



## ECHOES OF AUTHORITY: THE ROLE OF THE *IKORO* DRUM IN UMUNZE SOCIETY, 1915–1970

Moses Tivlumun Korinya, PhD

Department of History & International Relations,  
Veritas University, Abuja  
[korinyam@veritas.edu.ng](mailto:korinyam@veritas.edu.ng)

&

Marycynthia Uchenna Alago

An alumna of Veritas University, Abuja.  
[alagom@veritas.edu.ng](mailto:alagom@veritas.edu.ng)

### Abstract

*This paper explores the historical and cultural significance of the Ikoru drum in the traditional Igbo society of Umunze between 1915 and 1970. Utilizing oral testimonies, ethnographic fieldwork, and archival sources, the study investigates the origins, physical attributes, symbolic meanings, and socio-political functions of the Ikoru. Within the framework of indigenous communication systems and Igbo cosmology, findings reveal that the drum served as a multidimensional instrument for community mobilization, ritual expression, and governance. It functioned as a voice of authority, transmitting messages across vast spaces and commanding collective action in moments of crisis, deliberation, and ceremony. The study also addresses the decline of the Ikoru's influence during the colonial and immediate postcolonial periods, revealing how external pressures reshaped indigenous institutions. The findings contribute to scholarship on African oral traditions, indigenous political systems, and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.*

**Keywords:** Ikoru drum, Umunze, Igbo society, indigenous communication, traditional governance, cultural heritage, oral history

### Introduction

In many African societies, drums are far more than musical instruments; they are potent symbols of cultural identity, instruments of communication, and vessels of historical memory. Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, one such drum, the *Ikoru* stands out for its multidimensional roles within traditional communities. Towering in size and resonant in sound, the *Ikoru* is not merely played for entertainment or ritual; it is heard as a voice of authority, a medium through which communal values, warnings, and directives are articulated. Its beats reverberate with meaning, commanding attention, invoking ancestral presence, and shaping socio-political order. Yet, despite its significance, scholarly attention to the *Ikoru*, especially within specific Igbo subgroups such as the people of Umunze, remains limited. This study focuses on the historical and cultural significance of the *Ikoru* drum in Umunze, a prominent Igbo community, during the period from 1915 to 1970; a time marked by profound social and political transformations. Drawing on oral testimonies, ethnographic fieldwork, and archival materials, the research investigates the origins, physical construction, symbolic meanings, and functional roles of the *Ikoru* within traditional Igbo society. The analysis is situated within the broader frameworks of indigenous African communication systems and Igbo cosmology, through which the *Ikoru* emerges not only as an artifact of cultural heritage but as an active agent in the organization of community life.



The paper argues that the *Ikoru* functioned as a multidimensional instrument, central to community mobilization, ritual expression, and governance. It operated as a powerful communication device capable of transmitting messages across vast distances, summoning men to arms, announcing deaths, convening assemblies, and enforcing communal decisions. Its presence in the village square symbolized unity, vigilance, and continuity with the ancestors. However, the advent of colonial rule and the gradual imposition of Western institutions challenged the authority of traditional structures, leading to a decline in the *Ikoru*'s influence. By the postcolonial era, the *Ikoru* had been marginalized in many communities, displaced by new forms of governance and communication.

Through an interdisciplinary approach, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of African oral traditions, indigenous political institutions, and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. By centering the *Ikoru* in the historical narrative of Umunze, it seeks to illuminate the complex ways in which traditional African societies maintained social cohesion, transmitted knowledge, and negotiated power, while also acknowledging the external forces that have reshaped these practices over time.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is anchored in three interrelated conceptual strands: indigenous communication systems, symbolic anthropology, and theories of authority in acephalous societies. First, within the tradition of indigenous communication systems (Ugboajah, 1985; Wilson, 1991), the *Ikoru* drum is understood not as mere music but as a functional instrument of information dissemination, governance, and collective action. Its codified sound patterns, restricted access, and ritualized use align with African modes of “talking drums” as proto-media technologies that served the needs of non-literate but highly organized communities. Second, the framework of symbolic anthropology (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1967) provides tools for interpreting the *Ikoru* as a cultural symbol embedded in Igbo cosmology. Beyond sound, the *Ikoru* embodies meanings of power, unity, and ancestral presence. Its ritual restrictions and symbolic motifs reinforce its role as a vessel of collective identity and memory, situating it at the intersection of the physical and metaphysical worlds.

Third, the analysis engages with theories of authority and governance in acephalous societies (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Onwuejeogwu, 1981). Igbo political organization historically lacked centralized kingship, instead privileging councils, age grades, and title societies. Within this system, the *Ikoru* functioned as a voice of consensus, legitimizing decisions and summoning collective participation. Its authority derived from the community's recognition of its sacred and administrative weight. These three strands converge to frame the *Ikoru* as both a communicative technology and a socio-political institution, one whose transformation under colonialism and missionary influence illustrates broader tensions between indigenous systems and imposed modernity. By situating the *Ikoru* within these conceptual fields, this study contributes to scholarship on African oral traditions, intangible cultural heritage, and the resilience of indigenous institutions amid historical change.

### **Geographic and Historical Background of Umunze**

Umunze is a prominent Igbo-speaking community located in present-day Orumba South Local Government Area of Anambra State, southeastern Nigeria. Geographically, it lies at the



boundary between Anambra and Imo States, serving as a cultural and economic link between the highland Igbo communities of the hinterland and the riverine societies of the lower Niger Basin. The terrain is generally marked by undulating hills, with fertile soils that support agriculture; particularly yam, cassava, and palm produce (Okeke, 2006). The historical roots of Umunze are deeply tied to migration and settlement narratives common across Igbo societies. Oral traditions suggest that the community descended from a progenitor known as Nze, a patriarch whose descendants established the foundational kindreds of the town (Ekwunife, 1990). Over generations, these kindreds grew into autonomous village units with strong kinship and lineage systems, forming the socio-political nucleus of Umunze.

Umunze's historical development was influenced by its strategic location as a trade and cultural node. It functioned as a point of interaction for neighboring communities such as Isulo, Eziagu, and Owerre-Ezukala. By the early 20th century, Umunze had become integrated into the indirect rule system under British colonialism, which reconfigured many of its traditional power structures, particularly through the appointment of warrant chiefs and native court systems (Afigbo, 1972).

### **Traditional Institutions of Umunze in the Igbo Cultural Context**

Traditional institutions in Umunze align with the decentralized political systems that characterize much of Igbo society. The Igbo are historically known for their acephalous or segmentary political organization; lacking centralized kingship or monarchies but relying instead on councils of elders, lineage heads, age grades (*otu ogbo*), and secret societies (*ndi nze na ozo*) to maintain order and governance (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). In Umunze, the political structure is traditionally organized around the *ndichie* (council of elders), the *okpala* (lineage head), and various age-grade associations that perform both civic and military duties. The *ndichie* are responsible for community decision-making, land disputes, rituals, and the enforcement of customary laws. These elders derive their authority from seniority, wisdom, and spiritual status, often linked to ancestral veneration.

Another critical institution is the *Nze na Ozo* title society, which serves both religious and political functions. Membership into this elite group is based on moral integrity, wealth, and religious purity, and it confers a sacred status on the titleholder, who acts as a moral guide and spiritual intermediary (Isichei, 1976). The title system reinforces social stratification and preserves cultural values. Furthermore, the *Ikoru* drum itself functioned as a traditional institution; an instrument imbued with authority, often associated with judicial summons, emergency mobilization, or community-wide announcements. Its use was regulated and interpreted only by recognized elders or titleholders, further emphasizing its sacred and administrative role.

Collectively, these institutions operated in a participatory and consensus-driven framework, allowing for communal checks and balances. Although these systems faced disruption under colonial rule and post-colonial modernity, they remain vital to the cultural identity of Umunze and reflect broader patterns of Igbo socio-political organization.



### **Historical Origins, Physical Structure and Construction of the *Ikor* Drum**

The *Ikor* drum is a significant traditional instrument among the Igbo, particularly in Umunze, where it has served not merely as a musical device but as a central organ of indigenous communication, governance, and spirituality. Oral traditions trace the origins of the *Ikor* to the early period of communal consolidation, when societal needs demanded an effective means of long-distance communication in non-literate societies (Uchendu, 1965). In Umunze, as in many other Igbo communities, the *Ikor* is said to have emerged from divine instruction or ancestral guidance, imbued with spiritual significance from its inception.

Unlike smaller talking drums used in festivals or ceremonies, the *Ikor* is monumental in both size and importance. Its presence in the community is often associated with sacredness, and its sounding is restricted to very specific, high-stakes occasions; such as deaths of titled men, impending war, communal gatherings, or emergencies. The exclusivity surrounding its use reinforces its role as a sacred and authoritative voice of the community (Korinya & Bazza, 2025). The *Ikor* is a slit drum, usually hewn from the trunk of a large hardwood tree; often the *iroko* (*Milicia excelsa*) or *ohia*, chosen for its acoustic properties and spiritual relevance. The drum is typically massive, requiring permanent installation in a central communal space such as the village square (*ama*), where it remains protected by a thatched or open-roofed structure.

Its structure comprises a long-hollowed cylinder with an elongated slit running through the top surface. The interior cavity amplifies sound when struck with specialized wooden mallets. Some *Ikor* drums are carved with symbolic motifs; representing ancestral spirits, totems, or cosmic imagery, further reinforcing their ritual importance (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). The size and craftsmanship of the drum often correlate with the prestige and historical depth of the community that owns it.

### **Samples of Traditional *Ikor* Drum**

**Image 1: Sample 1 of *Ikor* Drum**





**Image 2: *Ikor* Drum as used among Igbos**



**Source: Igbo Archives.com**

Here are few representative images of Ikor drums, capturing both their imposing physical form and the beautiful carvings that reflect their cultural and symbolic importance:

- i. A traditional Igbo slit drum labeled as an \* Ikor\* or *Ufie*; a tall, carved log drum typically stationed in a village square
- ii. A vivid depiction of drum maintenance or performance, symbolizing how these drums are handled in cultural contexts

These images offer a tangible glimpse into the Ikor drum's physicality and cultural resonance. Far more than musical instruments, Ikor embody ancestral memory, communal governance, and the artistic legacy of the Igbo tradition. The detailed carvings and commanding size reinforce their central role in traditional communication and ritual life.

### **Symbolism and Cultural Meaning of *Ikor* Drums**

In Umuaya, the *Ikor* symbolizes more than mere sound. It embodies authority, tradition, and community identity. Its tone is immediately recognizable and distinguishes itself from ordinary drums or festival instruments. According to elders interviewed in the course of this research, the *Ikor*'s sounding is interpreted not as "music" but as a "language," capable of conveying encoded messages to specific age grades, elders, or the entire village (E. Obi, R. Ude, K. Nwankwo, L. Okoye, & T. Eze, personal communication, July 10, 2025). The symbolic power of the *Ikor* lies in its capacity to unify or mobilize people through collective memory and shared understanding. The drum speaks in codes that are understood only by initiated members of society, particularly titled elders and lineage heads. Its sounding may convey the death of a high-ranking elder, an alert to danger, or a call to an emergency assembly. It is believed that ignoring the call of the *Ikor* carries both social and spiritual consequences, including ostracism or ancestral disfavour (Okonkwo, 2015).



Furthermore, the *Ikoro* occupies a liminal space between the physical and metaphysical. It is often associated with ancestral presence and cosmic order. In some cases, libations are poured before sounding the drum, and certain taboos must be observed to avoid desecrating its sacred function. For instance, it is forbidden for women, children, or uninitiated men to approach the drum closely or participate in its maintenance (Isichei, 1976). In sum, the *Ikoro* is both a functional and symbolic instrument, serving as a channel of communication, a tool of governance, and a vessel of cultural memory. Its authority is derived not only from its sound but from the intricate network of meanings, rituals, and taboos surrounding its use.

*Ikoro* is a locally made instrument that is carved out from a log of wood. It is constructed from a hallowed out mahogany tree trunk and when beaten with sticks, it invariably gives rise to melodious sounds that carries symbolic meanings Ogudoro. The *Ikoro* as one of the indigenous religious practice system according to Umeogu “occupies a sacred place in Igbo land”. It is on this position that Richard Okafor, in his article “Nigerian Organology and Classification of African Musical Instruments”, admits that “it is easy to conclude that the giant slit drum must be indigenous to the forest regions of Nigeria especially South-Eastern Nigeria, where they are ritualized. Here, also they serve as instruments of social communication, tonal telegraphy, drum poetry and signal”. On this position Blench laments that they “were in use in many areas as part of systems of long-distance communication but their communication function has been supplanted by telephones and fast public transport”. Brian Tracy states that musical instruments like the *Ikoro* is a “beautiful piece of furniture, elegant and refined in details, obviously a super of work which no one explains or dismisses its achievements as having been a matter of good luck”. Steven Friesen, in his article “The Hawaiian Lei on a Voyage Through Modernities: A Study in Post-Contact Religion”, asserts that such instrument like the *Ikoro* is a “delicately crafted gift that functioned within a system of exchange that easily transcended foreign conceptual boundaries such as sacred or secular”.

*Ikoro* are very big community slit drums of Igbo people, especially those living in the south west and sharing common borders with the *Ibibio* and member tribes of cross River State. It is also known to the Igbo communities in the northern part of the south west of Igbo land as well as the southern part of the north central. *Ikoro* culture is totally absent in the Igbo communities west of the River Niger. However, community ownership of wooden drums is common in other parts of Igbo land and indeed Tropical Africa whose forests provide abundant wood for drum construction. In Igbo land, every market, village and even smaller groups, including dance groups have drums. *Ekwe ike* (power-drum) and *ekwe dike* (valiant drum) of Okotu ancestry even have monumental intentions almost comparable to *Ikoro*. *Ekpe* community in Okpameri locality of Bendel state (which is situated in the north west of Igbo land) owns a ponderous wood mass (drum) which is beaten during a particular male-oriented ritual. It is carved in form of a man lying face up, its genitals clearly shown. This wooden mass is not hollowed out; so the members depend on raw physical energy to beat out sounds from its ‘chest’. Despite the resemblance of the community’s name and drum culture with those of some Igbo communities which celebrate *Ekpe* festival, they do not think that there is any strong link existing between the said communities. The slit drum of *Mbaduku*, (a Tiv community in the middle belt region of Nigeria), is similar to Igbo *Ikoro* drum in many ways. Though it is a status symbol for the chief, it is used for sending coded messages to *Mbaduku* natives. It is about 300cm in length and 120cm across (diameter) and is sheltered in *Ate*, a four corner poled hut sited in the public



square. The slit drums “Obodomisong” of the Otoro and Ikono areas of Aka Ibom State, the Igbo close neighbors, are of the same structure and function as the Mbaduku ones (Korinya & Bazza, 2025). Elephant drum, a wood mass carved to resemble an elephant, is the monumental drum of some communities in Cameroun area.

Generally, the use of drums in sending messages is common among many other African communities, especially those groups whose languages are highly tonal. Some of these groups include Ewe, Yoruba, Ashanti, Kongo, Kele, Swahili, Ngala and Bechuana. Basically, Ikoro is a giant cylindrical communal owned drum. The Ikoro (giant slit drum) was, in many Igbo areas, the principle medium of tonal telegraphy. It is a half musical instrument and a half religious object. It was the symbol of the community. Elaborate festivals and ceremonies surrounding Ikoro can be found at Ngwa, Ohafia, Bende, Abriba and Edda. There are also geometric designs and carvings on some slit drums which tell some history.

*“Digo”, Ikoro calls, its call echoing throughout the arena.*

*“Owei”, the brave answers jubilantly, breaking into Ikoro dance steps, interlacing them with the intricate dance steps of heroes.*

*“Digo, didigo, digo, digo”, Ikoro roars again.*

*Eee-e-e, eee-e-e”, the drummer cries, accompanying it.*

*“Owei, owei!” the brave answers. “My ancestors,*

*Greatness is hereditary-o-o. My age grade is greater than me-o!*

*Owei, owei!” he cries happily as he dances around the arena,*

Bragging about his exploits, gesticulating and pointing to several directions of his adventures” (Isichei, 1976)

That is the Ikoro drum, the drum of the great, the drum of heroes. There is no place for the coward when Ikoro calls. Beaten only for those who have won the coveted crown, answered and danced to only by them.

There were two kinds of heroes in Igbo land of old; the social and the war heroes. The social hero like Omezue Nkume in Omezue, the Complete Achiever, Volume One of the Victims Series, is distinguished by his many wives, many children, many slaves, is a renowned wrestler and above all, he must have taken many titles. But none of the above achievements can earn him the call of the Ikoro drum. It is exclusive to another type of social hero. In Afikpo, it is the holder of the Omume title. Omume title is the equivalent of the Ozo title in other Igbo areas; it is the highest and last title any man or woman can take in Igbo land and Afikpo, respectively. The war hero, on the other hand, is one who has successfully been to war and returned victorious, or one who has killed a lion (agu), or accomplished a superhuman feat; the magnitude of which echoes in the call of the Ikoro drum. To him Ikoro calls. At his/her death Ikoro announces his/her passage. It is the highest recognition accorded the greatest warriors (Geertz, 1973).

### ***Ikoro Drum as Instrument of Governance and Community Mobilization***

From 1915 to 1970, a period marked by significant transitions in southeastern Nigeria; including colonial imposition, indirect rule, missionary penetration, and postcolonial restructuring, the *Ikoro* drum remained an enduring symbol of indigenous governance in



Umunze. The drum played a pivotal role in mobilizing the populace for political, judicial, and ritual activities, acting as a non-verbal but highly codified system of mass communication and communal coordination. In the absence of centralized authority typical of Western models, Umunze, like many Igbo societies, operated a participatory democratic system where decisions were made through councils and consensus. The *Ikoró* was sounded to summon these meetings, especially when urgent deliberations were required. Its deep, resonant tones alerted the *ndichie* (council of elders), lineage heads, and age grades to assemble for pressing matters such as boundary disputes, law enforcement, or communal projects (Uchendu, 1965). The drum's sound pattern conveyed different messages; short rhythmic pulses might indicate a general meeting, while long, reverberating tones often signalled emergency or conflict (E. Obi, et al, personal communication, 2025).

This function of the *Ikoró* allowed for an organic form of governance that was both decentralized and responsive. In many ways, the drum substituted for written decrees, announcements, and summonses, effectively binding the community in a shared auditory polity. Its legitimacy stemmed from both custom and collective recognition.

### **Use of *Ikoró* Drum in Conflict Resolution and Judicial Function**

The *Ikoró* was also central to the justice system in Umunze during the precolonial and early colonial period. When disputes arose, whether between individuals or villages, the *Ikoró* could be used to initiate a judicial assembly, bringing together elders, titleholders, and disputing parties. In this context, the drum served both as a call to order and as a spiritual mediator; its presence reinforced the sanctity and seriousness of the proceedings. Notably, the sounding of the *Ikoró* during these assemblies marked a form of public trial, where the community was both witness and jury. Testimonies were given before the elders, who interpreted customary law and prescribed appropriate restitution or punishment. The decisions made in such settings carried binding moral authority, and the *Ikoró*'s voice effectively legitimized the process (E. Obi, et al, personal communication, 2025).

Additionally, if a crime of significant social weight was committed, such as theft, incest, or taboo violations, the *Ikoró* was beaten to alert the entire community. In such cases, it served not merely as a messenger but as an instrument of public accountability. The accused would often surrender voluntarily, knowing that failure to respond to the *Ikoró*'s summons could result in ostracism or spiritual consequences (Ogbu, 2003).

### **Ritual and Ceremonial Roles of *Ikoró* Drum**

The *Ikoró* also played vital roles in the ritual life of Umunze. It was sounded during the funerals of titled men, especially those in the *Nze na Ozo* society, as part of the public expression of loss and ancestral transition. Its voice was believed to guide the spirit of the deceased into the ancestral realm and to inform the living of the death of a community figurehead (Korinya & Agbu, 2020). In this context, the drum symbolized both mourning and continuity, connecting the past, present, and future generations. Moreover, the *Ikoró* was used during sacred festivals such as the *Iri Ji* (New Yam Festival), when it was beaten to mark the beginning of communal feasting and to reaffirm communal unity and agricultural blessings. Only titled elders or



spiritually sanctioned individuals were permitted to strike the *Ikoró* during such events, underscoring its sacred exclusivity.

To the people of Umunze, the mere mention of the *Ikoró* signifies so many things. *Ikoró* stands for authority and identity. It is an embodiment of status or class consciousness for custodians of sacred positions. It guards the position of the privileged in the community. *Ikoró* means so many things to so many people, but basically it upholds the class of initiates. To buttress this point further, Igwe Abilikate II of Umunze who is an initiate, explains that: “It is for respected and high esteemed individuals in the community, when a great person who fought a great war dies the *Ikoró* sound is heard. Also in the case where the king dies like myself (referring to himself) the *Ikoró* will be played”. *Ikoró* is sounded not just for any calibre of people but for individuals who puts the community first. Also during the burial ceremony of these special people, the *Ikoró* would be used.

Flowing from the above, it could be deduced that, although the *Ikoró* is used to sustain the positions of the privileged, but also serve as a connection between the humans and the ancestral spirits living in the extraterrestrial realm for traditional worshippers. This is the reason why Steve Pinkerton idiomatically describes such sacred sound as “the sad sound of weeping bugles that announces the death of its founder”. Nzewi argues that the *Ikoró* sacred music is specially designated for meritocratic men in the community, and in particular that its sounds signifies the death and funerary events of a male person of achievement. *Ikoró* stands as a medium of communication; it is a talking instrument in Igbo culture. Above all one common think about *Ikoró* tradition anywhere in Igbo land is that it is used in sending messages across the communities that own them. To do this, the tonal language of the particular group that owns a particular drum is limited by the *Ikoró*. Information played are often known phrases, though complete sentences are played. The drum produces two main sounds; the high and low notes, but a skilled player can achieve more. To further this argument, Mr. Emmanuel Alago explains that: The *Ikoró* in Umunze was used during war times and matter of emergencies. Umunze fought many wars bother with neighboring towns and towns afar. So the great *Ikoró* of Umunze was used to pass information during this time. And it was highly used to give coded messages during the Nigerian civil war.

In pre-colonial days when villages used to carry out raids against themselves, as the case of Umunze and many villages, *Ikoró* was sounded to keep the people alert and ready for the impending invasion of the enemy. For the aggressors the *Ikoró* was sounded, before a war to assemble the warriors to the square. To give situation report to the people during and after each battle, and to congratulate the warriors and celebrate the victors after each battle. To assemble the warriors in Umunze the *Ikoró* would say:

***Igbo Invitation***

***Translation***

*Ihem m huru*

- what I have seen

*Egwu ekweghim katara*

- I am afraid to mention

*Ihem m nuru*

- what I have heard



These same notes were used in 1969 during the Nigerian civil war, when the federal troops was entering Umunze through farms. These particular notes also keep everyone alert while they listen for more information. In most cases it is followed by these phrases:

***Igbo Invitation***

***Translation***

<i>Umu Ikorobia</i>	-	Young men
<i>Osi Osisi</i>	-	Quickly, quickly
<i>Umu Ikorobia</i>	-	Young men
<i>Osi osisi</i>	-	Quickly, quickly

It goes on to call the individual village and persons as in Umuchu

***Igbo Invitation***

***Translation***

<i>Ugwu akwa</i>	-	Ugwuakwa
<i>Oji dibia bumike</i>	-	Who derves its strength from medicine
<i>Amanasaa</i>	-	Seven wards
<i>Unu o nokwa ya</i>	-	Are you there?
<i>Okpunachara</i>	-	Okpunachara
<i>Unu o nokwa ya</i>	-	Are yo there?
<i>Oje na Mbosi ogu</i>	-	He who goes on the war day
<i>Kwadoo</i>	-	Get ready
<i>Otuhere dike aka</i>	-	he who throws his hands
<i>N'ekwu</i>	-	behind the valiants head
<i>Kwadoo</i>	-	Get ready
<i>Ome ka dike</i>	-	He who behaves like a valiant
<i>Ahu adikwa gi?</i>	-	Are you well?
<i>Ome ka dike</i>	-	He who behaves like a valiant
<i>Mebe gara gara</i>	-	Be fast
<i>N'eme gara gara</i>	-	Always fast
<i>Umuchu, umuchu</i>	-	Umuchu, Umuchu
<i>Kwa mba kwa isi</i>	-	For every distant village, a head
<i>Isi a huru, si gbute</i>	-	Cut any sighted head
<i>Uguruze Kpoke</i>	-	Uguruze Kpoke
<i>Unu nokwa now</i>	-	Are you there (plural)
<i>Ono n'ofia bia ngwa ngwa</i>	-	If you are in the bush, come quickly
<i>Ono n'uzo bia ngwa ngwa</i>	-	If you are on the road, come quickly
<i>Ibe aha di ukata ra ukata</i>	-	Everywhere is charged
<i>Abara akwurankwu</i>	-	A peg has got stuck in a wood trunk
<i>Okwara Idika</i>	-	Okwa Idika
<i>Inokwa hu?</i>	-	Are you there
<i>Gwere oso</i>	-	Come running
<i>Gwere ije</i>	-	Come walking
<i>Bia wara wara</i>	-	Come with flash
<i>Ajuwa a jua Ebem Ukwu</i>	-	If one asks, he asks the great Ebem
<i>Ajukwa a jua Ebem ukwu</i>	-	If one asks, he asks the great Ebem



*Abu ejula n'ite*  
*Ju ebelebe*

- Palm nut husks have filled the pot  
- and filled everywhere

Ikorosalutationliterallyputs everyone in war mood. It boosts their strength and confidence. The thought of it being played when they get victory makes everybody to put in their best. The thought of dancing to the heroic music of the great Ikoroderives the spirit of success thereby making every warrior to ensure that he comes back a winner. The spirit of invocation and possession takes place whenever the Ikorois played. The Ikoromusic is not just danced by anyone its for the initiates; the title holders and the king. Like I stated earlier the Ikorosound serves as a connection between the living and the dead. It is the medium where the living can be able to communicate with their ancestors or forefathers. So there is the spirit that comes in when every the music is being played. Ben Madiagwu, an 87 year old who is a title holder explains that: "Whenever the Ikoromusic plays there is the feeling that I have, I felt opportuned to be in connection with our forefathers, I felt like a holy person. I felt like I am on a whole different world".

From the above statement, it can be seen that during the ritual dance the initiates feel special and privileged to partake in it. It makes them feel entitled. This mostly happens during the *ihejioku*, *oliliede* and *Nneokika* festivals; the three highest festivals in Umunze. During these periods the Ikorois used to alert the people for them to start with the festival preparation. Also during its celebration the Ikorois played. Most times people do not have time to stay with each other because of their busy schedules. Like the farmers who mostly have tight schedules, it is during such festival like the *ihejioku* that they will have time for themselves reunite with their families, their neighbours and their loved ones to celebrate. It should also be noted here that Ikorosound is responsible for invoking the spirits of the deities, ancestors, dieting during these festival. It makes the people keep in touch with their forefathers. This ritual dance binds the entire community together, the king, the ancestors, the initiates and guides the community together.

### **Colonial Disruption and Transformation**

Despite its entrenched socio-political functions, the *Ikorobegan* to lose its pre-eminence during the colonial era, particularly under the system of indirect rule introduced by the British. The appointment of warrant chiefs, many of whom lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the people, led to the sidelining of indigenous governance mechanisms, including those facilitated by the *Ikorobegan* (Afigbo, 1972). Furthermore, colonial authorities discouraged the use of indigenous instruments of power that could not be monitored or regulated by the state. The Christian missionary movement also contributed to the marginalization of the *Ikorobegan*, labeling its use as "pagan" or "fetish." This demonization led to generational disconnects, where younger members of society began to regard the drum with suspicion or indifference. Nevertheless, oral sources suggest that in private or remote areas, the use of the *Ikorobegan* persisted, albeit in diminished forms (Ekwunife, 1990). Even during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), some communities resorted to the *Ikorobegan* to issue warnings about air raids or military threats, suggesting that its communicative relevance had not been entirely erased, even under the strain of modern warfare.



### **Impact of Modernization and Religious Change**

The decline of the *Ikoru* in Umuaya society from the mid-20th century onward reflects broader patterns of cultural erosion influenced by colonialism, Christianity, urbanization, and globalization. As Western-style institutions and religious systems took root in southeastern Nigeria, indigenous structures, including symbolic instruments like the *Ikoru*, faced increasing marginalization. Christian missionary activity played a central role in redefining indigenous religious and cultural practices. In particular, missionaries associated the *Ikoru* and its ritualistic use with "paganism," viewing it as a relic of idolatry and spiritual darkness (Ekwunife, 1990). This perspective led to its rejection in many converted households. Schools established by mission churches discouraged engagement with traditional rites, effectively severing younger generations from ancestral knowledge systems. As more families embraced Christianity and Western education, the symbolic relevance of the *Ikoru* diminished, particularly in public life (Ilogu, 1974). Furthermore, modern communication systems such as radios, town criers using megaphones, and later mobile telephone rendered the *Ikoru* obsolete as a mass communication device. Village assemblies once summoned by the deep, resonant call of the *Ikoru* began to rely on announcements made in church gatherings or via contemporary technology (Okonkwo, 2015).

### **Disruption of Transmission and Loss of Sacred Knowledge**

With the decline in ritual usage came the loss of the cultural codes associated with interpreting the *Ikoru*. Unlike written language, the drum's "speech" was orally transmitted and passed down through generations of elders and initiated titleholders. As these custodians aged and died without adequately transmitting the knowledge, the ability to "read" or decode the drum's messages began to vanish (Nwankwo, 2012). This disruption affected not just the practical function of the *Ikoru*, but also its status as a cultural archive. In Umuaya, specific drum patterns once used to communicate the death of a titled elder, the birth of a male heir, or the call to ancestral festivals have largely faded from memory. Interviews conducted with community elders suggest that only a small number of elderly men still retain a partial understanding of these codes (Okeke, 2006).

Moreover, the taboos and ritual prohibitions surrounding the *Ikoru*; such as gender-based restrictions, spiritual cleansing before playing it, and libation rites, have fallen into disuse. While these practices once enforced the sacredness of the instrument, their abandonment has led to the desacralization of the *Ikoru*, turning it into little more than a historical artifact for many younger Umuaya residents.

### **Resilience and Cultural Revival**

Despite the challenges, there have been grassroots efforts in Umuaya and neighboring communities to preserve and revive interest in the *Ikoru* and related cultural expressions. Local cultural associations, often led by retired educators or traditional leaders, have organized festivals that include symbolic beatings of the *Ikoru*, storytelling sessions, and intergenerational dialogues on traditional knowledge systems.



In 2008, for instance, the Umunze Development Union incorporated a cultural Heritage Day into its annual calendar, which featured the *Ikoru* drum as a centerpiece attraction. Though the performance was largely ceremonial, it marked a shift toward revalorizing indigenous symbols (Udu, 2010). Similarly, a few cultural researchers from Anambra State College of Education have undertaken documentation projects to record oral histories and meanings associated with the drum before the last bearers of such knowledge pass on. Some elders advocate for the integration of indigenous knowledge, including the *Ikoru*, into local curricula, arguing that traditional instruments can coexist with modern education if contextualized properly. This syncretic approach could serve not only to preserve the *Ikoru*, but also to deepen young people's sense of identity and historical rootedness (Afigbo, 1981).

### **The *Ikoru* in Contemporary Memory and Identity**

Today, the *Ikoru* remains present in Umunze not as an active governing instrument, but as a symbol of cultural pride and ancestral connection. While its political and judicial authority has waned, its presence in community squares and during festivals signifies a link to the past that many regard with reverence. In this sense, the *Ikoru* has undergone a symbolic transformation, from a practical tool of governance to a cultural emblem. It is often invoked in proverbs, songs, and public speeches as a metaphor for authority, unity, and wisdom. For example, local elders still say, “*O bu Ikoru na-akpo mmadu, o bughị ekwe*” (It is the *Ikoru* that summons a man, not an ordinary drum), emphasizing the drum's singular authority and distinction. Such metaphorical usage ensures that even as the literal functions of the *Ikoru* decline, its symbolic capital endures within collective memory and language.

### **Implications for Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Preservation**

The case of the *Ikoru* underscores the importance of documenting and preserving intangible cultural heritage. As oral traditions and indigenous institutions continue to wane under the pressures of global modernization, there is an urgent need to archive, study, and integrate these cultural forms into contemporary educational and social systems. Efforts to revive interest in the *Ikoru*, through festivals, academic research, and intergenerational dialogue, should be encouraged and institutionalized. Such initiatives not only enrich cultural identity among younger generations but also affirm the relevance of indigenous knowledge systems in addressing contemporary social and political challenges.

Future research could explore comparative studies of the *Ikoru* in other Igbo communities or examine its equivalents among other Nigerian ethnic groups. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches combining anthropology, musicology, and political history could yield deeper insights into the semiotic, acoustic, and ritual dimensions of traditional drums in African societies. Ultimately, the story of the *Ikoru* is not just about sound, it is about voice, authority, memory, and belonging. In Umunze, as in much of Igboland, the echoes of the *Ikoru* still resonate in the cultural consciousness, calling not only the living but also summoning the past into dialogue with the present.



## Conclusion

This study has examined the multifaceted role of the *Ikor* drum within the socio-political and cultural framework of Umunze, an Igbo-speaking community in southeastern Nigeria. Between 1915 and 1970; a period marked by colonial disruption, cultural transitions, and emergent national identity, the *Ikor* stood as more than a mere musical instrument. It served as a powerful medium of communication, a tool of indigenous governance, and a symbol of communal identity. From the geographical and historical roots of Umunze to the structural and symbolic complexities of the *Ikor*, the drum embodied traditional authority and communal consensus. It was instrumental in mobilizing the populace for political meetings, rituals, festivals, and emergencies. Its ability to encode messages reinforced a participatory governance system where decisions were collectively deliberated and enforced. The colonial administration's imposition of indirect rule, along with the spread of Christianity and modern communication technologies, led to a gradual decline in the *Ikor*'s centrality. However, its symbolic importance has not vanished. Instead, the *Ikor* has transitioned from an operational institution of governance to a potent emblem of cultural heritage, identity, and ancestral memory.

This transformation highlights the resilience of indigenous systems, even in the face of modernization and cultural change. The persistence of the *Ikor* in community memory, festivals, and proverbial language suggests that cultural continuity is not necessarily dependent on unchanged practice but on adaptive remembrance.

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