

# Self-Representation and the Construction of the Igbo World among Igbo Students in a Public University in Nigeria

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## Abstract

*Construction of a distinctive cultural identity in a heterogeneous community entails employing cultural symbols to portray a group's peculiarity. Within the university space in Nigeria, Igbo students re-enact the Igbo world through the employment of cultural symbols and ceremonials for the construction of an Igbo cultural identity. This study employs empirical evidence to explore how the Igbo world is re-enacted through ethnic identity construction within the territoriality of the university.<sup>1</sup> By looking at how the local culture is translocalised in the university space, I explore the Igbo world in the context of this multi-ethnic, yet peculiar environment. The questions are: how do Igbo students in public universities in Nigeria (re)construct Igbo identity in the university space, using cultural forms, symbols, and ceremonials? In what forms do the conferred connect with the larger university community as a symbol of the "self" and the "collective," reflecting group distinctiveness and contributing to the sustenance of the Igbo world in the university environment? This study has implications on the sustenance of Igbo cultural identity in a globalising world.*

*Key words:* Igbo ethnic identity, cultural symbols and ceremonials, Igbo students, university space

## Introduction

As an undergraduate student at Roseville University (pseudonym), Nigeria, between 1988 and 1992, I had the opportunity to serve as the treasurer of Anambra State Students' Association (1988–1989), and later as the Vice-President of the association (1989–1990). My position as an executive member of the association offered me an opportunity to understand, from the insider's perspective, the vision and workings of Igbo ethnic-based students' associations in higher education institutions (HEIs), and how they participate in ethnic identity construction. Although it has been almost two decades since I left the institution as a student, I rely on memories and ethnographic methods to explore how ethnic-based students' associations in the university recreate and re-enact group identity.

For the Igbo students at Roseville University, located in southwest Nigeria, the construction of *uwa Ndi-Igbo* (the Igbo world) is pertinent, bearing in mind that Roseville is situated in the southwest, far removed from the south-eastern region, the homeland of the Igbo. Roseville, like other universities in Africa, has been affected by dwindling government subventions to HEIs, which dates back to the 1980s following

the economic depression that marked the period. During that same period of time, the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), as recommended by the World Bank, aimed at addressing the nation's economic challenges, never abated the problem of "brain drain" that affected academic staff enrollment in universities in Africa from the 1990s. Besides "intellectual flight," the presence of foreign students in the institution declined so rapidly that by the 2010-2011 session the number of foreign students at Roseville was 35 out of an approximate student population of 20,000, a consequence of the declining standard of our universities in recent decades. Indeed, Niyi Osundare, a scholar-poet, in his Valedictory Lecture, bemoans the situation in the Nigerian premier university and argues that it is losing its "universe" (Osundare 2005, 2). Notably, whatever the condition of the university in Nigeria as an institution of "ideological production" (Pereira 2007, 27) may be, Igbo students are part of the student population from numerous ethnic groups in the country studying at Roseville University. Much like students from many of these ethnic groups, Igbo students (re)create the Igbo world within the university space for various reasons ranging from cultural nostalgia to cultural identity construction.

Construction of a distinctive cultural identity in a heterogeneous community like the university entails employing cultural symbols to portray a group's peculiarity. Igbo students at Roseville University re-enact the Igbo world, using diverse cultural forms, ceremonials and symbols. This study employs empirical evidence to explore how the Igbo world is (re)produced within the territoriality of the university through this process. The translocalisation of the Igbo world is part of the processes through which "local contents" are incorporated into the "universality" in the University. The questions are: how do the Igbo students in public universities in Nigeria (re)construct *uwaa Ndi-Igbo* (the Igbo world) in the university space, using cultural symbols and ceremonials? In what ways does this representation interact with the university's macro culture and contribute to the generation of "local contents" and translocalisation of the Igbo world in the university? In what forms do the conferred, in the case of the *igwe* (the traditional leader) of the Igbo students' association for instance, connect with the larger university community as a symbol of the "self" and the "collective," reflecting group distinctiveness and contributing to the sustenance of *uwaa Ndi-Igbo* in the university community? In answering these questions, the study first identifies some of the cultural forms, ceremonials, and symbols associated with the Igbo people, and how the students employ them to construct the Igbo identity on campus; second, it explores how other student communities perceive Igbo students and their socio-cultural "architectures" on campus. Finally, the article explores the *igwe* as a symbol of the "self" and the "collective" in the university space. This article is a contribution to the current debate on the future of Igbo culture in the face of Westernisation and globalisation.

Various scholars of Igbo studies have expressed fears of threats to Igbo language and culture in contemporary times. Obviously, a look at reports emanating from both theoretically and empirically based research, and international organisations such as UNESCO, suggests that Igbo language and culture is at the risk of going into

extinction in the near future, if nothing is done to check the current trend (Ejiofo 2011). Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the dialectical processes that constitute part of the ingredients of globalisation in view of what Igbo people bring to the market place of ideas and cultures in the process of the construction of their identity as exemplified in different places and spaces where the Igbo world is being (re)created. No matter how negligible these contributions may seem, we cannot but appreciate such “marginal” contributions made at micro levels to promote Igbo culture. I contend that while Igbo culture is obviously threatened, there are spaces beyond Igbo land where Igbo cultural values and identities are being (re)enacted. In the university space, and outside of it, both within Nigeria and in the diaspora, translocalisation of the Igbo lifeways contributes to the sustenance of the Igbo traditions and values. An Igbo cultural renaissance can and does emanate from spaces beyond Igbo land. Further, I argue that the translocalisation of Igbo culture at the university space deconstructs the universality that characterises the University, a key instrument of Westernisation; that peculiarity marks out the “University” as a distinct entity. The presence of the “local” in the University, however, is a manifestation of the utilisation of freedom, which is one of the main ideologies of the University. Yet the reality of mixture of varieties as exemplified in the Igbo language spoken by students-participants in this study is a challenge to the achievement of an authentic Igbo cultural identity reconstruction in a globalising world.

### Review of Literature

Research on ethnic-based organisations is not a novel thing in the fields of anthropology and sociology. Associational life remains an adaptive mechanism in indigenous African societies. In a study of ethnic-based organisations in the northern city of Kano, Nigeria, Eghosa Osaghae, a political scientist, in his work, *Trends in Migrant Political Organizations in Nigeria: The Igbo in Kano* (1994), argues that both the Igbo and the Yoruba in northern city of Kano, Nigeria, developed “supra-ethnic associations,” with institutionalisation of kingship known as *eze Ndi-Igbo* (“king” of the Igbo people) and *Oba* among the Igbo and Yoruba peoples respectively, which, according to him, is meant to create “home away from home” and provide an avenue for the children born outside their parents’ ethnic homeland to be acculturated into the culture of their parents. In the article “Power of Space, Space of Power: The Socio-Cultural Dynamics in the Institutionalization of *Ezeship* in Non-Igbo States in Nigeria,” Ukpokolo (2012a) argues that the institutionalisation of *ezeship* in non-Igbo states in Nigeria has engendered socio-cultural complexities both at the home town and the non-Igbo states where “supra-ethnic associations” and kingship institutions have developed, as space in both places have become contested arenas, a consequence of transgression of boundaries. In any case, in “Hometown Associations as a Means of Governance in Nigeria,” Honey and Okafor (1998) contend that hometown associations in urban Nigeria are of importance in the development of corresponding home communities.

The university is increasingly attracting attention in discussions on socio-political and economic development of nations, as well as issues about a people and their world,

which significantly borders on ethnic identity. In higher education institutions (HEIs), students belong to multiple groups, some of which are compulsory while others are optional (see *Fig. 1*). For instance, membership of departmental/faculty associations is compulsory whereas it is optional for religious groups, social clubs, ethnic-based organisations and similar cases. Group membership contributes to the development of collegiate students. In a study titled “Bridging Gaps, Creating Spaces: University of Ibadan Female Undergraduate Students in Intercultural Encounter,” Ukpokolo (2012b) notes that the undergraduates in HEIs need psycho-social support and they obtain this from peers in the informal circles where they interact through the process of informal mentoring. Similarly, John A. Axelson, a professor of counselling, in his book, *Counselling and Development in a Multicultural Society* (1995), contends that different group activities that the students are involved in give them a sense of security and belonging and help in the fulfilment of human gregariousness.

Students in HEIs often encounter diverse challenges in their attempt to be integrated into the culture of their institution. The gap created by the cultural differences between their home culture and the culture of their university is bridged by various means, including associational life. In the article, “Ethnic Communities within the University: An Examination of Factors Influencing the Personal Adjustment of International Students” (1998), Al-Sharideh and Goe contend that in the United States participation in ethnic organisations helps international students to develop strong ties with the co-culturals, providing a soft-landing for them and a space to learn how to cope with the challenges of their new environment. Commenting on international students and transitional challenges in the United States, the sociologist John A. Arthur, in *Invisible Sojourner: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States* (2000), argues that for the international students in the United States, ethnic associations help to adapt to the new environment by enabling them to bond with members of their ethnic group and overcome the initial challenges encountered in the institution of higher learning. Ethnic-based associations in HEIs, however, have diverse goals besides assisting in cultural adaptation of members. For instance, in the article, “A Search for Post-Apartheid Collective Identities: Ethnic Students’ Organisations at a South African University” (2008), Dinga Sikwebu observes that ethnic-based associations in Wit University, South Africa, function as instrument of identity construction in post-apartheid South Africa.

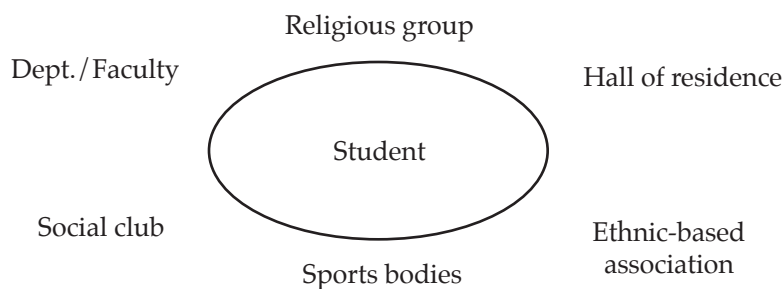


Figure 1: *Students' Multiple Group Membership* (Source: Ukpokolo 2012b, 75).

The focus of this paper is to examine how Igbo students at Roseville University engage in the (re)production of *uwa Ndi-Igbo* (the Igbo world), using cultural symbols and ceremonials. Studying Igbo students does not imply that the Igbo people are a homogenous group. I am aware of the heterogeneity that characterises Igbo culture as exemplified in diverse Igbo culture areas in Nigeria, despite the obvious “cultural universals” that mark the people’s lifeways. Further clarifications on these are made later in this article.

### Context and Methods

This research employed semi-structured interviews, key informant interview, focus group discussions, participant observation, and life history as data gathering techniques. An ethnographic approach is the most appropriate for research of this nature as it offers the researcher in-roads into the students’ understanding of what they do. Besides, I have also integrated my personal experiences as a former executive member of National Union of Anambra State Students (NUASS) to validate the data generated through other methods. A total of 25 participants were involved in this study, comprising of four executive members of the association, namely the President, the Social Officer, the former *igwe* (traditional ruler) of the National Union of Anambra Students’ Association (NUASS), and the current one (at the time of research), and other informants randomly selected. In selecting the participants, male and female students were included in the sample to create a gender balance. A total of two focus group discussions were also carried out comprising five students in each session. Six non-Igbo students were also interviewed in order to ascertain their perception of Igbo students’ construction of their identity in the university.

As a researcher-participant, I have consciously built on and integrated my knowledge of the subject providing insights as an “insider” as suggested by a feminist scholar, Lesley Shackleton in Shackleton (2007) in “Lost in Liberalism: A Case Study of the Disappearance of Gender Agenda at a South African University.” I am aware of the “insider-outsider” debate in qualitative research, which focuses on whether the inside-researcher can give objective assessment of research subjects as she/he is an integral part of the researched issue, a major position in positivist school of thought. This study leans on the conclusion drawn by Christina Chavez, a qualitative researcher, who finds that “insiders can understand the cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological disposition of participants as well as possess more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field” (Chavez 2008, 27). As an Igbo by birth and a former executive member of NUASS, not only am I acquainted with my research field, I also possess insider’s knowledge of my research subject and field. My positionality, therefore, offers me a good ground to grapple with the subject matter of my research, integrating my experience into it. This study is not just about uncovering reality, using an emic approach, but also about discovering, creating and documenting textuality that emerges in inter-subjective encounters. In studying the Igbo students, I have gone beyond what they do by engaging in discursiveness that emerged as the product of our engagements. Interpretive analysis, which is associated with



anthropologists like Clifford Geertz (see Geertz 1973), offers insights in the analysis of the data collected. This study was conducted both in English and Igbo languages. The informant had the choice of responding to questions in whichever language she/he chose. Where the informant chose Igbo language, translation has been included in the data presentation and analysis. One conspicuous point emerging from this study is that most of the informants mix Igbo and English languages, a case of code switching and code mixing—a common problem among Igbo language speakers. This phenomenon, too, is explored in this article. Of course, the problems associated with translations such as lack of equivalent words or even at times meaning, were also encountered in an attempt to translate from Source Language (SL) to Target Language (TL). Rather than word-to-word translation, I opted for equivalent meaning, inserting words where necessary to generate the near-accurate translations and meanings. The fieldwork for this article was carried out between 2010 and 2011.

### **Igbo Students' Associations at Roseville University**

The university, referred to as *mahadum* in Igbo language, meaning “know it all” and, by implication, “a place where one learns all things,” remains a subject of discussions in higher education scholarship. In Africa, scholars focus on the university as a place of “ideological production” (Pereira 2007, 27), “a critical component of development and development discourse” (Lawuyi and Ukpokolo 2012, 2), and a place and space for “identity construction” (Sikwebu 2008, 107), among other issues. Basically, the university is established to produce knowledge for societal advancement. Also important is the cultural production that takes place in the university space. Indeed, students are key stakeholders in the enterprise of knowledge production and key participants in cultural (re)production in the university, particularly through the multifaceted students' associations to which they belong.

At Roseville, there are 146 students' associations cutting across academic and religious bodies, social movements, social clubs, and ethnic-based organisations. Igbo students' associations are part of the different ethnic-based associations in the institution. There are five major Igbo students' groups representing five Igbo states in southeast Nigeria. These are Anambra State Students Association (NUASS), National Association of Abia State Students (NASS), Federation of Ebonyi State Students (FESS), National Council of Enugu State Students (NACESS), and National Association of Imo State Students (NAISS). These associations have common visions and missions that are reflected in their membership, administration, and annual activities. Four categories of Igbo students at Roseville were identified:

- (i) Students that come from Igbo land and are conversant with Igbo traditions and values. Most students in this category show interest in Igbo students' associations and easily rise to leadership positions in the association as a result of their knowledge of Igbo culture.
- (ii) Those born outside Igbo land with some knowledge of Igbo culture by virtue of their frequent visits to Igbo land. Some students in this category

may join Igbo students' associations while others may not. Those that join are easily co-opted to function in diverse capacities, such as membership of organising committees of programmes of the association.

- (iii) Those born outside Igbo land who lack the knowledge of Igbo language, traditions, and customs due to the socialisation they have received. Most of the Igbo students in this category hardly show interest in the activities of Igbo students' associations, and subsequently remain disconnected from the home culture. For those that are eager to learn, the ethnic-based association provides the platform for a (re)connection with the in-group and gives them the feeling of "being there though not there."
- (iv) Those who do not associate with the Igbo students' associations based on personal reasons comprising lack of time, involvement in the larger students' union leadership and/or students' fellowships on campus, and lack of interest.

Participating in the life of the association helps the students in satisfying the cultural yearnings emanating from their diasporic identity. They are able to interact closely with those who speak the same language, share the same cultural values and help in their adaptation processes by providing a safety net in the difficulties they encounter in their new environment. This agrees with the position of Al-Sharideh and Goe on international students in American HEIs when they hint that:

The network ties established within an ethnic community can be utilized by international students as a means of coping with and resolving problems that emerge during the course of their studies, thereby facilitating the adjustment process (Al-Sharideh and Goe 1998, 700).

Al-Sharideh and Goe, however, argue that for the international students in American universities, the more attachment they have with their ethnic communities, the more the distance between them and assimilation into American mainstream culture. The current study, however, has not verified this hypothesis within the context of the Nigerian society. Undoubtedly, as Sikwebu rightly notes, "[I]n unfamiliar and uncertain places, individuals use spaces such as communities, ethnic groups or bodies as insurance against displacement and to make meaning of their new conditions." While the university environment in Nigeria may not be classified as an "unfair environment," for the new entrants, it is, indeed, characterised by "uncertainty" (2008, 114).

The word "Igbo," according to Uchendu (1965), is used in three senses: the Igbo homeland/territory; the native speakers of the language, and as a language group. Forde and Jones (1950) identify five sub-cultures of the Igbo ethnic group, *vis-a-vis*: Northern or Onitsha Igbo; Southern or Owerri Igbo; Eastern or Cross River Igbo; North-eastern Igbo; and Western Igbo (part of the Igbo land in Delta State, Nigeria), with each sub-culture exhibiting certain cultural peculiarities. The Cross River Igbo, for instance, Forde and Jones note, are assumed to have adopted their double

descent system from their Ibibio neighbours, while the western Igbo are believed to have adopted the strong kingship/chiefdom system from their Benin (in Edo State) neighbours. The scholars, however, observe that all Igbo sub-cultures share certain cultural similarities, which include the Igbo language, white chalk culture,<sup>2</sup> strong socio-political institutions and cultural practices such as age grade system, *umunna* (patrilineage) grouping, masquerade institution, kolanut rituals, the vigour of Igbo music and dance movements, Igbo cuisines, dressing, sophisticated arts designs such as *uli* (delicate body painting), pottery designs, among other cultural practices. The River Niger divided the Igbo land into two unequal parts—the eastern Igbo (east of the River Niger), and the western Igbo (west of the River Niger), with the larger portion to the east. The Igbo land and culture referred to in this article is the Igbo east of the Niger and their culture.

Through the activities of the Igbo students' associations at Roseville University, the Igbo culture is translocalised, bringing the "local" into the "universal," the University. Dissecting "university" as a concept, Niyi Osundare posits that "uni" indicates "its oneness, its wholeness, its indivisibility, its essential integrity...a oneness derived from a whole, a macrocosm condensed into a microcosm." "Uni" represents "its intellectual concentratedness, its singleness of purpose in the pursuit of knowledge, learning, and wisdom, and the science of being and becoming, its insistence on the indivisibility of the integrity of intellect and knowledge" (Osundare 2005, 8). The second dimension of the concept "university," he maintains, is its "universus," which "highlights the dynamic process by which that wholeness is achieved...the universality of its import... For a university in name and in truth, is a curious and complex mix of the one and the all, the unique and the universal." "[I]ts 'universality' transform the university and makes it 'a compost of thought and garden of ideas'" (Osundare 2005, 9). Such a "garden of ideas" welcomes all and excludes none, except that which destroys when convincingly proved to be so. Invariably, students' multiple groups constitute part of those multiplicities of categories that contribute to the "universal" in the university. While the "uni" is the hallmark of the "University," the diversity of "cultural voices" in the university space is a deconstructionist instrument achieved through translocalisation processes, of which ethnic-based associations represent a category. This is achieved through cultural (re)productions in the university environment.

Ethnic associations such as the Igbo students' associations perform various functions such as instrument of acculturation. According Ositadinma, an informant and a member of NUASS:

When we come together, we teach our fellow students the things we do; the way we dress ..., the way we greet. Igbo people have the way we greet (Ositadinma 2011).

Igbo cultural norms, as the informant highlighted above, are represented in such cultural forms as mode of dressing, greetings, language, symbols, and ceremonials. These will be further explored in the subsequent sections in this article.



### **Constructing Collective Identity through Cultural Symbols and Ceremonials**

A human group constructs ethnic identity in the ways and means the people represent themselves, and are perceived by non-group members. This construct is evident when both the material and non-material aspects of a people's culture are employed to the group's advantage and subsequently establish ethnic boundaries. According to Nagel (1994, 153), ethnic boundaries are not static, for "the location and meaning of particular ethnic boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised, and revitalized, both by ethnic group members themselves as well as by outside observers." Ethnic-based identity not only reflects shared values and locality but also demonstrates an acknowledgement of that difference by non-group members, using cultural identification. Lamont and Molnar (2002, 168) identify two types of boundaries existing in intra- and inter-group interactions, which, according to them, are symbolic boundaries and social boundaries. They contend:

Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality (Lamont and Molnar 2002, 168).

The significance of "symbolic boundaries" is that it allows people to capture the "dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems, and principles of classifications" (Lamont and Molnar 2002, 168). Besides, Lamont and Molnar further argue, symbolic boundaries tend to "separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership system" (Lamont and Molnar 2002, 168). Often times, symbolic boundaries also function as instruments through which individuals or groups can acquire status and monopolise resources (Epstein 1992, 232) within and outside the group. This exclusivist tendency marginalises non-group members, not because they do not desire to occupy the centre space as active participants but, because of their lack of cultural capital in the form of "shared understanding;" their marginality is reinforced. Such cultural capital is symbolic and constitutes the resources necessary to navigate space within and between the constructed boundaries. The result is the establishment of social boundaries. Essentially, elements of social boundaries, Lamont and Molnar (2002, 168) hint, are "objectified forms of social difference manifested in equal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and non-material) and social opportunities," which are also revealed in constant behavioural patterns of association.

Ethnic-based associations employ symbols to construct social boundaries, and concretise the groups' position in the social space. Those associations use those same symbols to place the "Other" on the periphery, that is, those who do not share a people's ethnic identity. For the "Other," the only option is an acknowledgement and recognition of that difference. At the heart of this social dynamic and negotiation are identity politics, which are inevitable when individuals or groups engage in identity construction. Obviously, ethnic boundaries establish "patterns of social interaction

that give rise to, and subsequently reinforce, in-group members' self-identification and outsiders' confirmation of group distinctions" (Sanders 2002, 327). The university environment provides a platform for the youth as social actors to engage in cultural (re)production through various cultural activities, which the students initiate. Igbo students recreate the Igbo world on the campus, give "life" to it, dissolving place and distance in the process. But the concept of "place" is embedded in meanings too, depending on how the "constructor" interprets it. For the students, as they engage in the expression of their identity at the university, this arena becomes "the homeland." Locale loses its strangeness and its polysemic nature is re-affirmed through its continual shift in identity—from a classroom, a hall, for instance, to "Igbo land," to "village square." Thus, Massey affirms:

Place is a product of social relations and expressions of identity, as well as a node in a larger network of other places. The 'local' is linked to other locales through social relations, an important aspect in the formation of translocalities (Massey 1994 quoted in Tan and Yeoh 2011, 41).

The university is a locale of encounter with those who are different from us, providing equally a spatial context where we encounter co-culturalists, necessitating self-definition. Igbo students' "Week at Roseville" provides an opportunity for the Igbo students to (re)create Igbo cultural identity through the (re)production of the Igbo world in diverse ways such as dressing, language, symbolic invocations, and cultural ceremonials.

### **Igbo Students' Cultural Week**

Annually, Igbo students hold Igbo Cultural Week which is presently marked at the state association level, implying that each of the Igbo groups is a symbol of the whole. Several activities are slated for the one-week celebration, climaxed with "Cultural Day." To enhance Igbo visibility on campus, elements of Igbo culture are re-enacted. For NUASS members in particular, the eve of their week begins with a masquerade performance. According to Ikechukwu, a former president of NUASS:

*Mmanwu je aga na different halls of residence. Ewere ogene gagharia na campus ka ndi mmadu mata na Igbo Week ga ebido* (A masquerade will go around different halls of residence. A gong is used to make announcements around the campus so that the people will know that Igbo Week will commence) (Ikechukwu 2011).

A masquerade performance in Igbo culture is an invocation of the ancestors, and reflects the people's belief in the duality of human existence, and the interactions between the physical and the spiritual realms. Through this cultural re-enactment, Igbo students, though Christians, connect to their ancestral root, a practice that captures their "hybridity" (Bhabha 1994). In Igbo land, the masquerade performs multiple functions, including instrumentation of security, peace-making, and entertainment. For the students, however, it is solely for entertainment. Igbo Cultural Day is marked with *akuko uwa* (news), *ilu* (proverbs) competition, *gwam-gwam-gwam* (riddles), (*egwu*

*omenana Ndi-Igbo*) Igbo cultural dance, and functions as a platform for the promotion of Igbo dressing, and cuisines such as *ofe onugbu* (bitter leaf soup), which the female students prepare. Costumes and dresses are maximally employed to create Igbo presence on campus. Notably, scholars like Abner Cohen contend that dressing is a technique employed by the elite to elicit the dialectical relationship between the individual and the collective. According to him, “Dress, music, poetry, dance, commensality, and rhetoric are all techniques that play crucial part in the process of sociocultural causation” (Cohen 1981, 207).

Dressing is an instrument of identity creation and distinguishing between and amongst individuals. All cultures of the world have conventional mode of dressing for men and women, and these are reflected in clothing, skin markings, beads, body decorations such as *uli* motif (among the Igbo) or hairstyles. In the ancient Benin Kingdom, complete or partial nudity represented formal dressing, hierarchy in the kingship system, palace community, and texture of socio-cultural occasions. In contemporary times, though, complete nudity no longer exists; the latter remains part of the aesthetics of beauty of apparel in Benin kingdom (Nevadmsky and Airihenbuwa 2007; Edo 2007). Igbo people have an elaborate dress tradition. A man wears a long gown under a pair of trousers or a wrapper, a red cap with a feather, and beads for the wrist and neck, while a woman dresses in a pair of wrappers with matching blouse and head gear. Beads and earrings are worn on the neck and ears respectively to accentuate beauty. Although some of these clothes are made to individual specifications, they often fall within the culturally-acceptable styles for men and women. Thus, suede materials with *isiagu* (lion’s head) design are men’s clothing material while both men and women use George and hollandaise materials for wrappers. For the Igbo students at Roseville, the wearing of cultural attire to Igbo students’ association meetings and for the Igbo Cultural Day event accentuates the authentic Igbo identity.

The Cultural Day activities, which mark the end of Igbo Week, are the peak of the celebration, an occasion for the re-enactment of the collective but distinctive identity of the Igbo people, and connecting the Igbo students to the larger university community as well. Such activities engender commonality among disparate Igbo groups and establish a form of cultural markers for their identification and self-definition. *Oji* (Kola nut), which is a symbol of life, peace, and hospitality in Igbo culture, is employed in ritual performance of *igo oji* (kola nut rituals/prayers). Ikenna, the *Igwe* of Anambra State Students’ Association in the 2010/2011 academic session, demonstrates a typical example of how *igo ofo* using *oji* is performed:

*Nna, umu ndi-Igbo agbako go,  
Were si ka M kene gi ekene.  
Ihe anyi na ekpe na ekpele,  
anyi na ago na ofo bu  
ihe ga agara anyi were were.  
(Ndi mmadu azaa, “iseeee”)*

Father [Supreme Being], Igbo children have gathered and said I should thank you.  
What we ask in prayer is,  
what we supplicate with *ofo* is  
that things will be easy for us  
(The people respond: *iseeee*, meaning “So be it”)

*Asi na umu anyi ndi na-agu akwukwo,* We say, our children that are schooling

*ha ga enwe uburu akwukwo.* shall be intelligent.  
*O buru na ha gusia akwukwo* When they complete their education,  
*ha ga enweta ezigbo olu.* they will get good jobs.  
*(Ndi mmadu azaa "iseeeeeee")* (The people respond: "So be it")

*Ndi umu agborobia ndi ga anu di* The ladies that wish to marry will get good  
*enweta ezigbo di.* husbands.  
*Ka oje abu ebe obuna ha no, ana asi* So that wherever they are, people will say  
*"Ndi a bu umu Igbo. Ha na-eme ofuma."* "These are Igbo people. They are doing well."

Iseeeee So be it ooooo!

(Ikenna 2011, translation mine).

To perform the *oji* ritual, the "elder" who leads the prayer, shows the presented bowl of kolanut to all present, and then picks one with his right hand and extends the hand towards the audience while saying the above prayers. *Oji* ritual performance is a solemn occasion that demands the attention and concentration of all present. Besides the "elder" who leads the prayers, all present at the event are active participants, and respond: "Isee! Isee!" In such ritual performances, the fusion of the temporal and the spiritual is affirmed through the invocation of the Supreme Being and the Earth goddess to come and participate in the activities of the living and bless the students. The significance of such performance is insinuated in Ukpokolo (2011):

The kolanut, as a symbol of life and peace, is a revitalising agent, using the agency of the public meeting to reinvigorate interest in, and concern for social order. For the order to prevail, roles are properly distributed, and performances are well monitored. It is equally important that collective goals are kept in focus, both for the purpose of ensuring that divided loyalty does not arise, and a meaningful, directional development is pursued (173).

Thus, while the "elder" performs the kolanut ritual, the audience actively monitors and responds appropriately, for the ritual is incomplete without such harmony.

Although each Igbo student group operates independently, self-definition engenders a group's pride in what they are and represent, as contained in such songs as:

*Anyi ma kwa ndi bu ndi ma oluooo.* We know who is who, when the time comes.  
*Anyi ma kwa ndi bu ndi ma oluooo.* We know who is who, when the time comes.  
*Anyi ma kwa ndi bu ndi ma oluooo.* We know who is who, when the time comes.  
*Anambra State so kwa na ndi bu ndi* Anambra State is part of who is who  
*ma oluuuoooo n'obodooooo.* when the time comes in the community oooooooo!

(Ikenna 2011)

A group's emphasis on their superiority does not in any way infer competition with other Igbo groups. The emphasis is on their belief that, among the community of students on campus, Igbo students present a strong presence. Of particular importance is the atmosphere conjured when such songs rend the air; a cultural practice termed *ima mbem* (a form of acrobatic display) among the Igbo people is initiated. Ogenna, the Social Officer, describes it thusly:

When we sing this type of song, another person will run here and there and begin to attempt to do what ordinarily is impossible. He may attempt to climb a tree, to push down a tree, a house, while someone tries to hold him back. As we do this, others watch us and wonder what is happening. People will hold him so that he does not injure himself (Ogenna 2011).

At that moment, laughing, shouting, cheering and clapping from the audience fills the atmosphere, while some Igbo students scream "*Jide ya! Jide ya! O je ebebi ife! O je emebi ife! O je emeru aru!*" This means, "Hold him! Hold him! He will destroy things! He will destroy things! He will injure himself!" Attempts are made by some other participants to grab the performer. Igbo people believe that at the moment of *mbem* performance, the spirit of the ancestors takes hold of the performer and imbues him with supernatural powers which his mortal body cannot contain, forcing him to engage in extra-ordinary activities. At that moment, humans must assist the performer to act within acceptable parameters in the physical world. The Igbo people's belief in the duality of human existence as well as the close interactions between the physical and the spiritual worlds as contained in their worldview is brought to bear in such situations, and influences their actions and inactions—thoughts, feelings, perceptions, convictions and reactions. Indeed, such moments reflect their identity and uniqueness as people as captured in their worldview, a concept that Rapport and Overing (2000) rightly note,

[R]epresents fundamental conceptions of the world, conceptions which ramify into all other thoughts and feelings about the world, and conceptions which directly influence how people behave in the world. Furthermore, worldview is used to point up critical differences between groups of people ...based on how they see the world (395).

In Igbo land, while the performer may climb a palm tree and destroy palm fronds, he is held back when he tries to pull down the branches of mango and pear trees or push down a building! Within the university community, although "cultural outsiders" wonder what these "extra-ordinary" displays mean, they identify and define such performances as the Igbo people's "way of doing things." To further demonstrate how *uwa ndi-Igbo* is re-enacted, Chinenye, a NUASS member, affirms,

*Ana agba egwu omenana nke ana ama akwa were agba. Na atu ilu, na esikwa nri ndi Igbo nke iribeghi* since *ijiri lota na ulo akwukwo* (We dance traditional dances which are normally danced tying wrappers. Proverbs are used in speech. We also cook Igbo food such as



the type you've never eaten since you returned to school) (Chinenye 2011).

Cultural reproduction processes that take place within the period of Igbo Week, and other avenues of showcasing Igbo customs and traditions at the university environment further demonstrate the students' efforts at making their presence felt, as their colleagues connect to the Igbo world inherent in the south-eastern region of the country. Connectivity is established, as the distance between the two places—Igbo land and the university's peculiar environment—is bridged and melted, both for the Igbo students and the observers, dissolving place and space within an intangible moment. In such a situation, as Tan and Yeoh contend,

Locality is...(re)produced in a stream of social activities which occur in place. Conversely, material expressions of place provide the medium for the reproduction of the local. Hence the local is (re)produced through social actions and practices and also expressed in the form of material objects and artefacts in place (Tan & Yeoh 2011, 50).

Processes of translocalisation manifest in various social and cultural activities and contribute to satisfying the yearnings of nostalgia experienced by those separated from the sounds and rhythms of their local communities. Here, the students identify themselves as belonging to and coming from one "community," Igbo community, spurring in them self-consciousness, engendered in and by what they do. Yet, such a communion can only be "imagined." As Anderson (1983) notes of this form of self-identification, "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined," and concludes, "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 1983, 49). Such "imagining" emanates from and gains meanings in the very "styles," the cultural "architectures," constructed by the students through the instrumentality of the cultural artefacts in the Igbo world utilised in the definition of the "self" and the "collective." Thus, sounds from *ekwe* (wooden gong), *udu* (clay pot drum), the *ogene* (gongs), and *oja* (flute) and clapping of hands and stamping of feet are harmonised in rhythms beyond linguistic expression, invoking meanings and realities, which only the "initiated" understand. Reproduction of locality ensures that the Igbo people's lived life, separated by physical distance and symbolically by the quest for Western education at Roseville and the values and ideologies that Western education represents, can be (re)created and (re)enacted by means of cultural (re) production processes.

### **Constructing the "self": The "Igwe" as a Cultural Symbol**

Symbolic objects are instruments of group identity construction. Every symbolic object in a culture conveys meanings, which the creators of the symbol, make of it (Ukpokolo 2011). For the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, cultural symbols give meaning to existence by providing a "model of" the world as it is and a "model for" the world as it ought to be (Geertz 1973, 93). Similarly, Edmund Leach in *Culture and Communication: The Logic by which Symbols are Connected* contends that symbols, either verbal or non-

verbal, distinguishes one class of things or actions from another, helping us to create artificial boundaries in a field that is naturally continuous (Leach 1976, 331). Symbolism is manipulated by different peoples in different human societies and cultures to make statements on who they are, what they do and the meanings they hold concerning those things that matter to them, thereby helping people to distinguish between “us” and “them”, and indicates the difference within a group. At Roseville, Igbo students explore cultural symbols to construct Igbo identity. In recent years, the conferment of “traditional leader” has become one of the ways of translocalising the cultural patterns of the Igbo people and as a way of expressing their uniqueness. The *igwe* is the Igbo students’ “traditional leader” and is addressed as “His Royal Highness.” According to Ikenna,

The *igwe* must be versed in Igbo culture; be able to answer questions on Igbo culture. Igbo elders from town are invited to crown the students’ traditional leader....After the conferment, the new *igwe* chooses his cabinet members who will also be screened to ascertain the extent to which they are grounded in Igbo culture (Ikenna 2011).

For the Igbo students, the “institutionalisation” of *igweship* is one of the ways of defining their cultural peculiarity. The *igwe* is a symbol of the collective identity, and clothes are manipulated to maximise an effect, “to define or camouflage identity” (Cohen 1981, 210–211). Ikenna hints,

Each time we hold a meeting, the *igwe* puts on his traditional attire—*isiagu* robe. He puts on beads; he puts on a red cap and he equally has *lolo* [the ‘wife’ of *igwe*]. The *lolo* will dress the way it is done in the traditional setting...a woman puts on *omuma na ntukwasi*—a blouse and two wrappers (Ikenna 2011).

*Igwe* literally means “the sky” or “the heavens,” but in the context of traditional leadership in Igbo land, *igwe* stands for “power,” “awe,” or “reverence” and is one of the appellations ascribed to traditional leaders in Igbo land. The *igwe*, by virtue of the position he occupies and his regalia, is a symbol, a representation of sorts. He conjures meanings that reflect his people’s perception of reality. Clifford Geertz captures this reality in his analysis of sacred symbols:

Sacred symbols function to synthesize a people’s ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order (Geertz 1973, 89).

The reality, encapsulated in what the *igwe* represents, is embedded in symbolic action. According to Cohen, this action involves “the totality of the self and not a segment of it,” the selfhood realised through frequent participation by those who share this worldview in “patterns of symbolic activity” (Cohen 1981, 210–211). The *igwe* is greeted with the appellation, “*igweeeeeee*,” whenever he speaks in meetings or when

encountered on campus by the members of the Igbo students' association, and he responds by waving his right hand as a sign of acknowledgement.

The *igwe* represents the peculiarity and difference that creates boundaries both within the group and outside of it. As a symbol of his people's cultural values, the students' *igwe* fills a distinctive cultural gap created by the difference between the home culture and the culture of the students' new environment. He represents what his people believe to be ideal—beauty, glamour, aesthetic, and the symbolism necessary to create group identity. For the Igbo students, the *igwe* is a cultural custodian by virtue of the knowledge he possesses of how things “ought to be” among his people. The role of the *igwe* runs parallel to the role of the president of the Igbo students' ethnic association. While the president's duty is to relate with the university authorities as a political leader, the *igwe*, the people believe, is a traditional ruler, a father, a custodian of the customs and traditions of the Igbo people among his fellow students. Although the *igwe* does not enjoy official recognition from the university authorities (as he is not presented as one of the executive members of the association), to his group, he functions as the nexus that connects people and their home values and, thus, enjoys both political and socio-cultural recognition within that group; in the social arena he enjoys the recognition of students from disparate Igbo ethnic groups on campus. His position and status have implications on the Igbo identity more than that of the president of the association. For instance, it is mandatory for the *igwe* to reflect this cultural identity whenever he attends Igbo students' meetings by appearing in his full regalia, and on daily basis, puts on a bangle made of beads on his wrist, a symbol of his royalty. The existence of the two parallel structures is a replication of what obtains at the hometown community where town union leadership exists parallel to the traditional leadership.

The *igwe's* symbolism is further reflected in diverse ways he constructs and reconstructs his identity. For instance, the attire takes on meanings beyond mere clothing to become a cultural marker, an identity marker, conjuring and transforming meanings that are beyond mere fashion. But, of what significance is an *igwe* in the university community? According to Chukwudi, the first *Igwe* of NUASS:

*Eeeee... Mgbe M no na school, a bu M igwe ndi Anambra State students by extension igwe ndi Igbo [na Roseville] because only Anambra State students had igwe then. So, a na eme ihe na town, ana M eje representie the whole of Igbo students no [na Roseville], that is between 2007/2008 and 2009/2010 (Eeeee... When I was in school, I was the igwe of Anambra State students and by extension, the igwe of the Igbo students [in Roseville] because only the Anambra State students had igwe then. So wherever there was any occasion in town, I represented the whole of Igbo students [in Roseville], that is between 2007/2008 and 2009/2010) (Chukwudi 2011).*

For the people, the wearing of “long red cap and a feather” is one of the major things that sets the *igwe* or any “chief” apart. According to Ikenna,

There is no place in Igbo land that a chief will not put on a red cap and feather, and those

things signify some things. So when we are talking about bringing the Igbo world into the university, we try to inculcate those cultural values into our fellow students who do not have the opportunity of seeing these in Igbo land (Ikenna, September, 2011).

He acknowledges that Igbo culture is under threat. According to him, "Igbo people don't seem to regard their culture or see it as anything, and are taking to contemporary ways of doing things, which is a problem" (Ikenna 2011). To the students, this situation is a challenge they must confront through the recreation of Igbo ethnic identity, not just for the sake of cultural nostalgia but also for self-preservation and the prevention of cultural homogenisation.

### **...connecting with others**

Connecting with the larger students' community raises the question of how the Igbo group's constructed identity is interpreted in inter-cultural encounters, that is, how "cultural outsiders" respond to what the Igbo students claim they are. According to the former *igwe*, Chukwudi, the Igbo students' group has affected the university community, particularly in the way students from other ethnic groups respond to what the Igbo students do and represent. He recounted his experience thus:

When I was the *igwe* of Anambra State students, whenever I came out with Igbo attire, other students will be hailing me "*igweeeee*." Others will say, "I want to snap picture with you. I want to snap picture with you." When I attended dinner party organised by any faculty or association of between 500 and 1,000 students, I was always given an award: "The best dressed person here is *igwe*," because I wore the Igbo attire. At the end of the day, the best dressed person is *igwe* (Chukwudi 2011).

Other areas that informants claim that Igbo cultural visibility has connected with non-Igbo students include the cultural practice known as *ina ito* (a form of Igbo greeting amongst men, which involves the hitting of the back of one's hand against another person's three times). Ikechukwu (former president of NUASS) notes that whenever *ina ito* is going on,

*Osokwa ya buru onye na eme ngafe, O je akwuru, kwuo something. Oge ufodu ha fu ebe gi na ndi chiri echichi na ana ito, ha eweta aka ha. I si, "Mba, I chighi echichi." O na ewute ha. Ha asi, "Kee kwanu ihe ha ga eme." Asi M ha, "Uwa ozo ha ga aputa ha buru onye Igbo." Ha achia ochi jewara (Even if the person is a passer-by, he/she will stand and utter something. At times, when they see when you and a titled person are performing *ina ito* [greeting in a traditional Igbo way], they will bring their hands to participate. You will say "No, you are not a titled man." This hurts them. They will ask "What will I do to qualify." I will say to them, "In your next world, try and be an Igbo person." They will laugh and go away) (Ikechukwu 2011).*

He concludes that non-Igbo students admire the way the Igbo people "do things. They like the way we dress. They want to have our native attire."

The acceptability of Igbo clothing, admiration of other aspects of the culture such

as *ina ito*, and the utter display of shock and admiration at the *ima mbem* performance, as the informants note, indicate the acknowledgement of the aesthetics, creativity, and richness of Igbo traditions and culture. Igbo students at Roseville demonstrate their eagerness to preserve their culture in the face of globalisation and the diverse cultural contestations that confront the contemporary young people in Africa. Igbo ethnic construct at Roseville establishes the group's cultural legitimacy among the students' community. By excluding the cultural outsiders through Igbo culture-bound social actions, the students set cultural boundaries. Similarly, social status such as *igweship* enhances the capacity of the privileged to establish his hegemony among his people. The *igwe* as a socio-political and cultural ascription in the Igbo world raises the status of the conferred. In intra- and inter-group social dynamics, there is a dialectical relationship where members of a group identify with what they do as part of their "being," the cultural outsiders acknowledge this difference, accept it, and participate in re-establishing ethnic boundaries. In this interface of "being" and "not being," the university remains a citadel of learning, of ideas, of exploration, and of discovery. And, in the words of Niyi Osundare, the university is marked by "its inclusiveness, its diversity, its wholeness and comprehensiveness, the interconnectedness...Its mission is the pursuit—and practice—of freedom, genuine freedom, the liberty to think and feel, dream and care, roam and range, lose and find" (Osundare 2005, 9). Igbo students at Roseville explore and exploit this "freedom" and "diversity" to lend legitimacy to their constructed identity as a distinct group.

However, one thing that remains challenging is the inability of the students to consistently communicate in Igbo language. This raises the question of the place of language in the construction of authentic Igbo identity. Extracts from the responses of the research participants indicate a prevalence of mixture of varieties in form of code switching and code mixing as the interviewees mix Igbo and English languages within and between sentences respectively, a practice referred to as *Engli-Igbo* among Igbo language scholars. The next section of this article examines the relationship between language and cultural identity, with particular reference to the challenges the Igbo students encounter in their attempt to communicate in Igbo language.

### **Language, Mixture of Varieties, and Igbo Identity**

Language conveys thoughts, values, and cultural norms of people. The categorisation of Igbo language as one of the endangered languages of the world emanates from the increasing depletion of the population of Igbo language speakers. Ejiofo (2011) identified some of the reasons that account for this. First, as Igbo people gain Western education and competence in English language, they increasingly tend underrate the significance of their indigenous language. This tradition emanated from the nature of Western educational training the earlier generations of Igbo people received when it was a "sacrilege" to speak indigenous (Igbo) language in secondary schools! Punishment could be strokes of the cane and/or "hard labour." Second, a majority of the present day Igbo elite communicate with their children in English while discouraging them from speaking the Igbo language. Third, English, apart from being the language of



modern technology and administration, is assumed to establish social distinctions and enhances the social status of the speaker. The supposed supremacy of the language is reinforced in the continued emphasis on the use of the language in instructional materials at the basic levels of education. This bias in itself poses a major challenge to the realisation of the vision of linguistic inclusiveness for the Igbo people. Ekwuru rightly notes that “the use of a foreign language affected a paradigm shift in the mental perception and conceptualisation of the Igbo cultural reality” (Ekwuru 1999, 53).

Other developments in the global arena have added a new dimension to the complicated linguistic inequality with which sub-Saharan African countries grapple. For instance, media imperialism occasioned by the clamour for the “free flow” of information has not only led to the influx of Western views and culture into African local communities but also promoted the Western models as the only alternative. Consequently, Adegbola (2006) reasoned that although the “free access” of information as promoted by UNESCO is to “give people the opportunity to gain access to information in the market place of ideas” (2006, 6), the infrastructural advantage which the West has over developing countries suggests that the battle for self-representation, linguistic inclusiveness, and the trading of ideas in this market cannot be on equal terms. Lack of equitable platform, therefore, further suggests that the battle of ideas had already been fought and won long before its commencement. The digital gap has, indeed, assumed insurmountable complexities. Adegbola (2006) identifies the areas where these complexities are obvious: Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been designed primarily for use in the English language; eighty per cent of the content of the global information infrastructure is in English; less than three per cent is from Africa, most of which is in English; and finally, many of the African languages in written form are not available to modern information technologies (Adegbola 2006, 7). He concludes that “the asymmetry in the information flows between African and the rest of the world will remain, even if the infrastructural defects are effectively addressed” (Adegbola 2006, 7). The above scenario characterises the complex realities in which an Igbo student struggles to communicate in “undiluted” Igbo language. Presented below are specific instances that demonstrate the students’ “hybrid” identity (Bhabha 1994) as they responded to interview questions. It is noteworthy that in these cases, the interviewees were supposedly speaking Igbo language.

Table 1: Linguistic Items Representing Instances of Mixture of varieties, and their Meanings

	<b>Linguistic item</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
i.	“ <i>O je akwuru, kwuo</i> something.” (Ikechukwu, the former NUASS President)	“He will wait and say something.”
ii.	“ <i>Nгаа</i> dinner <i>umu akwukwo na</i> faculty or other associations” (Former <i>igwe</i> of the students)	“When I attended students’ dinner at the faculty or other associations”
iii.	“ <i>A na-enye M</i> award.” (Former <i>igwe</i> of the Igbo students)	“They always give me an award.”
iv.	“...just because <i>M yi akwa ndi-Igbo</i> ” (Former <i>igwe</i> of Igbo students)	“... just because I was putting on Igbo attire”

v.	“ <i>Mmanwu je aga na</i> different halls of residence.” (Ikechukwu, the former NUASS President)	“Masquerades will go to different halls of residence.”
vi.	“ <i>E were ogene gaharia na campus ka ndi mmadu mata na Igbo Week, je ebido.</i> ” (Ikechukwu, the former NUASS president)	“An iron gong will be beaten round different halls of residence so that people will know that Igbo Week will soon commence.”
vii.	“So, <i>a na eme ihe na town, a na Me je representie</i> the whole of Igbo students ..., that is between 2007/2008 and 2009/2010.” (A former <i>Igwe</i> of Igbo students)	“So, whenever there was an event in town, I went to represent the whole of Igbo students..., that is between 2007/2008 and 2009/2010.”
viii.	“A woman puts on <i>omuma na ntukwasi</i> – a blouse and two wrappers” (Ikenna, a former <i>igwe</i> , 2010/2011 academic session)	“A woman puts on a blouse and two wrappers”

The above extracts illustrate the prevalence of the mixture of varieties in the verbal expressions of the research participants. A mixture of varieties can occur in diverse forms that include code switching, code mixing, borrowing, pidgin, and creole (Hudson 1980, 51–69). Hudson argues that code switching is an inevitable consequence of bilingualism and/or multilingualism (Hudson 1980, 51). African speakers of any of the European languages engage in code switching and code mixing depending on situations. Linguistic expressions of the research participants, in *Table 1* above, clearly demonstrate the students’ involvement in code mixing and conversational code switching while communicating in Igbo language. Interestingly, this also occurs during the students’ association meetings where rules against the use of English language during association meetings exist. Often, students inadvertently break such rules several times in a meeting. From the examples presented above, code mixing occurs in certain forms:

- a. Lexical transfer: certain English words such as “award,” “dinner,” and “campus” are represented in English. This is done due to (i) easy flow of communication, and (ii) to avoid loss of meaning of the original word.
- b. Dual presentation of a lexical item: Some Igbo words may be presented side by side its English equivalent as in *omuma na ntukwasi*—a blouse and two wrappers.
- c. Structural reconstruction: An English word (verb) is restructured by the addition of an Igbo suffix, e.g. “representie,” where “ie” is an Igbo suffix. “Represent” (an English word) becomes the root word and “ie,” the suffix that transforms “represent” to stand for “to represent.”
- d. “Years” and “academic sessions” are presented in English language though the Igbo language equivalents exist.

Although the above examples do not exhaust all the linguistic pitfalls characterising

the students' use of Igbo language, it demonstrates the "dark side" of the students' attempts at the construction of their ethnic identity. While this challenge remains apparent, we cannot but acknowledge the ingenuity, creativity, and the sense of ethnic nationalism the students—through their ethnic associations, cultural symbols, and ceremonials—demonstrate and promote in their construction of Igbo identity in a university space.

### Conclusion

This article explored how Igbo students in a public university in Nigeria reproduce the Igbo world in the university space through translocalisation of aspects of Igbo culture and for the purpose of the promotion of Igbo ethnic identity. Dress, dance, language, symbolic and other cultural forms and ceremonials such as *ina ato*, *mbem*, chieftaincy and *igweship* are manipulated by the Igbo students' associations to establish cultural difference. Thus, the territoriality of the university becomes a space where the "local" and the "universal" are blended as part of the constituents of the University, exhibiting its aura of diversity and freedom. The micro and macro forces of Westernisation have undermined the Igbo language, as code mixing and code switching are prevalent in the Igbo students' linguistic repertoire and expression. These practices are a product of the hegemonic grip the English language has on the people and a reflection of their hybrid identity. Students' resilience is demonstrated in their undaunted participation in the cultural and ideological contestations, which privilege a particular way of "being." Resistance to the Western cultural hegemony is an indication of the students' resilience as they, in their micro ways, counterattack cultural homogenisation, which threatens their ethnic identity. To engage in this contestation, the "local" is translocalised, dissolving the distance that bestrides the "home" and the "diaspora," to create a form of "imagined homeland." The role of non-group members in the creation of a group identity is further demonstrated through their participation as observers and their acknowledgement of the difference and the peculiarity, which the Igbo students propagate; they accept the uniqueness of *uwa ndi-Igbo*. Undoubtedly, ethnic nationalism promoted by Igbo students in higher education institutions and other Igbo people in the diaspora stand to contribute to the placing of the Igbo cultural identity on the social and cultural "architectures" of a globalising world, a contribution which demands acknowledgement.

### Notes

1. A case study typology was adopted for this study, and the research site is Roseville University (pseudonym). Techniques of data collection include key informant interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, and life history.

2. The usage and assigning of meanings in symbolic and artistic forms to white chalk.

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## Response

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### Comments on “Self-Representation”

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Based on personal observations, a leadership role in an ethnically based association, and field research, the paper uses Igbo students on a Nigerian campus to show how culture—defined within the parameters of an Igbo identity—is part of university life. The campus is located in the Western part of the country dominated by the Yoruba. Being outside of the Igbo homeland in eastern Nigeria helps in contextualizing the Igbo identity in that space, and in framing the rationale for the retention of cultural identity outside of its primary base as study subjects cope with new challenges, thrive in new terrain, and provoke cultural nostalgia.

The data is strong and the analyses are clear as to the construction of Igbo identity outside of their primary homeland. The activities described by the author include the formation of clubs, promotion of Igbo language, wearing of ethnic clothes, emphasis on cultural symbolism, use of kola nut to pray, performance of various rituals, and the celebration of an annual Igbo Cultural Week that includes lectures, and masquerade performance. Dr. Chinyere Ukpokolo also emphasizes the use of dress, Igbo language, food, and ceremonies “to establish cultural difference.”

The data and methodology are sound. The evidence supports the conclusion of the connection between expressions of culture and identity retention. Much of

the evidence is used to support assertions that practices are grounded in a belief that Igbo culture should not die, and that Igbo language, if not used, can become extinct. The essay is well written; the best part being where the practices are analyzed, which is so well done that outsiders of the culture can understand them.

There are three issues arising from this essay. First, it contributes to studies on African immigrants in cities, specifically how they use ethnic-based associations to create networks to assist one another to build semi-autonomous communities. Building a home away from home, those associations contribute to the socialization process. What is different in this study is its localization within a university community that avoids generalizations. The difference between what students do on campus and what their parents do at home and what migrants do at other locations requires better clarification. If there is no difference between practices on campus and the city at large, then the uniqueness of that campus space disappears; if indeed there are differences, then the author has the opportunity to compare and contrast associated lives in different spaces within the same city.

Yet a fundamental problem which is not addressed is the distance of travel, that is, how far the Igbo students are removed from their homes. These students are not permanent immigrants, strictly speaking, given that the locale is still within Nigeria and the subjects have not crossed international borders. There is, thus, a significant difference in the experience of the Igbo in Western Nigeria, who have continuous and easy access to Igbo geographical space, and the immigrant in far-flung places who are cut off geographically and

physically.

Second, the author assumes that the localization of Igbo culture can be blended with universalism on a Nigerian campus. The paper offers no data to support this assertion. Rather, the contrary may be true as is clearly articulated in the closing sentences: "Resistance to the Western cultural hegemony is an indication of the students' resilience, as they, in their micro ways, counterattack cultural homogenization, which threatens their ethnic identity." It is unclear how the combined examples are incorporated into the "universality" of the university. Indeed, the data analysis suggests the rejection of cosmopolitanism embedded in a university project. It could be that the author's intuition about the legitimacy of universalism (with a small "u") is under-theorized, but it could also be a matter of data. This tension in the essay opens up another research area to be pursued. While globalization is recognized, and discussed in tandem with "universalism," the localism expressed here does not clarify its linkage to broader, less-territorial based culture and influences.

Third, the essay assumes that there is such a thing as "an authentic Igbo cultural identity." This authenticity is an invention, an imaginary cluster of ideas and practices that define a group. Like most other African groups, many practices are of recent origins and constructions, which lack the historical depth that is often associated with them; talking about "authenticity" may either be misleading or exaggerated. From eating cassava to stock fish, and wearing attire made of materials called "george" and "hollandaise," one sees how culture relies upon adaptation that it subsequently calls indigenous, not

realizing that cassava is originally from Brazil, stock fish is from Norway, and the fabric is from the Netherlands and China.

Dr. Chinyere Ukpokolo has whet the appetite for more studies on this important subject. Her familiarity with the data is invaluable. She has left the door wide open for other scholars to build upon her insightful study.