

# Ritual contents and elements of drama in the Igbo traditional wrestling festival

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**ABSTRACT:** Wrestling in Igbo land is not merely a sport but a means of preserving and passing down cultural traditions from one generation to the next. It embodies the core values of the Igbo people, such as bravery, resilience, and unity. By engaging in wrestling, young Igbo individuals gain a deeper understanding of their heritage, fostering a sense of pride and identity. The objectives of this study are to analyse the dramatic elements and ritual contents of the Igbo traditional wrestling festival. The study was accomplished through a combination of interviews and participant observation. Historical facts that surround wrestling festivals were obtained through interviews with elders of the people, including the Igwes (community leaders). The data collected were subjected to both textual and structural analysis, using the thematic approach and transcription method. The analysis was done descriptively based on the objectives of the study. The findings of the study revealed that Igbo wrestling festival is significant as it symbolises strength, skill, and communal unity. Traditional wrestling events are culturally important, serving as a rite of passage for young men and a means of gaining social status. Igbo traditional wrestling festival also reflects the values of competition and honour within the Igbo society, highlighting the community's appreciation for physical prowess and tradition. The study further established that the Igbo wrestling festival is deeply intertwined with spiritual beliefs and rituals. Before matches, wrestlers often partake in traditional ceremonies and prayers to seek divine favour and protection. These rituals add a spiritual dimension to the sport, establishing the connection between physical prowess and metaphysical forces. The study also discovered that Igbo traditional wrestling festivals showcase the following dramatic elements: actors, costume, arena (obom), audience, plot, spectacle and props. It is, therefore, a traditional drama. It has a storyline, and there is drumming and dancing accompanying the wrestling bouts.

**Keywords:** Festival, ritual, traditional drama, wrestling.

## INTRODUCTION

In Africa today, as in the past, there are several facets of cultural life which are gradually being eroded and fast going into extinction either because they are branded primitive or because they are simply abandoned for the so called modern entertainment engagements like television operas, home videos or partying which our younger generation conceive as more civilized. One of such African cultural practices which confers a distinct identity on tribal entities is the traditional wrestling festival, which is fast disappearing in various Igbo communities. The Igbo

people value traditional wrestling festival performance because it provides education, socialisation, recreation, livelihood and identity. Wrestling competition between two communities has the capacity to entertain and educate, uphold morals, preserve traditional knowledge and keep history alive. This study, therefore, seeks to look into the dramatic elements and ritual contents of the Igbo traditional wrestling festival.

Igbo wrestling exercise is a form of game in which men come out to test their physical prowess. In the olden days,

they used wrestling to test one's bravery and ability to withstand enemies. Traditionally, one's bravery determines the kind of woman one will marry, just as levels of education and financial capability in our present time are criteria for marriage. Wrestling is normally done on Eke and Afor market days, depending on the community's choice. Wrestling is a dramatic art that belongs to the aspect of oral drama in Africa. In most cases, they form part of the extended festival celebrations to honour either seasonal changes or rites of passage.

Wrestling festival was a major form of relaxation in Igbo land in the olden days. It has a season and is greatly celebrated all through Igbo land. It captures the interest of everybody, men and women, young and old. It is one aspect of Igbo culture that modernity has not completely taken away, as shown in Figure 1, a wrestling contest in a traditional setting at Nnewi, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Wrestling gives young men a chance to show off to their parents, friends, and possible mates. A young man's reputation in society might improve with success in the arena, therefore increasing his eligibility for marriage or leadership positions. The celebration is important in supporting the moral principles of duty, honour, and strength.

Although Igbo wrestling customs have been mostly unaltered, the festival has evolved to fit into the changes brought about by globalisation and modernisation. Many Igbo groups, both rural and metropolitan, still honour "igba mgba" in modern times; it is still a vivid statement of Igbo cultural identity. The celebration links the past with the present.

"Igba mgba" (wrestling) has grown to be a major focus for cultural tourism in certain areas, drawing people eager to experience traditional Igbo life. Beyond Igbo land, this festival has also become well-known, as wrestling contests are part of cultural celebrations and festivities throughout Nigeria and beyond. This has spurred cultural preservation and increased knowledge about Igbo culture.

Notwithstanding these developments, the fundamental Igbo values: strength, bravery, honour and community resonate with the people, reminding the Igbo of their rich legacy and the need of preserving their customs in a fast-changing environment. The celebration continues to be a potent emblem of cultural pride and resilience

A major cultural event in Igbo land embodying the ideals, history, and community spirit of the Igbo people is the traditional wrestling festival. "Igba Mgba" as it is called in Igbo is more than simply a sport, but also a rite of passage, a test of strength, and a celebration of the continuity and vitality of the community. Deeply rooted in Igbo customs, the celebration is still very important in helping the Igbo people to preserve their cultural legacy. The background cultural values, customs, and contemporary relevance of Igbo "mgba" in Igbo land are investigated in this study.

For millennia, Igbo people have embraced wrestling as a fundamental activity from which their roots are strongly



**Figure 1.** Wrestlers performing at a wrestling festival in Nnewi, Anambra State.

ingrained in their customs. In Igbo civilisation, wrestling has many uses historically. It was a technique way of settling disputes, deciding on leadership, and showcasing young men's athletic ability. With wrestling events scheduled during harvest season, a period when communities celebrated strength and plenty, the sport was intimately connected to the agricultural calendar.

Wrestling was also a means of young men seeking respect and recognition within their societies in pre-colonial periods. In the wrestling ring, success may result in social elevation as winning wrestlers were often revered as heroes and could win the respect of powerful members of society. The sport was recognised as a fundamental component of masculinity, and young men entering maturity were expected to go through wrestling events as a rite of passage. It is seen as a rite of passage for young men, symbolising their journey from boyhood to manhood. Through wrestling, young men proved their physical strength and demonstrated their ability to protect and provide for their families.

Wrestling tournaments attract a significant number of spectators, contributing to the local economy. These events stimulate economic activities such as food vendors, traders and artisans, who sell their products and services to the attendees. The revenue generated from wrestling events helps support local businesses and boosts the overall economic development of the region.

Concerning the existence of indigenous drama in Africa, some scholars have come out strongly to deny the existence of indigenous drama in Africa. These scholars include Echeruo (1981), who asserts that a story has been forced into ritual. Kalu Uka (1973) further claims that traditional drama is not yet drama; rather, it is a vestigial element from which drama may draw its ideas. He goes ahead to assert that what some people call traditional drama should be merely referred to as elements of drama. This study is here to counter their assertion because the Igbo wrestling festival is an indigenous drama which has



**Figure 2.** Wrestlers engaged in a wrestling bout at Nsukka Enugu State (source: During a wrestling festival contest at Nsukka, Enugu State).

proved itself dramatic. After all, it has plot, characters, settings, costumes, make-up, conflict, dialogue, music/song, dance, audience, performer and spectacle. Characters in Igbo wrestling festival performance include clansmen and women, maternal uncles, grandparents, neighbours and friends from the community, wrestlers and spectators that are members of the Igbo community as shown in Figure 2, where a spectator is standing by the road side and watching the wrestlers lock horns at a wrestling bout at Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria. This inclusivity in the choice of characters is hinged on the fact that the performance is communal and the space is fluid.

As Nigeria continues to modernise, traditional cultural practices risk being overshadowed. By keeping this activity alive, the Igbo community can ensure that their unique customs and traditions are passed down to future generations. Thus, the a need to investigate the dramatic elements and ritual contents of the Igbo wrestling festival, document and preserve it in print for future generations before it fades away.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual framework.

#### *Wrestling*

Beyond the sport of wrestling, the Igbo “Mgba” celebration captures the ideals and character of the people. The celebration is a group activity that unites individuals of all ages, therefore promoting continuity and togetherness. This is a moment when society comes together to praise moral values such as justice, bravery, and honour, in

addition to athletic ability.

According to Nzewi (2009), wrestling is defined as a sporting event. Wrestling is believed to be indigenous, being part and parcel of the Igbo culture. Buttressing the claim that the game is indigenous, Obi (2008) portrays “Mgba” as a potentially lethal activity. Simply put, wrestling is a sport in which two opponents try to pin each other’s shoulders to the floor. The performers use a manoeuvring technique called holds to grip their opponents and control their movements.

Wrestling in Igbo culture provides a platform for individuals to showcase their skills and gain recognition. Accomplished wrestlers are revered as heroes and serve as role models for the younger generation. Their achievements in the wrestling arena are celebrated not only by their communities but also by neighbouring villages, further enhancing their reputation. Wrestling tournaments in Igbo land bring communities together, fostering a strong sense of social cohesion. These events attract participants and spectators from various villages, fostering connections and strengthening social bonds. The shared experience of supporting wrestlers creates a sense of belonging and collective identity within the community.

#### *Traditional drama*

According to Duruaku (2003:11), “traditional drama refers to indigenous performing art forms that have not been corrupted by modernisation over the years”. The festivals which combine dances, songs, music, chants, speech/dialogue, spectacle, and so on, are examples of traditional drama. According to Iwuckukwu (2009), drama as an art form thrives on performances because it involves the imitation

of an action, an enactment or re-enactment of a story in a life situation.

### **Ritual**

Rituals are those repeated activities that produce desired results. Rituals are actions taken in order to relate with supernatural powers through worship, incantations, enchantments, use of sacrifices, magic and spiritual means so as to exert control over situations, as well as acquire power and fame. According to Davis-Floyd Laughlin (2003: 8), "a ritual is a patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of cultural (or individual) beliefs and values".

### **Festival**

A festival is an organised event when people meet at some time of the year to celebrate special events of religious or cultural significance. According to Seidu (2002), festivals are collective rituals of both religious and historical importance and are characterised by such activities as the pouring of libation, sacrifices to the gods, washing and cleansing of ancestral stools and shrines, merry-making, among others, depending on the circumstances surrounding a particular celebration or festival. Traditional festivals are centred on religious, socio-economic, political and cultural beliefs and values of a society. During festive periods, people return to their hometowns to celebrate their family ties and reinforce the customs and values of the community.

### **Empirical review**

This section presents some of the studies conducted on wrestling festivals in Igbo land and beyond. Not much research work has been done on the traditional wrestling festival. However, few scholars have done sketchy work on traditional wrestling festivals in Nigeria, and their works have been reviewed hereunder.

Ikegwu (2011) examined the effect of globalisation on Igbo cultural heritage for tourism development: A case study of Mgba (wrestling). In the study, he noted that mgba predates the colonial period in the Igbo nation. The skill, stamina, joy, honour and fame that mgba confers on an individual in those pre-colonial days is sought after by every male child born in that community. Every male child desires to be "dimgba" (a wrestler) using his age-grade, as it confers recognition by the community. Communities are feared for the number of 'ndi mgba' (wrestlers) they parade. Though it is not uncommon for one to challenge his fellow man to wrestling, it is usually done during festivities such as the celebration of the New Yam Festival (iri ji ọhuru). Today, only a few communities in the remote

villages still observe the cultural fiesta. Globalisation has masked wrestling competition in Igbo land. The death of some Igbo cultural values, such as 'mgba', that could have resulted in rich cultural tourism, stems from the appeal of Western cultures and acculturation. The young and the old in Igbo land, especially in urban centres, glue their eyes on the television screen to watch white-man's footballing and wrestling competitions to our detriment.

Amadi-Ikpa (2020) investigated the visual expression of the Ikwerre wrestling festival through mixed media painting technique. This study, "Visual expression of Ikwerre wrestling festival in mixed media painting is designed to examine the effectiveness and synergy of enamel paints, sand and fabric as media to produce a painting of the Ikwerre wrestling festival on canvas. Wrestling is one of the most celebrated cultures of the Ikwerre people. It is one of the physical exercises that brings people together in Ikwerre land. The aim of the study is to document the culture in such that might trigger the people's interest to encourage its revival using mixed media techniques with enamel, sand and fabrics. The study was guided by empathy and institutional theories. The research design that was employed for this study is a studio experimental research design. The findings of the study revealed that there is a need to explore other materials like enamels, paints, sand and fabric to produce paintings. In conclusion, it is believed that the study has enlarged the scope of media, knowledge in painting, as well as projecting the rich culture of the Ikwerre people to a worldwide view.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is guided by performance theory propounded by Schechner (2009). According to Schechner (2009), performance theory is rooted in practice and is fundamentally interdisciplinary and intercultural. Schechner's perspective on performance was greatly influenced by Turner and Maryanski (1988). They assert that performance entails daily repetitive practices which are artistic in nature.

According to performance theory, performances simply depend on everyday conflicts, tensions and pressures of life, different rites and ceremonies that have been initiated in the society. The performance in this case acts as a tool for societal commentary, where people comment on the general happenings in their daily lives during the performance.

Bauman (1986) adds that performance can be seen as a special mode of communication, and the performance itself provides the frame within which messages being communicated are to be understood and interpreted. In any performance, the performer assumes the responsibility for a display of communicative competence. On the other hand, the audience also assumes the right to regard the performance and the performer with special intensity.

The performance itself becomes constitutive of the domain of verbal art. Performance is always controlled by the rules of a given community about speaking in general. As an example, it takes up the question of the relationship of aesthetic and ethical values.

Performance theory is relevant to this study because it plays a significant role in exploring drama in Igbo traditional wrestling performance. Performance theory is about the ritual performances which are of importance to a particular community. Igbo traditional wrestling festival brings the Igbo people together in celebration through dance, song and music.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was accomplished through a combination of interviews and observation. The historical facts that surround the wrestling festival were obtained through interviews with elders of the people of the area, including the Igwes (community leaders). Participant observation was used as a tool in data collection. This was made possible by actively participating as a member of the audience, thereby joining in the handclapping. After the wrestling events were over, the data collected were subjected to both textual and structural analysis, using the thematic approach and transcription method. The data collected were later analysed descriptively based on the objectives of the study.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents and analyses the data collected from the field under the following sub-heading: Dramatic elements and ritual in traditional wrestling festival among the Igbo people and the influence of modernisation on the performance of the Igbo traditional wrestling festival.

### Ritual contents in the Igbo traditional wrestling festival

One of the captivating aspects of the Igbo wrestling festival is the symbolism attached to the sport. It embodies the spirit of overcoming obstacles and challenges, reflecting the resilience and tenacity of the Igbo people. Through wrestling, individuals learn the importance of perseverance and the rewards of hard work and dedication.

Moreover, wrestling in Igbo culture is deeply intertwined with spiritual beliefs and rituals. Before matches, wrestlers often partake in traditional ceremonies and prayers to seek divine favour and protection. These rituals add a spiritual dimension to the sport, highlighting the connection between physical prowess and metaphysical forces.

Two of the informants (Mr. Nze Ugwu, John and Mr. Nze Abugu, Idoko), who were once renowned wrestlers, noted

that, during their days, they used to offer sacrifices to the gods in order to achieve the feat. They further stressed that for one to emerge victorious in a wrestling contest, he has to perform incantations, enchantments and make use of the supernatural power of the highest order to exert control over the situation. Some wrestlers even go as far as sleeping in the graveyard in order to have communion with the spirits, while others deprive themselves of sleeping with a woman a week to the day of the wrestling festival. Some wrestlers may even deprive themselves of eating any food prepared by a woman.

Some perform the ritual of running to touch the drums and touch their chests in return, while others touch the ground and touch their chest in the process. Other wrestlers engage in symbolic washing of their hands with sand before the commencement of the wrestling with an opponent.

According to the other informants (Mr. Okeke Eze and Nwafor Nwokolo), the Igba Mgba contests are ceremonial events governed by certain rites and conventions, not just about physical struggle. Usually, including bathing in holy water, using certain medicines, or being blessed by seniors or spiritual leaders. The wrestlers go through purifying rites before a bout starts. These ceremonies are supposed to release any bad energy from the wrestlers and get them ready for the fight.

The celebration may also be attended by spiritual authorities like diviners or conventional priests. To guarantee that the wrestlers are spiritually ready for the tournament, they carry out the rites meant to call for the protection and blessings of the ancestors and gods. These leaders stress the deep-rooted ideas that support Igba Mgba and therefore strengthen the link between the physical and spiritual sides of the celebration

### Dramatic elements in the Igbo traditional wrestling festival

The following dramatic elements found in traditional wrestling festivals among the Igbo people will be discussed: Arena (stage), plot, spectacle, characters (actors), setting, song and dance, rhythm.

#### **Arena (stage)**

Usually occurring in an open field or village square, the festival provides the wrestling venue. In the village square, fans swarm to see the battles, support their favourite wrestlers, and engage in the celebration. Playing traditional instruments, drummers and musicians provide a rhythmic background that energises the wrestlers and increases the intensity of the battles. Arena is the performing area or performance space. The Igbo performing area is called theatre-in-the-round. Wrestling



**Figure 3.** Wrestlers with loincloths as costumes in a performance arena at Elele, Rivers State (source: Facebook ng).

performance is normally done in “ama egwuregwu” (village square) as shown in Figure 3, where wrestlers are performing at the wrestling arena at Elele, Rivers State, Nigeria. This is a preferred stage type for the traditional Igbo wrestling festival. In Igbo land, the audience sits around the performing arena. The Igbo people are used to encircling their performers for an effective relationship.

### **Plot**

A plot comprises the events that make up a story, particularly as these events relate to one another in a pattern or a sequence, as they relate to each other through cause and effect. The plot of drama contributes enormously to the thematic development of the story, and the emphasis mostly falls on cause and effect.

Plot in a traditional wrestling festival is the scenario, which is an imaginatively constructed plot upon which a performance is based. The traditional Igbo wrestling festival has a story that surrounds it. This story is embedded in the music and songs that the performers or referees render to the audience. Music and songs are very important dramatic elements in the Igbo traditional wrestling festival. Music gives aesthetic pleasure to the performance and helps to create mood and pace to the wrestling activities.

### **Spectacle**

Spectacle in drama entails aspects of costuming and enhancement in production. Spectacle is one of the aspects that has elevated the arts, especially drama, as the playwright creates the mood of the play in order to captivate the audience. Crow (1983) calls it the ‘larger than life’ element in every dramatic production. In the context of this study, spectacle is seen as something exhibited to view as unusual, notable, or entertaining. The focus is on the Igbo traditional wrestling festival and those eye-catching aspects worn by the actors, which make them stand out from the rest.

Costumes and make-up play very functional roles in traditional African drama. Costumes are a visual re-enactment of a people’s history and a reminder of their traditions. Apart from appealing to the eye, they also send a message to the audience. For instance, the beads worn by the actors remind the Igbo people of available resources to invent something new.

Costumes are utilised as a type of emblematic articulation of oneself, just as an open device that deciphers its sociological impacts at some random time. Ensemble has the feature of catching the audience’s mental focus, increasing their disposition and passing on the message through non-verbal means. Costume not only serves the purpose of clothing but, most importantly, plays



**Figure 4.** Wrestlers in action at Umuahia, Imo State. (source: Facebook ng).

the role of cultural identification.

### **Props**

Props are very important for the actors to master the use of their stage properties. Props are those artistic materials used by the actors on set. In the Igbo traditional wrestling festival, a bell is used by the performer as one of the stage properties. Props add glamour to the performance. In some Igbo communities, the prop used during wrestling contests is the broom held by members to control the inflow of the audience into the arena. Sometimes, it is used to regulate the wrestling, separate contestants that have locked themselves as well as to push the audience backwards from the wrestling arena as shown in Figure 4, where a man is seen standing by the wrestlers, probably holding a bell or a broom, although not visible in the picture, but with the intention to regulate the wrestling.

### **Characters (Actors)**

Finnegan (1970), in regards to drama, states, "Most important is the idea of enactment, of representation

through actors who imitate people and events" (P.501). In the African traditional drama, the choice and signification of character are vital and fundamental to the expression and conveyance of meaning. The characters symbolise values, beliefs, and the philosophy of the community, which brings people together.

During the Igbo traditional wrestling festival, the wrestlers are the main characters on the occasion and are surrounded by the audience, who sing praises and chants as they merrily dance. The elders, the clan's people, the referees and the audience constitute the characters in the drama as all of them have a role to play in the actualisation of the wrestling festival. In the Igbo traditional wrestling festival, just like most traditional African festivals, the audience is a participating one, and it is part of the community of active performers. The audience, who are also part of the characters, come and go at will depending on the force of spontaneity brought by the tempo, rhythm, and inspiration experienced by the audience. The performance is fluid, it is for all present at the wrestling arena. Without audience participation, the beauty of the wrestling festival is lost. It is as a result of the audience that a wrestling contest becomes profoundly interactive. The audience joins in the dance and the singing. This participation of the audience forces the active performers



**Figure 5.** Drummers and wrestlers at a town square at Ogrute Elugwu Ezike (source: collected during a wrestling bout).

(wrestlers) to heighten their level of performance. The only way to differentiate the audience and the performer is through the costumes and properties that are used. The performer popularly known as “dimgba” (wrestler) is crucial to the wrestling festival. In the Igbo traditional wrestling festival, the wrestlers use their bodies and voices to entertain the audience. They are the performers. The number of contestants that will wrestle at a match is not exactly fixed. One contestant comes out to challenge an opponent from the opposing team, community or village. Wrestlers are trained to abstain from sex at least a week before every contest. The first wrestler springs into the arena at will and throws a challenge at the opponent. If a man refuses a challenge, the challenger collects some sand in his palm, rubs it against his buttocks, and throws it at the coward, or he is permitted to pull at the weakling’s hair.

If the challenge is accepted, the contest begins. During this hot contest, in which their muscles are taut and stretched to breaking point, the wrestler who passes over his opponent’s back is the victor, as shown in Figure 5.

### **Song**

Songs are an important genre of oral literature. The Igbo traditional wrestling festival would be incomplete without songs. Basically, they are poems and chants composed to be sung during the performance. Songs are a sub-genre of oral literature and hence a literary form normally composed and sung on this particular occasion. The song is just one way of conveying a message to the audience. These songs are highly repetitive with the purpose of stressing the message to the intended person. This Repetition of words, phrases or even whole verses not only contributes to the rhythm of the song but also emphasises important points in the song. This repetition also enhances the theme of the song. In Igbo culture, wrestling is not merely a form of entertainment but a symbol of communal unity and pride. It is a way for individuals to demonstrate their strength and agility while upholding the values of honour and respect. Wrestlers are highly respected within their communities, and their skills are admired by both young and old. The traditional wrestling matches are not

just about physical strength; they also emphasise strategy, technique, and mental fortitude. Wrestlers undergo rigorous training to hone their skills and prepare for competitions. This dedication to training reflects the discipline and determination valued in Igbo society.

### **Dance**

In a wrestling bout, victory is a communal celebration rather than just a personal one. Usually placed on the shoulders of his fans, a wrestler's triumph is paraded around the village square. Celebrating the wrestler's power and ability, the community honours the triumph with eating, dancing and singing. As a mark of the community's respect, the winning wrestler can also receive presents like a cow or other priceless objects.

In every chant, drumbeat, song, chorus and dance replicate nuances that serve as part of a ritual; dance expresses the conviction, attitude, norms and values of a specific culture. It is what is instilled in the way of life that can be reflected in the dance of a particular social group. Dance during a traditional wrestling festival recounts a story, or serves strict political monitoring or social needs. This is the case of Igbo traditional wrestling, as the dance is not merely a way of passing time but expresses the mood of the day, which brings joy and bliss as it is a celebration of one of the pleasant lifetime events in the community. Therefore, the characters who are involved dance with vigour, and an expression of happiness is written all over their faces.

Traditional drama is invariably music-oriented, with the attendant features of dance and song. Clark (1981) asserts that, if drama is an elegant initiation of action with elements of ritual, language, song, mime, music and dance, then there is evidence of drama in Africa. This is quite evident in the Igbo traditional wrestling festival because the performance will not be complete without dance. During the dance, the characters sing songs of praise to the wrestlers as they dance. Igbo traditional wrestling dance is significant as it brings people together, for instance, when a group of dancers are performing, there is an audience that gathers to watch and participate in the performance. In line with the above view, Enekwé (1991) states that dance plays an important role in society in realising societal harmonious living and togetherness. This leads to a deep sense of communion with each other. The dance helps to preserve the people's culture in the sense that the language of the people is used.

### **Imagery**

Imagery in drama refers to the use of descriptive language that is appealing to the human mind. It leads to the formation of a mental picture. Imagery adds layers of deeper symbolic meaning to the performance. Aspects of

imagery include symbolism, simile, metaphor and personification. The use of imagery in performance is very crucial as it contributes to the effective conveyance of the intended message.

### **Drumming**

The importance of the drum during traditional wrestling festivals is to evoke the emotions of the wrestlers and create excitement in the arena. Drumming during the wrestling festival is also used to welcome wrestlers into the arena. Wrestlers react to this welcome beat in different ways, based on the beat of the drum. Sometimes, they dance to the beat to show their strength. They also react by shouting their names, raging at their opponents or walking boldly round the arena. The beat of the drum also evokes another level of excitement in the wrestler by encouraging him to fight and defend the honour for which he was known. Here, drumming is introduced to trigger fire and desire in the wrestler to conquer and subdue his opponent. The sound of the drums becomes essential in stirring up emotions in the match to inspire excitement and passion. The effect of the beat of the drum resonates as the wrestler vows not to let the people down. In the midst of the excitement of the inspiring drumming, the wrestler boasts, "whoever doubts the depth of the great river should step into it".

The "Nkwa Mgba" (wrestling ensemble) is the most accomplished musical ensemble in Ngwa land, and keeps the wrestling arena charged with their music. This energises the atmosphere, evoking a strong masculine feeling in the contestants' blood, and fills their bones and marrow with renewed energy and vigour to contest. The drums of the Nkwa Mgba are arranged in linear order and are about ten. They have the bass, tenor, treble and alto ranges. These drums are made of animal skins (akpukpo anu), usually from a bush animal called Mgbada. The accompanying instruments are the wooden gong, rattle, the metal gong (agogo) and the drumming sticks.

The drummers are usually not less than four. While the energetic beating of the drums rent the air, holding it captive and charged, the chief drummer, who is very skilful, uses the drum to call out the names of the wrestlers and warn the potential contestants of how adroit they were. Meanwhile, a group of lively youths would wave the palm fronds in the air to keep off the crowd from trespassing and launching themselves into the wrestling arena.

Drumming also has an intoxicating effect that further brings the wrestler's masculinity to the fore. During matches, wrestlers engage in both attacking and defensive movements with the aid of the rhythm from the percussion instrument. However, the effect of drumming during matches sometimes reaches a maximum peak of intoxication. Finnegan (2012) affirms that wrestling tournaments are sometimes accompanied by a kind of praise on a



**Figure 6.** Wrestlers in action with the audience enjoying their performance at Ikpamodo, Elugwu Ezike, Enugu state (source: collected during one of the wrestling festivals at Ikpamodo).

talking drum. The participants are welcomed as they enter the ring, while the match continues to offer comments and encouragement. This is also echoed by Marshal (2001), who posits that during wrestling festivals in Senegal, wrestlers are always accompanied by personal drummers who usually play *sabra*, a traditional African drum which possesses deep symbolic meaning to the wrestlers. Figure 6 depicts a wrestling arena with spectators and drummers sitting in a circle watching and enjoying the contest.

### **Rhythm**

Rhythm is defined as the pace of dramatisation and alludes to the beats of the presentation. In drama, rhythm must be altered, regardless of the drama's length, and it corresponds to the emotional state of the performers. In drama, rhythm is realised in exchanges of dialogue between the performers during singing and dance. This is evident in the Igbo traditional wrestling contest as the performers of the songs converse at a regular interval during the performance. Most Igbo traditional wrestling festival songs are in call-and-response mode. This involves a soloist singing a line, then the others respond. This creates rhythm as it happens regularly. Rhythm is also seen in the movement of a performer. This is evident in his/her dance steps, which are synchronised. This is the case in the Igbo traditional wrestling festival, as the dancers during the performance portray unity in their body movements. For instance, they all move their legs forward and backwards as they hit the ground and the same is

repeated in the successive performance.

### **Application of the performance theory**

Performance theory by Schechimer is relevant to this study because it deals with ritual performance, which the Igbo traditional wrestling festival fits into. Schechimer states that the theory depends on everyday conflicts, tensions and pleasures of life, different rites and ceremonies that have been ritualised in the society. The performance in this case acts as a tool for societal commentary where people comment on the general happenings in their lives during the performance, and the audience complements the performance. Performance, therefore, is not only about the performers and the audience; it encompasses art forms, which include dance/music, song, dialogue, and poetry, which are fused with other dramatic elements. Therefore, this study concurs with the fact that the Igbo traditional wrestling festival suits Schechimer's model of performance in relation to drama. Performance theory is about the ritual performances which are of importance to a particular community, as it brings them together. Igbo traditional wrestling festival is a ritual performance that brings the Igbo people together in celebration through dance, song and music. During the performance of the Igbo wrestling festival, songs are sung accompanied by the dance. The characters put on special costumes and makeup, and this makes performance theory suitable for this study because it deals with performance.

## Findings of the study

The findings of the study revealed that the Igbo wrestling festival is significant as it symbolises strength, skill, and communal unity. Traditional wrestling events are culturally important, serving as a rite of passage for young men and a means of gaining social status. Igbo traditional wrestling festival also reflects the values of competition and honour within the Igbo society, highlighting the community's appreciation for physical prowess and tradition.

The study further established that the Igbo wrestling festival is deeply intertwined with spiritual beliefs and rituals. Before matches, wrestlers often partake in traditional ceremonies and prayers to seek divine favour and protection. These rituals add a spiritual dimension to the sport, highlighting the connection between physical prowess and metaphysical forces.

The study also found that, Igbo traditional wrestling festival showcases the following dramatic elements: actors, costume, arena (obom), audience, plot, spectacle and props. It is, therefore, a traditional drama. It has a storyline, and there is drumming and dancing during the wrestling bouts.

Furthermore, wrestling in Igbo culture serves as a platform for social interaction and bonding. It brings people together, fostering a sense of camaraderie and mutual support. Spectators gather to witness the matches, cheering for their favourite wrestlers and celebrating the display of athleticism and sportsmanship. It serves as a means of showcasing masculinity, physical prowess and courage. The sport is often accompanied by vibrant music, drumming and enthusiastic spectators, creating a lively and engaging atmosphere

## Conclusion

In conclusion, wrestling in Igbo culture is a testament to the strength, resilience, and communal spirit of the Igbo people. It embodies the values of honour, discipline, and unity, serving as an inspiring and educational tradition. The spectacle of the wrestling matches illustrates the value that is placed on physical agility and strength in Igbo culture. In ways similar to today's sports, the wrestling events, even in their violence, provide vicarious pleasure for the spectators who consider the victors heroes and often carry them on their shoulders.

Wrestling in Igbo land holds immense cultural significance, serving as a cherished tradition that promotes physical and mental development, social cohesion, and the preservation of cultural identity. This ancient sport not only celebrates strength and athleticism but also embodies the spirit and values of the Igbo people. By recognising the importance of wrestling, we can appreciate and uphold the rich cultural heritage of Igbo land for generations to come.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## INTERVIEWEES

- Mr. Nze Ugwu, John, 68 years. Igogoro, Elugwu Ezike. 20th October, 2024.
- Mr. Okeke, Eze, 74 years. Ikpamodo, Elugwu Ezike. 24th October, 2024.
- Mr. Nze Abugu, Idoko, 46 years. Onitsha, Anambra State. 28th October, 2024.
- Mr. Nwafor, Nwokolo, 59 years. Afikpo, Ebonyi State. 30th October, 2024.