

## ORACLE DIPLOMACY IN PRE-COLONIAL IGBO LAND

Odeke, Francis C. and Onuoha, Ikechuwu O.  
Department of History and International Relations  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities  
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki.  
[odekefrancis59@gmail.com](mailto:odekefrancis59@gmail.com)/[pabloletters@gmail.com](mailto:pabloletters@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Oracle Diplomacy is the nurturing of relationships through religious beliefs based on deities or oracles. Oracle diplomacy is not the same as cultural diplomacy but is part of it. Cultural diplomacy extends relations through cultural practices like marriage, festival, masquerade, title taking, et cetera. But in oracle diplomacy, Oracle Priests are the visible diplomats that nurture and sustain relationships with people and groups from within and far away who seek the services of the Priests and their oracles. This study uses the primary and secondary sources of data to prove that Africans had good knowledge of diplomacy with well established means and institutions that encouraged mutual relations and economic growth before the Europeans and Arabs invaded the continent. The study is centred on the Igbo nation of Nigeria where religious beliefs were extensively used in peace building and good inter-group relations. Its methodology is the thematic and analytic approaches of history. From available facts, Igbo people were a deeply religious group; they knew and worshipped a Supreme Being through intermediaries called oracles or deities; and they and their clients believed and revered the messages of the deities as divine and effective. With these developments, the paper discovered that everywhere in pre-colonial Igbo land and other near and far communities, oracles answered both personal and communal needs of adherents, helped the spread of Igbo pre-colonial religion as well as extended their foreign interests. With these advantages, the paper holds the opinion that oracle diplomacy as a natural way of relationship in the early days of the Igbo could be of use to the modern day international community if meticulously incorporated into global affairs, especially the elusive peace and security questions which are paramount to economic drives.

**Key words:** Nigeria; Igbo land; Oracle; Diplomacy; Religion; Foreign interests

### **1. Introduction**

Oracle diplomacy was a veritable means of solutions to critical situations in pre-colonial Igbo land, and in all African communities. Apart from serving as guardians to the communities, the oracles answered the needs of individuals and groups. These needs varied from disputes over land and allegations, infertility in married women, personal and communal protection in peace and crises times, better farm yields, success in life endeavours, and lots more. Each need was directed to God Almighty who alone was believed to have answers to all human problems. The acceptable means of requesting answers from God, the Supreme Being, was through the oracles believed to be divine and effective in the affairs of man. Then there were Priests of the oracles who interceded for the people when consulted, and related with the oracles to pass their messages to the people. This intermediary role of the priests was as a result of the widely held view that no human was worthy enough to interact directly with God.

Oracles were not limited to Igbo people in Africa. Every community in every Kingdom of the continent had one form of oracle or the other that was consulted for answers to different needs of the people. Oracles were believed as divine institutions which served as intermediaries between God and man. Man honoured the Supreme Being through the oracles. But no member of any community was seen as worthy enough to relate directly with God. There were the Priests believed to be more pious than other men who served the oracles on behalf of the people. They offered sacrifices to the oracles to appease them when offended and to wash away the guilt of the offense off the offender. Many a time the Priests received messages of impending doom from the oracles and was duty bound to deliver same as a warning to the people; and he or she advised on the nature of sacrifices that could avert the consequences of the looming danger.

Oracles also served as instruments of conflict resolution in pre-colonial Africa. Individuals and communities in different forms of conflicts consulted the oracles for solutions. Individually, people accused of evil deeds against their neighbours like witchcrafts or poisoning, were marched to the oracles to prove their innocence or to be condemned and punished, if found guilty. (Ofonagoro, 1979:27) The verdicts of the oracles were final, though there were instances of corruption and miscarriage of justice as in some cases before the Long Juju of Arochukwu (*IbiniUkpabi*) where the accused were simply proclaimed to have been killed by the oracle. But in actual sense such accused persons were hidden away to be sold as slaves by the Priest of the oracle and his lieutenants. (Aja, N.O., 2013: 17) On the other hand, individuals in need of the fruit of the womb, of bountiful yields and harvests, of supernatural power and protection, of family unity and peace, and so on, consulted the oracles through the Priests. On many occasions communities facing some of the above challenges, and in particular instances, looming external attacks, collectively consulted the oracles to avert the looming danger or to have victory in the eventual out break of hostilities.

Some oracles were believed to have been used in facilitating trade and the movement of traders. According to Obasi (2013), “in those olden days when travelling through unknown communities was fraught with danger, it was the Aro people (holy men, Children of God), who could pass freely everywhere and even give safe escort to other travelers.” And as recorded by Afigbo (1987:123), a conflict of interest arose between the people of Okoloma or Bonny and their Ijo brethren in the hinterland regions over trade benefits that resulted to the confiscation of Bonny traders’ goods by the Ijo groups. The conflict escalated to a point that the King of Okoloma, King Asimini, had to send an embassy to Prince Opoli, Priest of *Otubulu*, national god of the “Gbu-Ming-Apu” (or Fresh water people) to use his power and position to intervene in the trade misunderstanding between his people and Azuogu people under Prince Opoli, the Priest. Afigbo said that Prince Opoli accepted the conciliation efforts of King Asimini, and eventually peace was restored to the two communities. In appreciation and to cement the resultant relationship, Princess EdiminiAsimini, the only daughter of King Asimini, was given in marriage to Prince Opoli. The position of Opoli as the Priest of *Otubulu* deity was therefore, used to prove the power of oracles and their effectiveness in diplomacy in pre-colonial Africa.

Although approaches differed in the use of oracle diplomacy in all communities of Africa, the relevance of oracles in the affairs of the people cannot be underestimated. They (oracles) were universal in Africa. The belief in them and their effectiveness was part of the African religion. Opoku, K.A. (1978: 11) wrote that:

Religion rounds up the totality of African culture. Normally a person does not need any special instruction in religion. He picks it as he grows and begins to participate in the communal rituals and ceremonies. It is only priests, chiefs or leaders of religious associations who require special instructions. And, although a particular society may recognize the need for leaders who have powers or training, or both, to officiate on some important religious occasions, one finds that generally in Africa, religious leadership is diffused or widely spread.

It was this universality of religion in Africa and the various approaches to it as well as its effectiveness that the European invaders failed to understand. In their confused state and their rashness to make the most from the resources of the sprawling environment, they declared war on the things that had held Africans together. They condemned and destroyed everything indigenous to Africa as superstitious (the belief that particular events happen in a way that cannot be explained by reason or science) but at the same time preached the belief in an invisible universal God that was beyond all human reasoning and every scientific method. That God, according to their gospel, was responsible for everything in life; the same belief all Africans held about the Supreme Being or *Leve* (Supreme Creatorin Mende, Sierra Leone), *Onyame*(God the Creator of all things in Akan, Ghana), *Chukwuokike*(the person who creates in Ibo), etcetera. (Opoku, 1978: 14-18) If the European invaders of Africa had had the patience to understudy the roles of oracles or deities in conflict resolution, inter-group relations and peace management in Africa, and how these enhanced trade and politics among the indigenous peoples of the continent, their “civilizing mission” of the African would have had recognizable positive results.

## **2. Concept of Diplomacy**

Oracle diplomacy works within the context of cultural diplomacy; cultural diplomacy being the use of soft power approach in the exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples. (Arndt, R.T., Online) But oracle diplomacy is distinct in its own approaches as it attends to the needs of clients who accept the rules and order of the gods or deities. There are priests in oracle diplomacy who act as professional diplomats in disseminating the rules of the oracles to adherents and ensuring compliance to the rules. In that order, oracle diplomacy through the priests, manages people’s conflicts in a bid to proffer solutions to their needs.

Diplomacy, generally speaking, is the skill of managing conflicts (of any kind) without offending the parties or adding offence to their situation. In international relations, diplomacy manages the trend and flow of engagements between nations. Ordinarily in life, diplomacy simply means the good attitudes or cordial manners to attain favours from people. Diplomacy, therefore, applies tact or subtlety in pursuing dominance, influence, socio-economic and political powers.

Academic theorization of the concept of diplomacy will fail unless individual needs of persons are considered together with the needs of States in international affairs. The people who work as diplomats in the international system are citizens of nations and they have some personal needs within their nations. These personal needs are served through the services rendered to the States by the diplomats. They are paid for their jobs. In that sequence, all citizens of a country, including the President, policy makers, civil and public servants, business people, farmers, and so forth, have their respective individual needs tied to those of their countries. Thus, for a country's foreign policies to be totally comprehensive and effective, these personal needs of the citizens must be considered along side the foreign interests of the State when formulating the policies.

From the foregoing, diplomacy can be said to be an all encompassing skill that seeks to satisfy human needs through services to an employer – a State or corporate group. In the world of employment, employees simply obey and carry out the rules of their employers; otherwise, their appointments are terminated. The same goes for the diplomat who must do the biddings of the government of his country or risk being recalled or sacked out of his representative position. So, a diplomat must learn to wrap his personal interests within those of the State he is serving in order to keep his job. Kennan (1951), a former US Secretary of State, was not comfortable with the obvious neglect of the citizen's personal interests in the pursuit of American foreign policy. He was emphatic when he stated:

I find it hard to see how we can live up to our responsibilities as a great power 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 referring to the interests of Americans at home whose individual interests was not carried along in the foreign policies of the US government. He was, therefore, advocating the inclusion of those interests in America foreign policy because the neglected citizens were the tangible productive part of the American State. Diplomats should, as a matter of fact, try to balance their duties to the State and their personal interests since they are also citizens of the State they are representing. Agreed that diplomacy is not a profession of the utmost decent persons, they are not, and should not be expected to be perfect in their engagements for the State. They have to serve the State well, they have to be blunt when it is so demanded by their home governments, and soft when such is required to secure the interests of their States. In that vein, sincerity and insincerity should go hand in hand in diplomacy. Palmer and Palmer (2015:83) quoting David Dallin, said 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 means that subtlety and insincerity are the characteristics of practical diplomacy. The diplomat has to abide to the expectations of his employer despite his personal views. He cannot stand against his employer on any issue as long as he remains under the employer, whatever the expectations of the latter are. As a matter of fact, he has to merge his personal interests with those of the State he is representing. Nonetheless, the diplomat has his background to contend with in

marrying his personal interests with his employer's since his environment plays a role in his world views. If the diplomat was born and brought up in a hostile environment he tends to hostile in his engagements but if he was bred in humane environment where human dignity is respected, he will be humane and peaceful in his approaches. It is the last set of diplomats that often push the frontiers of diplomacy towards friendliness among nations. Baker, J.A. (1995), on the dedication page of his famous work, *The Politics of Diplomacy, 1989 – 1992*, showed the great influence of his background on his services as a US Secretary of State when he wrote, "To my great-grand father, my grand father, and my father, the three generations of the James Addison Bakers whose in God, integrity, and hard work, gave me a remarkable heritage that inspired me".

At all levels diplomacy acknowledges the cultural backgrounds of players in winning over their contemporaries. At the personal level people gain favours from others by wooing them into submission; and at the international level, diplomats engage in negotiations to exert influence over colleagues to serve the interest of their home governments better. Machiavelli (1532: 15-18), said that Princes who want to subject other States under their control should not lose sight of the backgrounds of the States, including their religion, governments, languages, etc. Oracle diplomacy adopted that approach in that agents of the Oracle Priests secretly understudied the backgrounds of potential clients and relayed their findings to the Priests before the clients actually arrived to the shrines of the oracles. That way, it was easy for the Priests to serve the people's interests accurately and with precision.

### **3. Oracles in Pre-colonial Igbo Cultural Diplomacy**

Oracles are part of a people's religion, and religion, according to Opoku (1978), rounds up the totality of culture in Africa. In pre-colonial Igbo land culture was not only a way of life; it was also a way of relationship by religion and other means. It built cordial contacts between the Igbo and many external groups and communities. Igbo oracles served many personal, group and communal needs. Apart from questions on some mysteries in many communities, oracles were believed to have the power to answer questions on personal matters. They were indispensable in Igbo cultural diplomacy because Igbo people depended much on them for confirmation of deeds, to seal most business and social deals, to ascertain if a marriage will be peaceful and fruitful, etc.

On many occasions the pre-colonial Igbo accepted promises made before a shrine as more reliable than ones made outside shrine houses. Reasons were that reneging on such a promise were believed as affronts to the gods and was sure to provoke their anger that could bring about instant death. Business partners and land speculators often resorted to the oracles to ensure payment of debts as well as the sincerity of land owners in property or land deals. An example of the latter was the covenant entered into by the elders of Andoni (in present day Rivers State) with the emigrants from Bonny in about 1870 under Mbanoso Okwara Ozurumba, nicknamed Jaja by British traders, a former Igbo slave boy. In the words of Cookey (1974: 69-70), "Having formalized the their relationship ... the people of Andoni at the time acknowledged the supremacy of a deity called *Iyobulo* (whose shrine was situated at the village of Alabie), and the Chief Priest of the deity was recognized as the head of all Andoni".

It was under the Chief Priest of the *Iyobulo* oracle that the covenant was made and eventually sealed with the ritual at Ekomtoro, the name of the bar where Imo River empties into the Atlantic. Cookey (1974) maintained that it was to establish the sincere commitment of the parties that an oath for peaceful co-existence and non-betrayal was sworn by both the hosts and their guests. Again, to ascertain the sincerity of parties in business deals or to confirm the innocence of an accused, the Igbo looked onto the oracles whose verdicts were accepted as divine, final and impartial. In most of such cases, the consultation was pre-arranged by an agent of the oracle priest who lived within the area of litigants. The agent conducted all the disputants to the shrine of the oracle on a day approved for arbitration by the oracle priest. Obasi (2013:15) said of the Long Juju (*IbiniUkpabi* oracle) of Arochukwu: the oracle “constituted a very strong element” that held Uburu community (in present day Ebonyi State) and the Aro people together. He noted that:

The Aro conducted the clients to the oracle to settle disputes or to identify and punish crimes ... at the time when they formed the government of the Igbo speaking area. The (oracle) was reputed to be able to make barren women or impotent men fruitful. The opinion of the Aro man was eagerly and dearly sought in political as well as in social matters.

Achebe (1958:15) noted that in the days before things fell apart in Igbo land “people came from far and near to consult” (the Agbala oracle). “They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbours. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers.” In that respect, oracles served multi purposes in Igbo cultural diplomacy, answering questions not only on personal relations but also on multi-lateral relations that at times involved several communities brought together by trade or war. A good case was the alliance of the Aro with warriors of communities like Ohafia, Abam and Edda, by which they kept their subjects under control for Aro interest and the supremacy of their ‘Long Juju’ throughout Igbo land. (Obasi, 2013:15-17) Achebe (1958) further averred that the opinion of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, was even sought after for better farm yields and harvests. According to him, “the story was told in Umuofia of how ... Unoka (a failure) had gone to consult the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves to find out why he always had a miserable harvest.”

In pre-colonial Igbo customary judicial system oracles were prominent in dispensing justice. With their power to see into the future, their verdicts were accepted as final and unquestionable. Achebe (1958) had said that people came to the *Agbala* oracle to “discover what the future held for them” just as Obasi (2013:16) maintained that the verdict of the *IbiniUkpabi* oracle of Arochukwu was not to be questioned by any authority. “To do so was regarded as a sacrilege which at the time would lead to death or slavery if the question was taken to the oracle.” In the view of Ofonagoro (1979:26), “ Within a given village, difficulties were adjusted by arbitration, the injured party taking the initiative to summon ad hoc arbitrators to resolve the difficulties. Where the verdict of the arbitrators proved unsatisfactory, the injured party (could seek redress through) **the network of oracles among which *Ebinokpabi* (*IbiniUkpabi*), the supreme arbitrator in judicial matters, was the most important”.**

As religious instruments, oracles were consulted in times of trouble and for the general wellbeing of the people. The deities served as instruments of social control and order as people feared to offend societal norms to avoid the punishment of the gods. (Onuoha, 2018:99) The fear of the anger of the oracles and the subsequent punishments, according to Onuoha, was therefore, the reasons for the kind of social behavior that assured peace and orderliness in all Igbo communities. That was so because the traditional gods could punish offenders “now and in this life” instead of judging and punishing them long time after they died as carried in both the Christian and Islamic faiths. (Onuoha, 2018:200) Aja (2005:92-93) maintains that religion was so interwoven with the social customs of the Igbo that it was difficult to distinguish one from the other. Every event was associated with an oracle or deity. For example,

... the young warrior going to war must consult his war god (Nkamalu) before proceeding; a farmer who was going to plant his yam must consult his yam god(Njoku) before and after harvest; prospective wrestlers could not engage in contests until they had seen their Nkamalu and other deities; the married woman who had illicit sexual intercourse had to appease the ancestral gods(Maa obu) and Ali (the Earth-goddess); the festivals of Iko, Ikeji, Mbe and Nri-nsi-omumu (fertility) could not be celebrated without sacrifices (to the deities) ...(In a nutshell), the social organization of Afikpo (an Igbo society) was intricately interwoven with religious beliefs and practices.

Thus, as an intricate part of Igbo religion, oracles were found and worshipped in every community. Apart from the more popular *IbiniUkpabi* oracle which came to prominence as a result of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the *Agbala* oracle popularized by the itinerant Awka blacksmiths and diviners, and the *Amadioha* oracle of the Aro, there were numerous other oracles like the *Igwe kala* of Umunneoha (an Aro colony), *Ngeneukwuenu* (in Uburu community, Ohaozara Local Government Area, Ebonyi State), *Nnamihimiri* oracle (in Akpoha, Afikpo Local Government Area, Ebonyi State), *Nnam-ezi* oracle (in EgbaraAkpoha, Afikpo LGA, Ebonyi State), Aka (green snake) oracle in Ikwo and Akaeze (Ebonyi State), and many others. In all each of these oracles served the personal and communal needs of adherents and enhanced the inter-group relations of the communities. Other oracles that promoted inter-group relations in Igbo land were the *Uzu* oracle (god of iron, in Awka and Abakaliki clans) and the *Ivom-eji-eje-ogu* oracle (in Abakaliki area) which mostly ensured victories in wars. Ugoh (2003:32-34) said that *Ivom-eji-eje-ogu* was acquired by different communities that were in wars in many parts of Igbo land, and that the oracle always brought victory to the communities. Although the *IbiniUkpabi* oracle was often duplicated by the Aro and given new names (like *Ojukwu* of Diobu, in present day Rivers State) for broader trade and other diplomatic purposes, *Ivom-eji-eje-ogu* could also be found by different names in many warlike communities in Ebonyi State and beyond.

#### **4. Effectiveness of Oracle Diplomacy**

Oracle diplomacy in Igbo land was as effective as any other form of diplomacy around the world. Effective diplomacy demands that those formulating and implementing “foreign policies” need to

learn the skill of relating and communicating with people whose interests are very different from their own. (James Jeffrey, 2015) This may include people who are angry, frustrated and upset. Effective diplomacy has the remarkable ability to elicit limitless potentials of practitioners of diplomacy to tolerate, communicate and solve seemingly insurmountable human problems. Effective diplomacy goes with effective communication. (Jeffrey, 2015) In Igbo oracle diplomacy Priests were naturally humane enough to a point that they could relate, counsel (communicate) and attend to the individual needs of their clients. As a mark of appreciation and conviction that the services of the Priests were actually satisfactory, the clients in many instances idolized the Priests. The words of the Priests were accepted as the voice of the gods.

The Priests enjoyed the special privilege of unmolested passage even through communities that were considered too dangerous to ordinary persons. The pre-colonial Igbo did not engage in diplomacy for economic reasons only. Falola, et al (1989:90) noted that by turning all instruments of war into instruments of peace, Igbo oracle priests were able to convince entire communities of the relevance of peace to human existence. The priests engaged in peace crusades, conflict resolutions and condemned all acts of violence within and outside Igbo land. Afigbo (1987) stated that Nri priests were visibly involved in the coronation of several Benin Oba and Atta Igala, a relationship that spanned both ritual and artistic connections of the groups, especially through Nri priests. That was very impactful on the peaceful trade and socio-economic relations of the Igbo, Benin and Igala Kingdoms. On the whole, oracle priests in Igbo land encouraged the peaceful co-existence among communities through rituals and other religious activities. They built and consecrated shrines for client communities and ordained members of first settlers as Priests of the shrines. Aja (2005:109-112) said that Aro oracle agents of the *IbiniUkpabi* named the shrines *Omara ali* or *Otosi* in many communities.

The Nri people (in present day Anambra State) were the first in Igbo land to forge a good sample of cordial internal and external relationships with different communities. Their rulers, according to Falola, et al (1989:90), created a regime which transformed weapons of aggression such as spears, cutlasses and clubs into symbols of peace. Their state and influence was very unique over an extended area of Igbo land, though without any political authority attached. Without actually ruling any Kingdom or empire, the Eze Nri diviners and ritualists travelled long distances performing rites, teaching and practicing agriculture and iron works. The apogee of the Nri influence stretched from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries. During this period, the Nri cultures, as manifested in various title systems, and the Ikenga cult spread to parts of Western Igbo and ...Igala area of present Benue State.

The historic Arochukwu oracle, *IbiniUkpabi*, was established from a local Ibibio shrine called *Ibritam*, in the Cross River estuary. Arochukwu people made good use of the oracle in determining Igbo relations with near and long distant neighbours. With their individual and collective acumen in trade, diplomatic dexterity and economic sense they were able to bring a great part of Igbo land, Ibibio in Cross River, and ApalAkpa in the Benue valley under Aro influence. (Falola, et al, 1989) Aro traders, through the agents of *IbiniUkpabi* oracle, created as



many as ninety-eight colonies with trade fairs by which they spread the (Aro) Igbo influence widely. (Ottenberg, 1958:299) Travelling long distances was often considered very dangerous in Igbo land except to oracle priests and agents who were also involved in seizing travelers. Ottenberg observed that people were always fearful of “being captured by oracle agents ...” while on business trips. (p.29) But Aro traders and oracle agents enjoyed unmolested passages as a result of the fear of their *IbiniUkpabioracle* by which they gained unrivalled power and supremacy over other parts of Igbo land before the coming of Europeans. In those days, according to Obasi (2013:16), when travelling through unknown communities was fraught with danger, it was the Aro people (holy men, Children of God), who passed freely everywhere and even gave safe escort to other travelers. The Aro oracle agents were organized into groups that controlled different sections of Igbo land as Aro settlements or colonies and by that satisfied Aro solidarity interests generally.

Diplomacy, Silberman (2013) stated, affects the every day lives of citizens as could be seen in the diplomatic efforts of the Eze Nri diviners of Awka and the *IbiniUkpabioracle* agents of Arochukwu. Besides many other oracle agents throughout Igbo land, the above groups of oracle agents provided security to their clients and many others along insecure trade routes, ensured their national securities as well as enabling healthy intergroup relations within Igbo land and beyond. That was indeed, the actual effectiveness of diplomacy in pre-colonial Igbo land under the oracles.

##### **5. Expanding Igbo Interests and Influence through the Oracles**

Igbo people were driven into relationships with their neighbours and distant peoples specifically for economic reasons. Any other interest was secondary to Igbo economic needs. Igbo relations with other communities were conducted by different means, and oracles being part of Igbo culture and religion, were central to the people’s economic drive. As Opoku (1978) expressed about Africans: “ ...in traditional Africa, religion is life and life, religion. Africans are engaged in religion in whatever they do---whether it be farming, fishing or hunting; or simply eating, drinking or travelling. Religion gives meaning and significance to their lives, both in this world and the next. It is hence not an abstraction but a part of reality and everyday life. In other words ... Africans are a people who in all things are religious.

It is therefore, no exaggeration that though other factors like marriage, secret societies and title-taking played different roles in pre-colonial Igbo inter-group relations, the role of oracles in that can not be over-emphasized. The deep-seated religious nature of the Igbo evolved from the time of Eri, the acclaimed progenitor of the Igbo race. Marriages were not contracted without the opinion of the oracles to ascertain the success or otherwise of the unions, especially marriages with external suitors or brides. Thus, the Igbo engaged the services of oracles to foretell the probabilities of marriage contracts. Oracles were everywhere in Igbo land with some people consecrated and ordained priests to serve as intermediaries between human worshippers and the oracles. Achebe (1958) noted that people came from far to consult the oracles for individual and

communal needs. By such consultations, oracles helped the wide expansion of Igbo interests and influence to far away communities.

Through inter-group wars and trade, secret societies that had oracular backings were widely exchanged between Igbo communities and their near and distant neighbours. The secret societies were important as law giving agents and for performing specific duties in the communities. For instance, the *Ekpe* and *Okonko* secret societies of the Cross River region were widely borrowed into many Igbo communities for law keeping, security and general services. They were integrated into the socio-cultural and political institutions of many Igbo communities. Alagoa (1980) believed that Ekpe exercised wide political, social and economic functions...Ekpe served as a police force to enforce the laws. It collected debts, stopped fights between individuals and groups, disciplined ...and generally kept the peace. Ekpe disposed of a range of sanctions as wide as its functions. It could place an offending individual or community on interdiction, boycott or ostracism. Ekpe could impose a fine, detain or arrest an offender, and on occasions, even execute a criminal.

In the Afikpo area, a core Igbo society where the *Ekpe* and *Okonko* secret societies were extensively borrowed and incorporated into the people's traditional social institutions, the functions of the secret societies were the same as in the Cross River region. But in all clans of Afikpo, initiation rites of the societies and their operations were all connected to the earth goddess (the *Ali* oracle) as many offences that demanded the intervention of the secret societies were considered offences against the earth goddess too. On that premise, the *Ekpe* and *Okonko* secret societies were seen as part of the religion and culture of the people. Aja (2005) observed that, Cultures such as the *Ekpe* and the *Okonko* societies are certain of the Efik and Ibibio type (respectively. They performed in Afikpo almost the same social, cultural, religious and political functions as (they do) among the Efik (and the Ibibio.)

Through religion the Igbo built relations with people of the coastal states; Benin Empire on the west of the Niger, the Igala Kingdom and the other Niger-Benue states on the north. Economic and socio-cultural gains were the major concerns of the Igbo in those inter-group interactions. Alagoa (1980:258) Alagoa maintained that the earliest large-scale integrating system among the Igbo was based on the spiritual powers of the Eze Nri of Awka land.

The Nri priests could move a wide area of Igbo land without harassment because of the spiritual powers it was believed God had conferred on the Eze Nri. The first Eze Nri had brought forth the first yams, cocoyams, bananas, plantains, and oil palms, and he, accordingly, possessed the right to make the *oguji* or yam medicine for the surrounding towns. He had ritual powers over agricultural production. The Eze Nri alone could rid a community of an abomination or *nso* incurred through a breach of taboo; the Nri priests could also crown the Eze of other towns, and tie the *ngwulu* ankle cords when a man anywhere took the *Ozo* title, the most prized in Igbo land.

While Nri priests had a great influence on Idah, Igala and Benin, Alagoa (1980: 259) observed that Nri also confirmed Awka in the work of blacksmithing through the award of an *Ofo*. The

ancestral Awka was said to have done his “first smiting service for Nri by drying the earth with his bellows, and making *Otonsi* ritual spears for Nri.” It was equally observed by Alagoa that the *ushior Agbala*, the oracle of Awka, was an extension of the *IbiniUkpabi* oracle of Arochukwu, and that like the Nri and Aro, the Awka also travelled the Igbo country as priests, diviners, and doctors. They did not only engage in economic activities like the Aro but also travelled as carvers of wooden items as well as traders in beads, ivory and other luxury goods.

Falola, et al (1989) said that the Igbo-Ukwu civilization had a major impact on the development of the Igbo society. The civilization evolved around a highly ritualized priest-king, and grew a successful agriculture, game hunting and wide commercial activities that exchanged locally made goods for foreign ones from far away Venice and India. Igbo-Ukwu priests related with people from near and far communities by installing Chiefs, purifying lands and carrying out title taking rites throughout Igbo land and beyond. Igbo priests of diverse divinities were accorded special respect in all communities within and outside Igbo land. Presiding over religious festivals of the communities, the priests united different groups which extended Igbo interests and influence.

Oracle priests were important in Igbo political life as they were mostly the final arbiters in disputes through the involvement of oaths. Also, the priests were the ministers of oracles whose decisions were ‘final in certain disputes.’ (Falola, et al, 1989) The priests of the *IbiniUkpabi* oracle of Arochukwu played vital roles in expanding Igbo relations with immediate and distant neighbours. The Aro focused on trade and spiritual services to carry out their lucrative commercial activities with the people of Bende, Uburu, Eke Imoha (Onueke), Afikpo, and the rest of their ninety-eight colonies scattered all over Igbo land and beyond. Obasi (2013) held that:

In Igbo land, there was no other political organization strong enough to challenge the authority of...Aro people. (Their) oracle came to be looked upon as the only avenue for getting impartial redress against injustice, which could not be challenged...The Aro were known as messengers of their oracle and were popularly referred to as *Umu Chukwu* (children of god). They were respected as holy men and any message reported to have come from their oracle ...was treated with veneration and dispatch.

Nonetheless, Obasi maintained that it was by military force that the Aro were able to hold recalcitrant communities under control, the same means by which European colonialists held their African colonies.

Another oracle that was widely expanded Igbo interests and influence was the *Igwe ka Ala* (god above the earth), an assumed extension of the *IbiniUkpabi* oracle, located at Umunneoha, an Aro colony in the outskirts of Owerri. Obasi (2013:18) stated that the *Igwe ka Ali* oracle was organized in secrecy and deceit like its principal, the *IbiniUkpabi*. The oracle was destroyed by the Eastern Nigeria Government in 1960 when it became glaring that its activities were obnoxious.

*NgeneUkwuenu* was an oracle in Uburu Ome community (in present day Ohaozara Local Government Area of Ebonyi State). Its shrine was located within a thick forest close to the Presbyterian Joint Hospital, Uburu. The oracle was controlled by the Ibe Ngwoke Ogbu lineage of Ogbu village who inherited it from late Eze Nwukporo of Uhuoha village. The family of Eze Nwukporo remained the authentic custodians of the *Opia*, the instrument of authority of the oracle. They also claimed the right to the forearms of all animals sacrificed to the oracle. (Obasi, 2013:19-20) Clients of *NgeneUkwuenu* came to Uburu from away Port Harcourt, Calabar, Umuahia, Ogoja, Lafia, Kaduna and other distance places. They formed themselves into unions as *Umu Ngene*(sons of the high one) in their respective places, for solidarity to the benevolence of the deity. They also paid annual homage to the oracle in conveyances of cars and commercial vehicles loaded with worshippers and their sacrificial animals and materials. Obasi (2013) maintained that it was these patrons that, popularized the efficacy of (*NgeneUkwuenu*) ...Even heads of Government and some Christian groups went to consult the *Ngene* for (an increase of members) and obedience of the members.

As the *NgeneUkwuenu* oracle of Uburu was popularizing Igbo interests and values within and outside Igbo land, the *Odo* masquerade deity of Nsukka was doing the same thing for the Igbo and their neighbours. The oracle was dreaded for its powers against enemies and evil forces. It could not condone competition from any other masquerade. *Odo* was life and death to its priest who were expected to forsake their families and wealth to qualify to venerate and to serve *Odo*. The deity was often acquired by communities outside Nsukka for protection and benevolence, especially in times of war. For instance, NdiaguEchiku community in Ngbo land (in Ebonyi State) acquired the *Odo* oracle to unite their community and to wade off threats of war from their enemies. In an interview, Romanus Echi explained that his community (NdiaguEchiku) acquired *Odo* from Nsukka in the early days to unite the community and enable them fight their enemies. He added that:

Odo was the only (masquerade) deity that existed in NdiaguEchiku since the people settled in their community. The people believed in the powers of so much so that it was dreaded to have power over life and death. *Odo* was allowed the right to control the socio-economic and political life of NdiaguEchiku community. All male born in NdiaguEchiku belonged to *Odo* right from birth.

In Akpoha community (Afikpo Local Government Area, Ebonyi State) there were the *Nnamihimiri* and *Nnameze* oracles which equally attracted worshippers from near and far communities, and externalized Igbo interests and values. *Nnamihimiri* oracle was domiciled in a swampy forest named after the deity. Worshippers were said to have consulted the oracle from home and far communities to seek knowledge of their future and to ask questions of who was the actual culprit in a crime. Disputes of all kind were said to have been decided by the oracle until nursing mothers began consulting it over the faeces of their kids. The oracle felt embarrassed and left Akpoha land, complaining that the people's insults had gone too unbearable to it.

*NnamezeEgbara* belonged to Egbara community (in AmaoguAkpoha, Afikpo Local Government, Ebonyi State.) It was a water deity that resided inside the Akpoha River at its Egbara end. The last known priest of the deity was called Okoro Arakpa who, sources said, walked into the river and walked out with his body fully dried of water. That was a routine duty for the priest who went into the water with a cock, fire and other sacrificial items, especially when a person was to be covenanted to the oracle or a worshipper came to fulfill a vow to the deity. Oral sources said that in the early days, people preparing for war, wrestling contests or undertaking a business trip consulted *Nnameze* and made sacrifices to it, promising bountiful thanksgiving if they returned victorious or successful. People from other communities also consulted the oracle for protection, power and fortunes in their engagements. But the vengeful visitation of the oracle was unavoidable if the priest delayed in making a due sacrifice. And when a worshipper who had an outstanding vow violated it, the oracle visited him and his family with mysterious deaths or sicknesses. Sometimes when the sacrifices of the deity were delayed, the oracle sailed to the surface of the river in the form of a crocodile to demand compliance. In such cases, the priest was duty bound to appease the water god and prayed it to go back to its home in the water until the sacrifice was ready. But when the sacrifices were delayed further, the priest was attacked spiritually and people who ventured into the water got drowned.

### **Conclusion**

Generally diplomacy is the skill of impartial management of difficult situations that arise between individuals and groups without offending any of the parties. The term is mostly common in intergroup or international relations. Diplomacy operates in the different fields of human affairs. In a nutshell, diplomacy seeks the peaceful co-existence of humans based on their needs and aspirations. Oracles were one of the means by which people's needs and aspirations were attended to in traditional societies of old.

As in modern diplomacy, oracle diplomacy employed highly skilled individuals called priests who manipulated the minds of disputants and others to restore peace and confidence in troubled situations. Disputants accepted all settlements of oracles and were comfortable with all their conditions for the settlements. That was made possible through sacrifices and promises to remain committed to the terms of peace given by the oracles through their priests. That is also the method of modern diplomacy where negotiators (diplomats) determine the terms of settlement and peace through series of consultations and meetings with parties in conflicts.

Oracle diplomacy was therefore, as effective as any other form of modern diplomacy in the pursuit of peace and security. Oracle diplomacy additionally assured adherents of personal and communal protection, fulfillment and prosperity in all fields of life. Oracle diplomacy engaged the services of agents who went ahead of the priests to market the power and efficacy of the deities the same way modern diplomacy engage individuals and groups to water the grounds for peace before the actual negotiations by professional diplomats commence. Thus, oracle diplomacy and modern diplomacy sought, and seek, the same purpose though technically, by different methods.

The Igbo of pre-colonial Nigeria who used oracles in the pursuit of peace, security and economic prosperity achieved as much as any modern State seeks to achieve through modern diplomacy.

While peace and security remain elusive to modern States, the pre-colonial Igbo accomplished them through their oracles which to a large extent, are still ignored by modern man as primitive, religious and superstitious. In that illusion, the modern man is suffering intractable conflicts and chaos in his daily affairs due to negligence and ignorance of the effective approaches of Igbo oracle diplomacy.

## References

- Achebe, C. (1958), *Things Fall Apart*, (England: William Heinemann Ltd.)
- Afigbo, A.E. (1987), *The Igbo and their Neighbours: Intergroup Relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953*, (Ibadan: University Press Limited)
- Aja, R.O. (2005), *A History of Afikpo circa 1600*, (Lagos: Mbeyi and Associates (Nig.) Ltd)
- Alagoa, E.J. (1980), "The Eastern Niger Delta and the Hinterland in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century" in (Obaro Ikime ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Limited)
- Arndt, R. A., "Cultural Diplomacy," ([https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural Diplomacy](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_Diplomacy)) Retrieved on 10/05/2022
- Baker, J.A. (1995), *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons)
- Cookey, S.J.S. (1974), *King Jaja of the Niger Delta: His Life and Times, 1881-1891*, (NOK Publishers, Ltd)
- Echi Romanus, c.75. A traditionalist and farmer, interviewed in NdiaguEchiku on 16/03/2017
- Falola, T., Mahadi, A., Uhomoibhi, M., and Anyanwu, U. (1989), *History of Nigeria I: Nigeria before 1800 AD*, (Ikeja, Lagos: Longman Nigeria PLC)
- Gabriel Uro, c.76. A community leader and farmer, interviewed in EgbaraAkpoha on 10/04/2022
- Jeffrey, J. (September 24, 2015), "Effective Diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," ([https://www.oic-world-peace.org/effective-diplomacy-in-the 21-century](https://www.oic-world-peace.org/effective-diplomacy-in-the-21-century)) Retrieved on 17/10/2017
- Kennan, G. F. (1951), *American Diplomacy*, (New York: University of Chicago Press)
- Lawrence Etee Egbe, c.71. A community leader and farmer, interviewed in AmaozaraAmaogu, Akpoha, on 26/12/2022
- Obasi, N. A. (2013), *Customs and Traditions in Uburu*, (Uburu: Dollar Digital Press)
- Ofonagoro, W.I. (1979), *Trade and Politics in Southern Nigeria, 1881-1929*, (New York: NOK Publishers International)
- Onuoha, I.O. (2018), "Religion and the Development of Nigeria" in (Ogo, N. Chukwu, ed), *Essays on Nigerian Peoples and Culture*, (Abakaliki: End Point Publishers)
- Opoku, K.A. (1978), *West African Traditional Religion*, (Singapore: FEP International Private Limited)
- Ottenberg, S. (1958), "Igbo Oracles and Intergroup Relations," *Southwest Journal of Anthropology*. Xiv. 3. Pp.293 313
- Palmer, N. D. and Palmer, G. (2015), *International Relations (The World Community in Transition, 3<sup>rd</sup> Revised Edition)*, (New Delhi, India)
- Silberman, Z. (2013), "The Power of Effective Diplomacy," (<https://www.usglc.org/blog/the-power-of-effective-diplomacy/>) Retrieved on 17/10/2017