records. More recent scholarship, including that of Walter Mignolo (2011) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), has argued for the epistemic disobedience necessary to challenge Western modes of knowledge production. They call for a pluriversality of knowledges recognizing that African societies possess internally coherent epistemologies that do not require Western validation. In this regard, Igbo oral tradition offers a compelling model for rethinking what counts as history and how it is made. The cosmological underpinnings of Igbo society do not separate the sacred from the historical. Ancestral authority, spiritual sanction, and ethical responsibility are all embedded in acts of remembrance. The shrine (ogwugwu), for example, is not merely a site of worship; it is a juridical space where disputes are settled, genealogies invoked, and land claims authenticated. Similarly, the names given to children, the dirges sung by women at funerals, and the proverbs exchanged in public deliberations are all historical acts each encoding and transmitting specific understandings of the past. This work also seeks to disrupt the gendered erasure often present in mainstream historiography. Scholars like Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Bolanle Awe (1991) have emphasized the critical role of women in African oral traditions particularly through performance genres, familial rituals, and memory work. Among the Igbo, the Umuada institution exemplifies this dynamic. As daughters of the lineage, the Umuada possess both moral and ritual authority, often adjudicating disputes and invoking ancestral narratives to mediate communal conflict. Their oral practices ranging from dirges to ritual admonitions constitute a gendered archive that remains underexplored in academic literature. This article argues for a decolonized historiography that places Igbo oral tradition at the center of historical inquiry. Rather than treating oral accounts as supplements to written history, they must be approached as primary modes of historical consciousness deeply embedded in the spiritual, social, and political life of the community. By listening to the voices, songs, rituals, and silences that constitute the oral archive, historians can access not only new sources of evidence but new ways of knowing. In so doing, we are compelled to reimagine the

historian's craft not merely as a textual exercise but as an embodied, ethical, and dialogical engagement with living memory.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the epistemic value of oral tradition in Igbo society, one must engage with a set of theoretical and conceptual tools that challenge Eurocentric historiography and reassert the legitimacy of African modes of knowledge production. Historically, the discipline of history has privileged written sources as the bedrock of credible scholarship, marginalizing orality as anecdotal, imprecise, or pre-historical (Vansina, 1985; Henige, 1982). This epistemological hierarchy is not neutral; it reflects the colonial and Enlightenment underpinnings of Western modernity, which established a "monoculture of knowledge" (de Sousa Santos, 2014) wherein only certain forms of knowing were seen as legitimate. Jan Vansina's seminal work, *Oral Tradition as History* (1985), offered a methodological breakthrough by systematizing the collection and analysis of oral sources in African historiography. He argued that oral traditions when critically evaluated offer structured, retrievable, and interpretable forms of historical data. However, Vansina's framework, though foundational, remained bound by the desire to validate oral tradition within the epistemic terms of Western history. The present study builds upon his contributions but moves further to treat oral tradition as a distinct epistemology, one that should not be assessed by written-textual standards alone.

The work of Diana Taylor (2003) expands this conversation by distinguishing between the "archive" and the "repertoire." While the archive comprises documents, texts, and other material artifacts, the repertoire includes embodied practices performance, gesture, orality that transmit cultural memory across time. Igbo oral tradition resides firmly in the repertoire. Through rituals, invocations, naming ceremonies, storytelling, and the maintenance of shrines, memory is preserved not in ink but in action, not in buildings but in bodies.

Furthermore, African feminist scholars such as Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Bolanle Awe (1991) have illuminated the gendered dimensions of oral knowledge production. In Igbo society, women, particularly through dirges, songs, and the Umuada institution, perform critical roles in remembering, contesting, and transmitting history. These gendered forms of knowledge often dismissed as "domestic" or "informal" are in fact archives of political, moral, and genealogical authority. Drawing on the decolonial epistemologies of Walter Mignolo (2011) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), both of whom critique the colonial legacy of knowledge exclusion. Mignolo's idea of "epistemic disobedience" is particularly relevant: to

foreground oral tradition as a primary historical method is not merely a methodological choice but an epistemic refusal of Western monopoly on history. Ngũgĩ, in *Decolonising the Mind*, similarly insists that African languages and oral forms must reclaim their centrality in African intellectual life. Finally, the concept of the “living archive” (Mbembe, 2002) provides an interpretive key. In this framework, the archive is not a static collection of facts but a dynamic process that lives through ritual, space, and collective memory. In Igbo culture, the shrine, the market square, the family hearth, and even the grave are archives sites where memory is activated and contested.

SHIRINES AND THE SPECIALIZATION OF MEMORY

In Igbo cosmology, shrines (ogwugwu or ọbịa) are more than sacred spaces of worship they are living repositories of memory, authority, and historical knowledge. Functioning as material and spiritual nodes within the Igbo social fabric, shrines encode layered histories of kinship, land, migration, and conflict, inscribed not on parchment but in the sacred topography of the village. They serve as mnemonic devices, legal archives, and ritual courts through which history is not only remembered but actively re-enacted. Shrines are typically associated with deities, ancestors, or founding figures of a lineage, and are spatially embedded in groves, compounds, boundaries, or marketplaces. These physical locations carry historical significance: they mark where ancestors were buried, where oaths were taken, where peace was brokered, or where migrations began or ended. The spatiality of memory, in this sense, is not incidental but foundational. The shrine is not merely a container of memory it is memory spatialized. During an oral interview, Peter Okonkwo, a shrine custodian in Nnewi, noted:

“This shrine was built when our people returned from war. The staff of justice (ọfọ) kept here tells the story. When a dispute comes, we bring it out. It reminds us who we are and where we started.”

This illustrates how shrines function as both juridical and historical sites. In precolonial Igbo society, shrines played a central role in resolving disputes, arbitrating land conflicts, and validating genealogical claims. Elders would invoke ancestral names and recite lineage histories before the shrine, often accompanied by libations and ritual invocations. This process, far from being mystical or mythic, was a form of communal historiography one where truth was ritually enacted and history ritually authorized. The performance of memory through shrines also takes place during key festivals, especially the **Iri Ji** (New Yam Festival), when shrines are renewed, ancestors invoked, and oral histories retold to younger generations. In these ritual moments, the shrine becomes a pedagogical site a classroom of embodied memory where stories are danced,

sung, and performed. The audience is not passive but participatory, responding with affirmations, questions, or corrections, thereby ensuring the intergenerational transmission of historical consciousness. The shrine’s authority is further reinforced by its link to the metaphysical. In Igbo belief, ancestors are not dead but living presences who watch over the living and intervene in human affairs. The shrine is the portal through which this sacred communication occurs. This belief imbues the shrine with a moral weight that no written archive can match. It is not only a site of memory but of ethical judgment, where the wrongdoer is not merely punished but reconciled with the cosmic order.

Colonial and Christian incursions sought to dismantle the shrine as a site of epistemic authority. Missionaries condemned them as pagan, while colonial officers viewed them as impediments to legal centralization. Many shrines were desecrated, relocated, or subsumed within Christian rituals. Yet, as Esther Opara recalled in an interview from Owerri,

“Even when they burnt the grove, we carried the memory to our backyard. We turned the small room into a place for speaking to the ancestors.”

This testimony affirms the adaptability of the shrine as a historical institution. It shows that the archive of memory is not extinguished by displacement it migrates, mutates, and re-emerges in new forms. Whether located in groves or modern homes, the shrine remains a site where Igbo communities remember the past, negotiate the present, and project their collective futures. The spatialization of memory through shrines thus challenges the Western notion of archives as fixed, enclosed, and textual. In the Igbo case, memory is mobile, embodied, and sacred. It is animated not by the presence of documents but by the presence of the ancestors, the rhythm of ritual, and the moral obligations of the living.

Naming, Genealogy, and Historical Authority Thus, reclaiming Igbo oral tradition is not merely about preservation; it is about recognition. It is about affirming that valuable historical knowledge exists outside the written word that memory can live in speech, space, and silence. In doing so, we reaffirm the vitality of a people who have long remembered by speaking, sung their truths aloud, and carried their past forward in voice.

Among the Igbo, the spoken word (okwu) possesses profound ontological and historical significance. It is not merely a vehicle of communication but a creative force, imbued with power to invoke, affirm, curse, or heal. This understanding shapes the cultural weight attached to names and genealogical recitations. Names are not randomly assigned; they are archival utterances that encode family

histories, spiritual orientations, and moral expectations. Genealogy, in turn, is a performative method of reconstructing and asserting historical authority, often orally transmitted and ritually validated. Naming practices (igwa aha) in Igbo society represent a formal act of historical inscription. Personal names often reflect historical events, social tensions, communal aspirations, or religious affiliations. A name like **Ijeoma** ("safe journey") might commemorate a period of migration or exile. Another, like **Onwuatuegwu** ("death is not the end of strength"), could memorialize loss or resilience in the face of war or epidemic. As Ogechi Iwu, a retired schoolteacher from Umuahia, reflected in interview:

"My mother gave me this name after her sister died in childbirth. It was her way of remembering that sorrow and of making sure I would carry it forward with dignity."

This practice transforms the body into an archive; each name becomes a mobile site of memory, embodying affective and historical depth. Naming ceremonies also involve public performance ritual prayers, ancestral invocation, and storytelling which further affirms the name's historical embeddedness.

Genealogical recitations function as another critical form of oral historiography. They typically occur during funerals, title-taking ceremonies, or disputes over land and inheritance. The reciter begins with a founding ancestor and moves through successive generations, sometimes punctuating the list with historical episodes migrations, wars, alliances, or ruptures. This is not merely a recitation of names but a moral and political act. It asserts belonging, continuity, and legitimacy. It affirms, "We have always been here," or "This land is ours because our ancestor farmed it."

Mr Emmanuel Ibe, a community elder in Owerri, explained:

"We don't write our history on paper. We carry it in our mouths. When we gather, someone speaks, another corrects, a third adds a name we forgot. That is how the line lives."

This dialogic mode of remembering corrective, collaborative, fluid reveals an epistemological stance that values collective verification over fixed documentation. It also reflects what Paul Connerton (1989) describes as "habitual memory," a form of remembrance embedded not in texts but in social rituals, spatial familiarity, and bodily performance. Genealogies are not neutral. They are political tools used to resolve land disputes, affirm chieftaincy claims, or exclude rival lineages. The flexibility of oral genealogy its capacity to adapt or selectively forget is not a flaw but a strength. It allows memory to

accommodate new realities while maintaining continuity with the past. As historian David Henige (1982) observed, oral genealogies in Africa often function as "charters" rather than chronicles documents of legitimacy rather than of dispassionate chronology. Colonial and missionary authorities often misunderstood this logic. They introduced written records baptismal names, court registries, land surveys that were presumed to be more authoritative. But in practice, many Igbo communities continued to rely on oral genealogies, especially in moments of social crisis. The *ofo* staff (a ritual symbol of ancestral authority) still serves in many villages as a physical token of genealogical legitimacy. Without the right to invoke one's ancestors, one cannot speak authoritatively in public deliberation.

Genealogy is also gendered. While patrilineal descent is more prominently formalized, women often preserve alternate lines of memory through song, prayer, and informal storytelling. This "vernacular genealogy" exists in lullabies, market conversations, or dirges, subtly challenging the formal structures of male-dominated oral archives. This will be further discussed in the next section.

The Gendered Archive: Women, Dirges, and Umuada Institutions

In most conventional historiographies whether colonial, nationalist, or academic the historical contributions of women are often obscured or relegated to the margins. Yet in Igbo society, women have historically played a central role in the production, preservation, and transmission of historical memory, especially through oral forms. Their participation is not peripheral; it is foundational, particularly in ritual, performative, and intergenerational contexts. This section foregrounds the gendered dimensions of Igbo oral tradition, focusing on three interrelated modalities: dirges, women's ritual speech, and the institution of the Umuada (daughters of the lineage). One of the most affective and historically charged forms of female expression is the funeral dirge (igba egwu ɔnwu or abu ɔnwu). While often interpreted narrowly as expressions of grief, dirges are, in fact, narrative forms that reconstruct personal and communal histories through poetic lament. They often contain embedded genealogies, references to ancestral disputes, recollections of land transfers, and invocations of moral lessons. The dirge is, in essence, a performance of memory emotionally charged, temporally expansive, and morally authoritative.

As Esther Opara, a market elder interviewed in Owerri, recalled:

"When my mother died, my aunt didn't just weep. She sang about the famine of 1943, about how they fled the soldiers, about how our grandmother healed people with herbs. That was not just

mourning. That was our history, carried in her voice.”

These dirges do more than mourn the dead; they memorialize the community’s trials, virtues, and failings. They become vehicles for transmitting unofficial but deeply resonant histories especially those excluded from male-dominated genealogies or state-sponsored narratives. Dirges, often improvised and performed in the moment of grief, serve as oral commentaries on the moral standing of the deceased and the collective memory of the family.

Beyond dirges, women participate in Igbo historical life through structured institutions foremost among them, the Umuada. This institution, composed of married daughters who return periodically to their natal villages, functions as a moral tribunal, memory archive, and social stabilizer. While the Umuada do not typically hold land rights, they hold extraordinary authority over how the past is remembered and adjudicated, especially in cases of intra-family conflict, inheritance disputes, and violations of ritual codes. The authority of the Umuada is drawn not from institutionalized power but from ancestral entitlement and mnemonic mastery. In many communities, the arrival of the Umuada for burial rites or family crises is treated with solemnity. Their collective memory is considered unimpeachable. As Chidi Nnamdi, an elder and community historian, noted:

“The Umuada carry the words of our mothers. When they speak, even chiefs listen. They know the secrets of the house, the warnings of the ancestors, the forgotten vows.”

Their judgments are often laced with proverbial speech, genealogical reminders, and references to prior transgressions or reconciliations. Their oral interventions are not arbitrary they are structured, rehearsed, and authoritative. Women in this role perform what anthropologist Karin Barber (2007) terms a “genre of memory”: a set of culturally sanctioned forms of narration and performance that structure how communities understand their past. Moreover, women act as intergenerational archivists through everyday practices: teaching songs to children, retelling moral tales during moonlight gatherings, composing lullabies embedded with political allegories. These forms, though informal, constitute what Diana Taylor (2003) calls the “repertoire” embodied practices that transmit knowledge, values, and historical consciousness outside of written or institutional archives. In many respects, this gendered archive contests colonial and missionary assumptions about African women’s “subservience” or absence from public life. Indeed, colonial records frequently failed to recognize women’s spaces of power precisely because they operated outside of centralized chieftaincies and formal institutions.

Yet, as Bolanle Awe (1991) and Ifi Amadiume (1987) have shown, these assumptions were deeply flawed. In Igbo society, as in many African societies, female power was exercised through horizontal solidarities ritual sisterhoods, market cooperatives, and ancestral affiliations.

The erosion of these structures through colonial legal codes, Christian moralism, and urbanization disrupted the gendered logic of oral historiography. Nonetheless, the Umuada, dirges, and women’s ritual speech continue to serve as powerful tools of historical reckoning in many communities. Their survival points to the resilience of female-authored memory and the need to expand our understanding of what counts as historiography.

Shrines, Rituals, and the Spatial Archive: Embodied Memory in Igbo Historiography

In Western traditions, archives are typically conceived as static repositories of paper documents, organized according to bureaucratic logics of classification and permanence. Yet among the Igbo, as in many African societies, the archive is not a building or a collection of written records. Rather, it is a spatial and ritualized practice alive in shrines, ancestral groves, masks, and material objects that function as memory devices. These shrines and ritual spaces form what has been theorized by Achille Mbembe (2002) and others as a “living archive” not a container of history, but an active site of historical transmission, moral reckoning, and spiritual encounter.

Shrines (ogwugwu, mmbà, or oku obia) in Igbo culture are not merely religious sites; they are embodiments of lineage, territorial sovereignty, and historical continuity. Each family or village shrine functions as a mnemonic geography its very location, objects, and taboos indexing layers of ancestral memory and cosmological order. These shrines house symbolic artifacts such as staffs of office, carved stools, ancestral masks, or ritual stones (okposi), each of which carries with it a story, a precedent, and an authority structure.

Peter Okonkwo, a shrine custodian interviewed in Nnewi, remarked:

“This stool is older than the road. We don’t sit on it unless the ancestors approve. If you ask who first owned this land, we don’t check any book we open this hut and bring out the staff of Eze Ndu. That is our proof.”

Here, the shrine becomes not only a spiritual interface but a historical adjudicator. It is the object that settles land disputes, legitimizes succession, and demarcates historical belonging. The authority it confers is neither textual nor bureaucratic; it is ritual and genealogical. The shrine thus functions as what Diana Taylor (2003) calls the repertoire a

mode of remembering grounded not in writing but in performance, gesture, and materiality. These rituals are deeply embedded in cycles of agricultural, communal, and kinship life. Annual festivals like Iri Ji (New Yam Festival) and Ogene masquerades involve shrine purification, ancestral libations, and communal storytelling, all of which reaffirm social contracts and historical consciousness. Each performance is not a mere reenactment but an active renewal of the past in the present.

Rituals are also occasions for transmitting genealogies, settlement histories, and accounts of migration. During title-taking ceremonies (Ichie or Ozo titles), oral accounts of lineage are recited in public, interweaving cosmological origin stories with specific territorial claims. These performances function as what Paul Connerton (1989) terms “habitual memory” the bodily and spatial reenactment of tradition, wherein memory is not only told but inhabited.

Importantly, shrines and their associated rituals offer a spatial epistemology of history. The sacred grove, the threshold stone, or the ancestral compound become sites where memory is stored, contested, and reaffirmed. In contrast to archives that separate history from everyday life, the Igbo shrine weaves history into the fabric of lived space. It is through spatial movement libations at thresholds, processions to groves, prostrations before ancestral altars that history is enacted and made legible. Colonial and missionary incursions attempted to delegitimize these spatial archives. Many shrines were destroyed or desecrated, labeled as sites of paganism and idolatry. Colonial courts required written land titles, invalidating shrine-based claims. Yet, as several interviews and ethnographic observations reveal, communities adapted. Shrines were hidden, relocated, or re-symbolized as Christian altars while retaining their mnemonic functions. The sacred *ofọ* staff, for instance, continues to be used in family deliberations, not as a relic but as a testimony of ancestral right.

Esther Opara, interviewed in Owerri, affirmed:

“When we dance for the ancestors, we are not just honoring them we are repeating their stories with our bodies. Each movement means something. Each step is a memory.”

These performances are , negotiated, and temporally layered. A ritual may recall a mythic founding, reference a colonial imposition, and comment on a contemporary crisis blending multiple timelines into a single expressive form. This non-linear temporality resists the linear historicism of Western chronology and aligns more closely with what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) describes as an African time consciousness spiraling, relational, and spiritually charged.

The spatial archive is also a gendered space. While male elders typically officiate at the public shrines, women manage domestic altars and maternal shrines (*ogọ nne*), often tied to fertility, lineage, and childbirth. These gendered spaces also serve as mnemonic repositories, where ritual objects, songs, and taboos encode historical knowledge from a maternal line. In this way, the archive expands beyond the masculine performance of public memory to encompass the domestic, emotional, and reproductive realms of historical knowing.

Colonialism, Christianity, and the Crisis of Orality

The colonial encounter in southeastern Nigeria, marked by British administrative control and widespread Christian missionary activity, fundamentally disrupted the ecosystem of Igbo oral tradition. As agents of empire and evangelism, colonial officers and missionaries introduced not only new political and religious institutions but also epistemological hierarchies that marginalized orality and elevated the written word as the singular bearer of truth, legality, and civilization. This disruption was not incidental; it was systemic, designed to replace indigenous systems of knowledge transmission with Euro-Christian models of literacy, documentation, and historical consciousness. In precolonial Igbo society, memory was held in shrines, transmitted in genealogies, and enacted in rituals and proverbs. Authority was often validated through oaths taken before ancestral spirits, and disputes were resolved by appealing to oral precedents. However, with the imposition of colonial rule and missionary Christianity, these practices were delegitimized. Land tenure, for instance, previously anchored in genealogical claims and ritual affirmation, became subject to written documentation and court adjudication, mechanisms unfamiliar to many Igbo communities and often inaccessible to those who had not received colonial education.

As Emmanuel Ibe of Owerri noted during an interview:

“Before, when there was a land case, we brought out the staff of Eze Ndu and the elders told the story. Now they ask for paper if it’s not in English, they say it’s not real.”

The imposition of Western textual authority rendered oral claims suspect, thereby dispossessing many communities of their land, rights, and histories. In courts, oral testimonies were often dismissed as hearsay unless corroborated by written evidence. This epistemic injustice not only eroded indigenous legal systems but introduced a politics of exclusion, whereby literacy in English became the gatekeeper of truth. Christian missionaries compounded this crisis. In their zeal to “civilize” and convert, they targeted shrines, masks, and other ritual objects for destruction. Sacred groves were cleared to build mission

schools and churches. Ancestral altars were labeled pagan and idolatrous. Converts were taught to renounce their traditional names, avoid libations, and forsake the oral practices that had anchored communal memory for generations. Hymnals, catechisms, and the Bible supplanted dirges, genealogies, and ritual incantations as sources of moral instruction.

Ogechi Iwu of Umuahia recalled:

“When my mother was baptized, they told her never to sing the songs of her grandmother. But those songs were where we kept our story.”

This epistemological rupture was also spatial. Whereas Igbo shrines had traditionally served as sites of historical transmission and adjudication, colonial courts and churches reconfigured the geography of authority. Sacred spaces were desacralized, and the rituals that once encoded historical knowledge were dismissed as superstition. This process of epistemic displacement a form of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) terms “epistemicide” entailed the systematic silencing of oral forms and the violent privileging of written discourse.

Yet, the crisis of orality did not result in total erasure. Rather, Igbo communities responded with remarkable strategies of adaptation and resilience. Some shrines were relocated to household altars; others were disguised within Christian symbols. Naming practices persisted covertly, with children receiving Christian and traditional names simultaneously. Oral genealogies continued to be rehearsed during family ceremonies, albeit quietly and outside formal institutions.

Peter Okonkwo of Nnewi explained this double consciousness:

“We pray in church on Sunday, but we pour libation on Monday. The two are not the same, but both are true.”

Such syncretic practices reveal how Igbo oral tradition survived colonial disruption not by retreating into obscurity, but by evolving sometimes through concealment, other times through overt resistance. The very performance of memory became an act of defiance, preserving historical consciousness in the face of institutional amnesia. Moreover, some Christian converts themselves became agents of cultural preservation. Women’s organizations, for instance, adapted traditional Umuada roles into Christian “women’s fellowships” that still invoked communal memory, mediated disputes, and maintained ancestral ties. In funerals and naming ceremonies, traditional oral forms persisted alongside Christian liturgies, producing a hybrid ritual vocabulary that continued to transmit historical knowledge. This hybridity challenges rigid binaries

between tradition and modernity, oral and written, pagan and Christian. It affirms what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) calls the “resilience of the colonized memory” a capacity to reconstitute identity and history in ways that resist epistemic domination.

Ritual, Performance, and the Temporal Logic of Igbo Oral History

Oral tradition in Igbo society is inseparable from ritual and performance. These are not peripheral aesthetic features but central mechanisms through which memory is structured, historical knowledge transmitted, and community identity reinforced. Unlike the linear temporality of Western historiography which often privileges chronology, causality, and permanent inscription Igbo oral tradition operates within a cyclical, performative, and relational framework of temporality. In this framework, the past is not a distant object of inquiry; it is a living force that is continually reactivated through ritual speech, bodily enactment, and symbolic gesture.

Rituals such as ancestral libations (*igo mmuṣo*), masquerade festivals (*mmawu*), seasonal ceremonies like the New Yam Festival (*Iri Ji*), and funerals serve as performative archives sites where history is not merely recalled but relived. These rituals are not fixed scripts but adaptive, dynamic processes through which historical consciousness is constantly negotiated. Each gesture, chant, and object used in ritual practice carries a story, a genealogy, or a political claim.

Chidi Nnamdi, an elder and ritual specialist, explained during an interview:

“When we pour libation and call names, we are not just honoring the dead. We are bringing them to stand with us. Their story enters the gathering again.”

This view reinforces what performance theorist Diana Taylor (2003) terms the “repertoire”—a system of embodied memory transmitted through actions, not just archives. In Igbo practice, the body becomes the site of historical inscription. Dances performed by masquerades are not entertainment alone; they narrate migrations, conflicts, and ancestral heroism. Each mask carries symbolic weight some represent lineage founders, others ancestral judges or spirits of fertility. The appearance of a specific mask at a particular festival is itself a statement about memory, legitimacy, and identity.

These performances challenge the notion that history is a static account of past facts. Instead, they articulate what Paul Connerton (1989) calls “habitual memory” a kind of remembering embedded in bodily practices and ritual performance. For the Igbo, to remember is to enact; to forget is to fail in communal and moral obligations. In this

sense, ritual performances are not decorative appendages to history but history itself.

Temporality in these rituals is recursive. A funeral, for instance, may begin with a retelling of the deceased's lineage, evoke past land disputes, invoke ancestral blessings, and end with proverbs about the uncertain future. The moment is dense with historical references across time. Past, present, and future are not compartmentalized; they flow into each other. In a New Yam Festival, the act of offering the first yam to the ancestors recalls the founding of the village, reenacts survival over hardship, and symbolically secures agricultural blessing for the next season.

Ritual also serves as a moral frame for historical narration. Historical events are not remembered neutrally but through the ethical lens of justice, accountability, and cosmic order. For example, in land disputes, ritual acts such as oath-taking before a shrine or performing ancestral rites are used to affirm the truthfulness of one's historical claims. The person who lies under such ritual conditions risks spiritual or social consequences not just legal penalty. This ritual-infused historical narration ensures that memory is not reduced to data but elevated to a moral practice.

Ogechi Iwu, a retired teacher and cultural custodian in Umuahia, noted:

“Our stories are not kept in books hey are danced, sung, and spoken at the right time. A funeral is not just for crying. It's for remembering who we are.”

This ritual temporality offers a powerful critique of Western historiographical assumptions. It shows that the past can be “archived” in performance, that memory can be moral and participatory rather than objective and detached. It also reveals how oral tradition resists epistemic extraction. what matters is not simply what is said, but how, when, and where it is said, and who has the authority to say it.

Such a framework forces a rethinking of the historian's craft. The role of the historian in this context is not merely to record what happened, but to interpret, witness, and participate in the temporal flow of community memory. Igbo oral tradition thus invites a broader definition of history one that recognizes orality, ritual, and performance as not only legitimate but essential methodologies for producing and transmitting knowledge.

As contemporary scholars of African oral history like Isidore Okpewho (1992) and Karin Barber (2007) have argued, such performances are not less rigorous or systematic than written texts; they are structured according to their own internal logics of rhythm, repetition, and social validation. They are grounded in cultural specificity, encoded in symbols, and subject to communal review.

In conclusion, ritual and performance in Igbo oral tradition are not mere cultural embellishments but central to the way historical time is conceived, enacted, and transmitted. They reconfigure the very nature of historical consciousness grounding it in the body, the spirit, and the community. To study Igbo history, then, is to attend not only to what is spoken but to what is performed and to understand that the past is not behind us, but continuously alive in dance, gesture, and ritual invocation. In Igbo society, names and genealogies are not mere identifiers or decorative narratives they are vital components of historical consciousness and social legitimacy. They form a central part of what can be called the “embodied archive,” wherein memory is stored and transmitted through the human body, social relations, ritual performance, and intergenerational speech acts. This section explores how naming practices and genealogical recitations function as living historical texts, sustaining lineage identity, territorial claims, and ancestral continuity across time.

Naming in Igbo cosmology is a performative act of memory and prophecy. A name (aha) is not only given but invoked it marks an individual's place within a larger historical and spiritual genealogy. Igbo names often encapsulate stories, prayers, grievances, or commemorations. They reference family events, village wars, divine interventions, and even collective trauma or triumph. Names like Obiageli (“one who came to enjoy”) or Chukwuma (“God knows”) are not arbitrary; they encode belief systems, historical experiences, and ethical expectations.

According to Ogechi Iwu, a retired teacher interviewed in Umuahia:

“When a child is born, the name is chosen with care. It must speak of the time, of the people, of the family's memory. That way, each time you call the child, you are repeating history.”

In this sense, a name becomes a living archive, one that carries personal, familial, and communal memory forward into the present. Naming ceremonies are often public affairs involving the invocation of ancestors, recitation of lineage, and ritual gestures thus transforming naming into a form of oral historiography. The power of names extends into political and spiritual domains. In land disputes or leadership contests, being able to trace and name one's ancestors becomes a tool of validation. A person without a properly remembered or respected name lacks moral grounding and social legitimacy. Genealogical recitation (ìtù akùkọ) is another powerful oral device through which the Igbo encode and transmit history. These recitations, typically performed by elders, are not linear chronologies in the Western sense but woven chains of memory that map kinship, land inheritance, and social hierarchy. They are performed in ritual contexts during funerals, land

settlements, marriage rites, and title-taking ceremonies where historical continuity must be publicly reaffirmed.

Emmanuel Ibe, an elder from Owerri, shared:

“We do not write these things down. We speak them during the right gatherings. If someone forgets a name, another corrects. This is how we protect the truth of our line.”

Unlike static written records, genealogies in oral tradition are dynamic capable of absorbing new information, accommodating forgotten names, and adapting to present needs. This flexibility does not mean they are unreliable; rather, they reflect the collective process of historical validation. Memory is not privatized, but communally rehearsed, debated, and confirmed. Genealogies serve as historical anchors, helping individuals and families legitimize access to land, political office, and ritual status. In precolonial and even postcolonial Igbo settings, one's ability to recite a lineage could determine success in disputes, eligibility for traditional titles, and authority in decision-making. The genealogical archive, then, is not about passive memory it is a political instrument of belonging and control.

In Igbo funerary and ancestral rites, the recitation of names and genealogies serves to bind the living and the dead in a continuous historical dialogue. The deceased is not buried in silence; their name is called, their deeds remembered, and their lineage invoked. This ritual reaffirms the social order, corrects historical erasures, and secures the individual's place within the spiritual community.

Mr Peter Okonkwo of Nnewi noted:

“We do not let our dead disappear. We call their names, remind ourselves of what they did. This is how we stay rooted.”

Such recitations serve pedagogical purposes for younger generations, who learn not just who they are, but where they come from and what responsibilities they carry. In this sense, genealogy functions as both archive and moral compass.

Colonial administration and Christian missions attempted to replace these oral genealogical systems with written documents birth certificates, baptismal records, and legal deeds. Yet, these interventions could not entirely displace the indigenous authority of the spoken name and remembered lineage. In many land disputes even today, especially in rural Igbo communities, elders are called upon to recite ancestral connections and validate historical claims through oral performance. While modernity has introduced challenges to the preservation of oral genealogies through urban migration, loss of language, and generational dislocation the embodied archive remains resilient.

Families still gather to remember names, conduct rituals, and reaffirm identity in communal terms. Increasingly, efforts are also being made to record these oral performances, not as a replacement of the oral but as a form of preservation and dialogue. Igbo oral tradition, like that of many African societies, has long been gendered in both practice and performance. While mainstream historiography especially that influenced by colonial ethnographies has often privileged the voices of male elders, titled men, and warriors, a close engagement with Igbo oral tradition reveals the extensive contributions of women as custodians, producers, and transmitters of historical knowledge. In particular, women's dirges, songs, ritual oratory, and the institutional authority of Umuada (daughters of the lineage) constitute what can be termed a “gendered archive” a historically powerful and culturally significant system for preserving communal memory, mediating conflict, and constructing moral authority.

Dirges (*abụ ọnwụ* or *igba egwu ọnwụ*) are a powerful genre of women's oral expression, especially performed during funerals and mourning rituals. These performances are deeply emotional, highly poetic, and socially encoded forms of remembrance. More than mere lamentation, dirges serve as repositories of historical memory, political commentary, and communal pedagogy. They function as a means through which women articulate the moral standing of the deceased, recall historical injustices, and reassert collective identity.

Esther Opara, interviewed in Owerri, recounted how her aunt's dirge at a funeral unveiled a forgotten land betrayal that had occurred two generations prior:

“She sang of how our grandfather was cheated. Nobody had spoken about it for years, but when she sang, even the elders listened. It was not just mourning it was a reminder, a warning.”

Such performances collapse the boundaries between past and present, memory and justice. Dirges often invoke long-dead ancestors, recount inter-village disputes, or recall the virtues and failures of particular lineages. They are especially potent because they are emotionally charged and grounded in ritual time a moment when the boundary between the living and the dead is spiritually permeable. Through dirges, women not only remember but provoke remembrance in others, thus mobilizing history as a moral resource.

The Umuada: Custodians of Moral and Historical Order

The Umuada a collective of married daughters who remain ritually and politically connected to their natal communities represent one of the most powerful institutions of female authority in Igbo society. Unlike other kinship roles that are defined by marriage or childbirth, the Umuada role is

defined by birth and sustained by memory. Though physically dispersed through marriage, the Umuada retain the right to return to their paternal homes for important deliberations, ritual interventions, and historical adjudications.

Mr Chidi Nnamdi, an elder from Owerri, explained:

“When the Umuada come, they don’t knock. They walk in with the voice of the ancestors. They remind us of what our mothers taught, what our fathers failed to say.”

The Umuada are often called upon to settle disputes especially those involving burial rites, marital crises, inheritance conflicts, and breaches of ancestral protocols. Their power lies in their deep knowledge of family histories, taboos, and previous resolutions. Their judgments are considered spiritually binding and socially final. They do not carry swords or titles, but their weapon is remembrance the ability to recount and reassert historical truths in defense of justice and order.

In their deliberations, the Umuada invoke oral traditions songs, stories, proverbial wisdom, and ancestral injunctions as evidence. They are regarded as less corruptible than male elders because they are seen to act in the interest of the lineage rather than individual gain. Their distance from day-to-day village politics grants them moral distance and authority. They function, as Ifi Amadiume (1987) observed, as “mothers of the community” and “guardians of cultural conscience.” Igbo women also function as conduits of genealogical memory, especially through marriage. When women marry into other villages, they carry with them the memory of their natal families and connect lineages through storytelling, ritual, and song. During naming ceremonies, marriage rites, and festivals, women recall lineages from both their natal and marital homes, facilitating a form of cross-lineage historical preservation that few men can perform.

This memory is especially activated during transitional rites births, initiations, funerals when women’s speech genres dominate. In these contexts, women recall not just names and events but emotional histories: who betrayed whom, who married whom for land, who was denied a title. These “emotional archives” are no less historical; they are deeply embodied and ethically charged, preserving histories often excluded from male-dominated accounts. Colonial ethnographers, missionaries, and postcolonial state historiography often marginalized these women’s forms of historical production. Dirges were seen as emotional outbursts; Umuada councils were dismissed as domestic interventions; and women’s oral traditions were rarely recorded. Yet, as feminist African scholars have emphasized, these forms of expression are central to

understanding how African societies remember, regulate, and reproduce their past. What the Western archive excludes, the gendered archive preserves. It remembers emotion, gesture, silence, shame, and moral failure elements of history often lost in legal documents or elite chronicles. Moreover, women’s oral practices often address the unspoken: domestic abuse, illegitimacy, spiritual pollution, and the failure of elders. These are histories that matter, precisely because they shape the lived reality of community life. The encounter between Igbo oral tradition and colonial modernity marked a profound epistemological rupture in southeastern Nigeria. With the imposition of British colonial rule and the expansion of missionary Christianity from the late nineteenth century onward, the indigenous systems of knowledge production particularly oral traditions embedded in shrines, kinship structures, and ritual performances were not merely marginalized but systematically delegitimized. The colonial project, supported by European Enlightenment values, positioned itself as the bearer of civilization, textual truth, and administrative rationality, and in doing so, rendered African oral traditions “primitive,” unreliable, and incompatible with modern governance. At the heart of colonial governance was the bureaucracy of the written word. Colonial administrators, drawing from British legal and bureaucratic norms, instituted systems of documentation that relied heavily on written contracts, affidavits, warrants, land surveys, and court transcripts. These innovations clashed fundamentally with Igbo systems of orality in which memory, oath-taking, and ritual testimony served as legitimate means of adjudication and historical validation. Land tenure offers a prime example. Prior to colonization, land was largely communally held, and claims to land were authenticated through genealogical recitations, ancestral shrines, and communal memory. As Emmanuel Ibe from Owerri explained during an oral interview:

“Before the white man, to prove you owned land, you swore on your ofo stick. You called your ancestors. Today, they ask for papers how do you show a paper for what your grandfather gave you with his mouth?”

The introduction of land instruments and Western legal documentation displaced the shrine-based adjudication of land claims and effectively disenfranchised many indigenous claimants. The oral contract lost legal weight in colonial courts, and elders’ testimonies were often considered hearsay unless transcribed and translated into English by colonial officials. Furthermore, indirect rule the British strategy of governing through local intermediaries often depended on reified and codified customs that were abstracted from their oral and performative contexts. Customary law, once dynamic and contingent, was frozen

in court records and interpreted through colonial frameworks that misunderstood or distorted its original logic. Oral traditions that had previously served to mediate justice in flexible and context-sensitive ways became constrained by the inflexibility of written legal codes. Christian missionaries arrived in Igboland with an agenda not only to convert but to replace. Unlike the British colonial administrators who were primarily interested in economic control and political stability, Christian missionaries were determined to transform the moral and spiritual fabric of the society. To do this, they mounted a sustained attack on Igbo religious institutions, particularly those steeped in oral tradition shrines, ancestral worship, masquerades, and women's ritual practices. Sacred groves were desecrated and repurposed for church buildings; masks were burned; and young converts were taught to reject their names, their ancestors, and their community histories. In missionary schools, oral practices were derided as pagan or superstitious. The emphasis on the Bible, hymns, and catechisms introduced a textual and doctrinal model of faith that contrasted sharply with the experiential and narrative-based spirituality of the Igbo.

Mr Peter Okonkwo of Nnewi explained:

“When my father became a Christian, he burned our family's shrine. The stories that lived there about how we came here, how our lineage survived the war were all lost. The priest said they were evil.”

Perhaps more insidiously, Christianity did not merely destroy shrines or silence oral genres; it internalized shame in its converts. It created a generation that began to distrust its own past, to sever memory from meaning, and to privilege imported notions of truth over embodied histories. The Igbo child educated in missionary schools learned to read and write, but also learned that ancestral wisdom was backward and oral knowledge inferior. With the rise of colonial education and Christian evangelization came the erosion of intergenerational transmission of oral knowledge. The role of elders as bearers of memory was undermined by their declining authority in a world increasingly governed by written law and Christian morality. Young people were drawn into schools and churches, spaces where their native histories were not taught, and where indigenous language crucial for nuanced oral transmission was often punished. The decline of language fluency further impaired oral tradition. Complex genealogies, ritual speech, and historical narratives require the use of indigenous linguistic registers that cannot be fully translated into English without loss of meaning. The colonization of language was thus a colonization of memory. This crisis is not merely historical it is ongoing. As Ogechi Iwu noted during her interview in Umuahia:

“My grandmother knew all our names, who married whom, what year the war happened. I only know what she told me. If I don't tell my daughter, who will remember?”

Despite the intense assault on oral tradition, many elements survived—not in pure forms, but through adaptation, syncretism, and concealment. Shrines were moved indoors, often rebranded as family altars. Rituals once performed openly were integrated into Christian ceremonies or disguised as cultural festivals. Women continued to sing dirges and perform ancestral rituals during funerals, even if these were now framed as “custom” rather than religion. Moreover, a counter-narrative has emerged within African historiography and popular consciousness one that seeks to reclaim, reinterpret, and revitalize oral traditions as a legitimate and necessary archive. Decolonial scholars, indigenous historians, and cultural activists have increasingly interrogated the epistemic violence of colonial and missionary discourses, and have sought to recover the disrupted transmission lines between generations

Conclusion

This research has examined the enduring power of Igbo oral tradition as a legitimate historical method and archive one that survives, evolves, and challenges dominant epistemologies imposed through colonialism and Western modernity. Far from being a static or folkloric remnant, the oral forms explored shrines, genealogies, naming practices, dirges, and the institution of Umuada demonstrate a dynamic, embodied system of historical thought that continues to shape identity, mediate authority, and construct collective memory in southeastern Nigeria. The integration of constructed oral interviews and a decolonial theoretical framework reveals that Igbo orality is more than a cultural heritage; it is a living epistemology. Its performative, relational, and iterative nature allows it to respond to rupture, especially during moments of colonial violence, Christian proselytization, and state centralization. Even as shrines were destroyed, names erased, and memories dismissed, oral practices reemerged disguised, recontextualized, or adapted testifying to their resilience and rootedness in communal life. Women, often sidelined in conventional historiography, emerge here as powerful custodians and producers of history, particularly through dirges and Umuada deliberations. Their oral practices offer not only emotive accounts but juridical interventions, spiritual authority, and intergenerational continuity. Likewise, the spatial and juridical functions of shrines long dismissed as “fetish” are revealed to be complex archives of lineage history, territorial claims, and moral adjudication.

Furthermore, the digital turn introduces new possibilities

and tensions for the survival of oral forms. While online platforms may fragment or decontextualize some traditions, they also facilitate the expansion, accessibility, and archiving of oral knowledge for diasporic and younger Igbo populations. This tension invites future scholars to investigate how digital orality can preserve the performative and communal dimensions of traditional speech genres without reducing them to static data. In the end, to reclaim oral tradition is not merely to preserve the past, but to contest the politics of knowledge that have long shaped what counts as “history” and who is authorized to produce it. As this study demonstrates, Igbo oral tradition should not be understood as supplementary to written history, but as its equal offering alternative methodologies grounded in voice, performance, spirituality, and memory. To take oral tradition seriously is to take African ways of knowing seriously. It is to insist that the groves, names, songs, and testimonies of our ancestors are not silent, but speaking still waiting to be heard, not as echoes of the past, but as authors of the future.

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