Salt of the Nation: Gender and Power in the Folklore of Salt Production Among the Okposi-Igbo Women in Southeastern Nigeria

by

Ogbonnaya Mark Okoro

A thesis accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In Folklore and Public Culture

Thesis Committee:

Juan Eduardo Wolf, Chair

Oluwakemi Balogun, Member

University of Oregon

Spring 2026

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Ogbonnaya Mark Okoro

Master of Arts in Folklore and Public Culture

Title: Salt of the Nation: Gender and Power in the Folklore of Salt Production Among the Okposi-Igbo Women in Southeastern Nigeria

Salt production has been the major occupation of Okposi-Igbo women in Southeastern Nigeria. The process of salt making and its history demonstrates indigenous science and relationship between humans, creativity, and environment. While salt gives nutrients and flavor to the food, the mmahi – salt produced by Okposi-Igbo women – is not only a spice used to garnish food but a means of cultural identity, survival, cultural sustainability, cultural memory, traditional medicine and healing, as well as power contestation. Precolonial Igbo societies are recognized as binary divisions and each gender, maintained kinship leadership and specific trades (Okonjo 1976:47). While the Igbo men dominated certain trade like blacksmithing and yam farming, the Igbo women dominated salt production and markets, thereby, having both political and economic autonomy – which backdated the British colonial presence in Nigeria. Igbo women's political and economic autonomy was disrupted by colonialism and resulted in resistance. By exploring the Okposi-Igbo women salt producers as a specific case study, as well as broader contexts of Igbo women, this thesis demonstrates the roles women play in colonial resistance and their positionality as transmitters of culture. It further examines how the folklore of salt contextualizes Igbo culture, its gender positionality, and its survival through colonization and beyond; and how women kept the salt market open despite the colonial and postcolonial wars in Nigeria, to reimagine their economic and political agency.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Ogbonnaya Mark Okoro

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Master of Arts, Folklore and Public Culture, 2026, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Arts, Linguistics and Igbo Studies, 2015, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Narrative studies
Precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial studies
Oral history
Material culture
Digital folklore
Storytelling
Folklore and literature
Gender Studies
Translation studies
Folklore and science
Linguistics, Language and culture
Oral traditions
Comparative studies
Folklore and foodways
Fiction
Children literature and folklore
African Studies
Igbo Studies

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Employee, University of Oregon, Fall 2024
Teaching Assistant, FLR 225 *Voices of Africa*

Graduate Employee, University of Oregon, Winter and Spring 2025
Communication Specialist, Oregon Folklife Network

Graduate Employee, University of Oregon, Summer 2025
Instructor of Record: FLR 250 *Introduction to Folklore*

Graduate Employee, University of Oregon, Fall 2025 – Spring 2026
Instructor of Record: WR 121z *Composition*

American Sign Language Interpreter, TalkingHealth9ja, 2020-2022

American Sign Language Interpreter, African Economic Congress, 2020

Legislative Intern, Federal House of Representatives, Nigeria Oct 2019 – Dec 2019

Founder, Igbo Master's Institute (www.igbotic.net) 2018 –

English and Literature Teacher, National High School, Okobo 2016 - 2017

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Center for the Study of Women in Society's Graduate Research Award, University of Oregon, 2025

Oregon Graduate Travel Award, University of Oregon, 2025

John & Joy Haines Scholarship for African Students, University of Oregon, 2025

Award of Global Impact in Igbo Studies, Department of Languages and Linguistics, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, 2025

PUBLICATIONS:

Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Understanding the Igbo Culture of Nigeria.* Colours of Language Press, 2025.

Okoro, Ogbonnaya. Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Fiziksi* (Physics and first science textbook translated into an African language - Igbo) Perfect Image Publishers, 2024.

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Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Uwa Na-Eme Ntughari (The Dynamic World)* Igbo Play. Createspace Publishers, 2018.

Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Ukwu Jie Agu (When a Leopard Breaks its Legs)* Igbo Novel. Pacific Publishers, 2017

Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *A Tufuo Nkirika Nkata (When Old Baskets Are Thrown Away)* Igbo Play. Pacific Publishers, 2017.

Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Uche Chukwu Ga-Eme (God's Will Be Done)* Igbo play. Pacific Publishers, 2017.

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Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Ihe Onye Turu N'Ahia (What the Market Delivers)* Igbo play. Pacific Publishers, 2015.

Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Ibuchim? (Are you, my God?)* Igbo play. Pacific Publishers, 2015.

Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Onye Buru Chi Ya Uzo (When One Runs After His Fortune)* Pacific Publishers. 2015.

Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Uwa Di Omimi (Beneath the Depths of the World)* Igbo play. Pacific Publishers, 2015.

Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Nze Nwata Chiri (A Child Conferred with Honor)* Igbo play. Pacific Publishers, 2025.

Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Uwa Na-Amighari Amighari (When the World Slips Away)* Igbo play. Perfect Image Publishers, 2025.

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Okoro, Ogbonnaya. *Nwata Tichaa Aki Tufuo Nkume (When a Child Cracks the Palm Kernel and Casts Away the Stone***.** Ezeh Press, 2012.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I sincerely thank Professors Juan Eduardo Wolf and Oluwakemi Balogun for their selfless support on this research. Professor Wolf particularly opened my eyes to ethnographic research and how to interpret my data, clearly. He gave me books to read, and his door was always open to guide me. Taking Professor Balogun's class in *Gender and Sex in Africa* in the Spring Term of 2025 opened my doors of curiosity to explore this research while studying the Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria. She is always eager to support me all the time. I would also like to appreciate Professor Leah Lowthorp, who through a discussion I had with her, suggested I explore the possibility of researching gender and colonialism in Igboland through the lens of folklore. Her advice and suggestions contributed to my drive for this project.

In addition, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the Center for the Study of Women in Society, University of Oregon for their generous support through Graduate Research Awards in 2025, which helped me financially, to conduct research in Nigeria. Also, I thank the Global Studies Institute, University of Oregon for their financial support through the Global Oregon Graduate Research Award, which made my trip to Nigeria for fieldwork, possible, in the Summer 2025. Also, I appreciate the support I received from the Folklore and Public Culture program at the University of Oregon and the faculty: Professors Gordon Sayre, Martha Bayless, Riki Saltzman, Daniel Wojcik; and the faculty from other departments who our paths have crossed through their courses.

I would mostly appreciate the women and men I met in the field who I interviewed: Mama Eto, Mama John, Mama Udoka, Mr. Augustine, Nnadi Ogo, Margret Ogudu (my mother), Onyibe Ekechukwu, and other four women in the focus group who chose to be anonymous – for

spending their time to narrate the whole story, process, and rituals surrounding salt making which are bases for this analysis. Ndeewo! Unu Emeela!

DEDICATION

To the memory of my grandmother, Obaji Nwigbo Unegwu who produced and sold indigenous Okposi-Igbo salt; and narrated her experience, in which my childhood memory was built upon.

To the memory of my late father, Mark Okoro Ogudu whose sacrifice paved way for my future.

To the memory of my academic father, Professor Inno Uzoma Nwadike, whose mentorship guided my path in the academic world.

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I

Introduction: Salt of the Nation: The Igbo Women and Salt

Introduction

Salt makes our food tasty and delicious, and it is also used to preserve food. Salt can be traditionally produced as a form of material culture or an industrialized nutritional spice. The traditional production of salt differs from culture to culture and serves different purposes. For the Igbo ethnic group in southeastern Nigeria, salt is beyond a spice added into food for good flavor, but a way of life, a way of identifying, cultural memory, gendered labor, and survival across generations. Salt is not just a substance specific to people, but it is the "Salt of the Nation" – a phrase implying ethnic nationalism while stating that it belongs to everyone in and enhances the survival of a nation-state. Okposi-Igbo women exercise absolute power in reshaping the outcome and process of salt making, leadership, and commerce within their society.[1] The choice of salt making, the materials used in making it, resource allocation, and its indigenous customs are influenced and controlled by women. Therefore, the material culture of salt production is traditionally attributed to women, which gives them both economic and political agency.

The expression, "Salt of the Nation" is the famous motto of Ebonyi State – one of the States in southeastern Nigeria. Ebonyi State is predominantly Igbo – one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria with an expanse of landscape for agricultural production. "Salt of the Nation" has a symbolic meaning of cultural and historical identity in connection with the oral tradition of salt production and gendered-labor, predating the 19th - 20th centuries' British

[1] Women who are born in Okposi or married to an Okposi man. Okposi is a subculture or subgroup of the Igbo ethnic group in the Southeastern Nigeria. It is a town located in Ohaozara Local Government Area of Ebonyi State. The town is known for the largest Salt Lake known as *Mmahi* and their women are known for salt production and trade across Nigeria.

Colonial presence in Nigeria and the creation of Ebonyi state in 1996. “Salt of the Nation” echoes ethnic pride – indicating that Ebonyi State where the salt lakes are located – does not only provide salt for the nation but gives Nigeria its flavor. This cultural materialistic flavor (salt) it gives to the people stems from a humble process where women are in charge. In Igbo cosmology, women are powerful beings through which humans originate, and they hold the most powerful position for the survival of mankind in terms of food. Nevertheless, salt has provided a gateway for such survival and Igbo women had been in the traditional forefront of making that possible.

Furthermore, salt production in the region has been the preoccupation of the Okposi-Igbo and Uburu women; while women from other Igbo tribes trade in salt. The Okposi-Igbo women are famous in the business of salt production in Nigeria. Okposi is a subgroup of the Igbo, and a town located in Ohaozara in Ebonyi State – where the major salt lake in the state is situated.

Precolonial Igbo societies had a dual-sex system in which men and women had their respective kinship institutions and trades. Although a patriarchal society, male dominance was invisible as both political and economic powers were dualized, and some Igbo societies were matrilocal (Dorothy and Uduma 2018; Okeke and Ahamefule 2023). While the Igbo men dominated certain trades such as yam farming and blacksmithing, the Igbo women dominated salt production and markets. The *omus* in western Igbo are female leaders in charge of markets. Therefore, the Igbo women had a significant economic and political autonomy. But colonialism came and tried to disrupt them while the Igbo women continued to produce salt traditionally as an action of resistance. They kept the salt market open despite the colonial and postcolonial wars in Nigeria. This thesis seeks to explore the textual interpretation of salt production as a practice of identity, gendered-labor, memory, and cultural sustainability among the Okposi-Igbo women;

also, a way of preserving and reviving identity by analyzing how colonialism and modernization have impacted salt production, and how women resisted them. By exploring the tradition of salt making in Igbo land with a specific study of the Okposi-Igbo salt producers, I will demonstrate how cultural experiences can be interpreted as a method of passing down traditions for cultural sustainability; and how material cultural practices helped women regain economic and political agencies that have been disrupted by colonization.

To accomplish these goals, this thesis addresses the following questions: What cultural values does salt possess in reimagining the Okposi-Igbo women's identity and power? How does salt production, as a material cultural practice, preserve cultural memories erased by colonialism and modernism? What is the metaphorical use of salt as an expression of identity among the Okposi-Igbo women? How do rituals associated with salt and its production reflect the gendered division of labor? What does salt say about the Igbo culture, gender positionality, and survival through colonization and time? How does personal experience shape understanding of cultural, traditional, and generational transmission of practices in the context of salt production?

To engage with the above questions, I will begin by exploring the traditional practices of salt production in Igboland and their cultural interpretations. In this chapter, I will focus on the methods, background, and theoretical framework employed in this study. Chapter 2 will present the data for analysis, then explore the history and process of salt production in Okposi-Igbo – why it is women dominated trade – and its significance. Chapter 3 will focus on relationship between colonialism and gender in Igbo land: how colonialism disrupts women's economic and political autonomy, and ways in which women through salt production stage resistance to reimagine power and identity through cultural continuity; and then conclude with Chapter 4 by

restating the purpose and importance of this study by discussing how the findings related to the broader questions of this thesis with consideration of the implications for the future research.

Methods

The study population for this project are the female salt producers in a community called Okposi which is in Ebonyi State, Southeastern Nigeria. Okposi is known for a Salt Lake called *Mmahi Ezi* where only women are allowed by the tradition to fetch water from the brine and evaporate it into a solid salt. The practice of salt production is handed down as tradition by women of Okposi, who also transfer the knowledge to their daughters and daughter in-laws. After obtaining approval by the University of Oregon Institution Review Board, I traveled to Nigeria in June 2025 and to this location to interview women who were producing salt at the time. I also interviewed three elderly men aged 50, 75, and 95 – who were custodians of Okposi tradition. Then, I interviewed about 8 women who shared their experiences about salt production: how they learned it, the process, what it means to them, and their plans for cultural continuity. These interlocutors provided me with the data which I have focused on to interpret this thesis. Out of these 8 women, I had four interviewed as a "focus group" while I interviewed the other women independently. My mother (70) did not produce salt, but she sold it. Therefore, I interviewed her, making it a total of 9 women. These interviews were recorded between June and July 2025. I sought their permission before I recorded them, and they also granted me permission to use the recordings in my research. Although some withheld their names or preferred being addressed with their children's name, for instance "Mama Eto" (Eto's Mother). I used my cellphone to record them and the Microsoft docs app in my phone for taking fieldnotes. After the interview, I transcribed and translated them from the Okposi dialect of the Igbo

language into the English Language before using the data for my first draft. I photographed images which also helped me remember the details.

I also employed participant observation as a method of data collection. I was in the kitchen where the salt was being produced and helped one of the women in heating up firewood. I observed the ways in which they process salt, and such observations also influence my interpretation of this work. In addition to this, reflexivity plays a major role here as I come from the same cultural environment where the salt is being produced by women. I am from Okposi and have witnessed across the region various women who have ventured into the material culture of salt production. As a child, I listened to my grandmother narrating her involvement in the business of salt making. Although I did not see her refine salt, she told me stories about how the Igbo survived during the Nigerian Civil War known as the Nigeria-Biafran War. The War lasted for 3 years from 1967-1970 between the Igbo who predominantly occupied Biafra Republic and Nigeria (Taiwo 2025).[2] The Igbo seceded from Nigeria and formed their own Government which led to the Civil War (Owoeye and Ezeanya 2022). Then, food was scarce, and salt became a luxury (Obi 2012). Millions of people starved to death (Brian 2017). However, my grandmother told me how they survived the War through salt and how she made money from the salt business during the national conflict. She showed me the defunct Biafran pound currencies from her iron-box. Furthermore, my mother also traded salt when I was a child. I witnessed older women moving in numbers with clay pots resting on their heads early in the morning while heading to Salt Lake to fetch and refine salt. These memories built up from my childhood constitute a part

[2] Biafran Republic existed between 1967-1970. The country existed in the old Eastern region in Nigeria – predominantly Igbo. The Republic was formed by the Military-Governor of the defunct Eastern Nigeria, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu to secede from Nigeria. This separation led to the Nigeria Civil War called Nigeria-Biafran War.

of the method of storytelling and data interpretation I used in this thesis. The stories spurred my interest in working on this topic.

In addition to these ethnographic methods, I reviewed literature about phenomenological hermeneutics, history, gender studies, material culture, folklore, women labor, salt production, and colonial studies. These materials compound the ideas and analyses of the data applied in this thesis as I merge them with the primary sources.

Background

This thesis applies historical background and personal experiences to study the material culture of salt production in Igbo land. Salt is important to human diet and survival (Chan et al., 2022). To some, it serves as a method of food preservation; to others, it serves as a commodity for trade, posing as an economic substance. While these signal the functions of salt, they equally express symbolic meanings of salt which are transmitted orally and practically. This perspective puts it under the realm of folklore. Folklore can function as an artifact which "acknowledges its historicity and attests to its durability and utility for human beings" (George and Jones 1995: 59). I argue that the tradition of people reflects their originality and identity. This tradition is expressed through different methods: orally, performances, and cultural materiality. Whichever way, human historicity and its utilization constitute their traditions (Gadamer 1960). The narratives and practices of this tradition is evident in Okposi-Igbo where salt production constitutes both economic and cultural institutions shaping belief and hand-down traditions across generations. Therefore, one cannot speak about the historicity of the Okposi-Igbo without salt production and the involvement of women in such expressive and artistic tradition.

Folklore of salt production in Okposi Igbo-community might be physically, philosophically, economically, medicinally, and spiritually important. Physically, it is a form of food. Without salt, the food is tasteless. Philosophically, salt enriches the linguistic repertoire of the Okposi-Igbo community where it is expressed in their idioms and proverbs. Economically, salt is the major trade of Okposi-Igbo women contributing to their economic and political agency during times of war and crisis. Medicinally, Okposi-Igbo people use indigenous salt for different kinds of healing; and spiritually, salt purifies the mind and heals the soul. These interpretations further indicate how salt is a symbolic culture of the Okposi-Igbo enshrined in folkloric functions as a cultural narrative preserving the identity of the people through interaction with their environment.

On the other hand, salt production requires extraction of mineral resources. Different cultures have ways in which they refine salt. The Okposi-Igbo produce salt through evaporation via open fire. The interesting aspect of this practice is that only women are allowed to produce salt, men have no business with salt production; instead, they embark on other labors such as farming, crafting, processing palm wine, and hunting. However, Women would fetch the brine from *Mmahi Ezi* – salt lake, then refine it through the open fire. This method is an indigenous science (Snively and John 2001) which requires techniques, knowledge, and attention to details – qualities and specialized practices passed down from older generations, mostly mothers or mother in-laws. Because of the value of salt among the Okposi-Igbo and its uniqueness, it is associated with bravery, power, wealth, economic and political agency.

In the pre-colonial Igbo society, salt was a source of food and healing. The Igbo maintained gender roles were each sex had economic and political power. This was disrupted by colonialism. However, several events indicate cultural resistance to colonial disruption. For

instance, during World War II when there was a scarcity of imported salt in colonial Nigeria, the women of Okposi-Igbo did not only become famous, but wealthy, as they got patronage across the country (Chuku 2004). The Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 also had the people of Biafra (seceding region, and the name the Igbo were called then) experience scarcity of salt. The Igbo women from Okposi became the source of hope through their craft, and at the same time, they were economically enriched. War brings about survival. However, in the period of Nigeria's civil war where everyone was trying to survive, certain traditional norms, such as ages of who could participate in refining the salt changed but gendered-labor style, did not change. Not even the war could turn the practice into male-dominated industry. Economic concerns often make female professions male concerns, but in this case, gender role was maintained as men had the responsibility of protection. While the Igbo men were busy fighting the war to protect their communities, their women were busy protecting the economic and nutritional society, thereby preserving and sustaining the tradition amid war (Ogechi 2024; Taiwo 2025).

Nonetheless, the folkloric aspect of salt production is also seen through the rituals and taboos of salt. In Okposi Igbo, it is a taboo for men to fetch the brine; it is a tradition only reserved for women. Within the traditional belief system of salt, salt wards off evil spirits and neutralizes poisons. More so, the spiritual belief states that certain rituals must be carried out to appease the goddess of the lake. The deity of the Salt Lake – *Mmahi* – who is believed to be a female controls the resources and her law must be obeyed. The gendered labor division is evident in this narrative where a female spiritual entity determines the gender labor of who can fetch the brine and process the salt. But there is no other concrete evidence whether what kept men from processing the salt could have been lack of knowledge or this oral traditional belief system.

Significantly, the myth is rooted in a culture with a division of labor that has everything associated with food – including salt, marked as women's responsibility.

However, despite the ubiquity of modern industrialized salt, the traditional salt production among the Okposi-Igbo women continues, demonstrating cultural awareness and sustainability. At this point, the focus is no longer only about profit making but maintaining the cultural significance of salt production and passing it down to generations notwithstanding cultural changes. I am interested in how cultural changes and contemporary society support the revival and continuity of salt production.

Another background to this thesis is my personal experience and how I witnessed people using this salt when I was a child. I once had an upset stomach, and my mother gave me the traditional salt produced by Okposi-Igbo women. She added a pinch into a cup of water and drink; I drank it, and I was healed. This experience nurtured my interest and curiosity into finding what salt means not only to me, but the Igbo community, and the rest of the world.

Theory

It appears almost impossible to assemble the nuances of data gathered for this work without applying an appropriate theoretical framework to shape the discourse. The data comprises stories and experiences which are useful to foreground this thesis. While the stories provide a basis for analysis, my personal experience also informs the interpretation of the assembled data. In line with that, hermeneutic phenomenology is a framework that guides this study. The concept of hermeneutic phenomenology is developed through the work of a German Philosopher, Martin Heidegger. In his magnum opus *Sein und Zeit* (1927) translated as *Being and Time* (John Wild, 1962), Heidegger argued that human existence is interpretative, and that

human understanding of the world is shaped by its culture, history, and personal experiences. He further disagreed with the idea of "neutral observer" or "objectivity" while arguing that understanding of the world exists between the interpreter and what is interpreted. This implies that a human's understanding about his world is shaped by history and personal experience and does not exist in isolation. Humans interpret their environment and live in harmony with their interpretation. Furthermore, Heidegger's idea contrast with the views of other traditional philosophers like René Descartes and Edmund Husserl that human understanding is theoretical and fundamentally detached; and that the world is understood primarily through "conscious" and observation of "detached objects."

This concept is further expanded by other scholars. For instance, the German philosopher Hans-George Gadamer (1960) in his book *Truth and Method* x-rayed philosophical hermeneutics by arguing that the world is perceived, not primarily theoretically, but practically. Gadamer further explored the roles of language, the phenomenology of human interactions, historicity, and the position of tradition in the business of human comprehension. In his view, Gadamer states that hermeneutics is concerned with seeking "that experience of truth that transcends the sphere of the control of scientific method" (1960: xii). It transcends all areas of knowledge. This definition accommodates areas of human experience where scientific explanations cannot account for. For instance, the tradition of salt production among the Okposi-Igbo women has certain beliefs and rituals that transcend beyond scientific methods but houses other areas of knowledge understood only by those who experience it. There is no scientific rationale of why only women fetch the brine and refine the salt; neither is there any scientific rule for removing footwear while fetching the brine. However, the justification for these practices stems from their personal experiences and interactions with their community.

In addition to Gadamer's view of hermeneutics, Alan Chan defines the field "as the science of understanding" (1984:421). Chan further argued that "human understanding" cannot be perceived as the "outcome of a methodical approach to an object"; instead, it constitutes "human existence itself." Both Chan and Gadamer agree that what constitutes human understanding is the experience and not a "methodical approach." To Chan, "human existence itself" is already an established method of understanding the world. In line with this ideology, humans are conscious of their existence and environment. They do not need any scientific method to understand that they truly exist and what their existence means to them; they are aware. What they see around them, what they feel, eat, and observe constitute their experiences and as well, their interpretation of the world in which they live.

Moreover, Paul Ricoeur (1969;1981) conceptualized hermeneutic phenomenology to examine ways in which humans use meanings to mediate through religion, art, myth, and language. One of the areas he expanded upon was the use of language and stories to negotiate and make sense of experience, and how "narrativity and temporality interact and ultimately return to the question of the meaning of being, the self, and self-identity" (Vidhya Santhanam 2022:107). In further discussing hermeneutics, Ricoeur argued that the author's intention is not defined by the meaning nor the perception a reader has toward the text, but the text itself. That is to say: what one interprets is far from one's ideology but the textual presentation itself.

The question is: what constitutes a text in Ricoeurr's idea? The author's experience which is written for the reader to read is a text. It is shaped by the perception of the writer and not the reader. In contrast, text can be unwritten, without the presence of an author and a reader. That means spoken words, rituals, cultural practices, material cultures, and myths function as texts for preservation of tradition (Clifford 1973; Jan 2011) The interviews, observations, and my

personal experience with salt producers constitute texts – unwritten texts, which will be analyzed and interpreted in their original form. Therefore, orality and performance are the textual form of this discourse.

While the above framework is situated within the premise of philosophy, the ideas are applicable to folklore in terms of performance studies. Folklore explores people's expressive culture and the world they find themselves. It interprets various experiences of humans and their environmental perceptions. Therefore, several scholars of folklore have tried to understand the methods in which material culture and traditions are interpreted and analyzed to convey meanings. For instance, Alan Dundes in his work *Interpreting Folklore* (1980) argued that folklore requires deep interpretation beyond the surface meaning; therefore, folklore is interpreted as symbolic texts encoded in cultural contexts. Although Dundes did not specifically use the word "hermeneutic phenomenology" in his theory, he argued for human experience through a psychoanalytic lens, stating that "folklore means something —to the tale teller, to the song singer, to the riddler, and to the audience or addressees" (1980:33). He further argued that "It may mean different things to different members of the same audience; it may mean different things to a single tale teller at different times in his life" (Dundes 1980:33). He conveys the ideology of hermeneutics as theorized by Ricour as a way of understanding meanings through symbols which signifies "culturally shared signs." That means that two truths can co-exist. Symbols are part of human experience embedded with meanings which require interpretation (Rasmussen 2012). For instance, the symbol of clay pot in Okposi-Igbo community, or a statue of a woman carrying a clay pot on her head conveys deep meaning of historicity and women's power in the cultural context of salt production. This meaning is both folkloric and hermeneutical because it is a textual symbolism expressed through statues or symbols.

Another folklorist and theorist, Dorothy Noyes (2003) employed a similar technique in her work in Catalonia. She examined how communities interpret festivals and traditions after their political change. Her argument establishes festivals as texts to be read, thereby expanding hermeneutics. Thus, this textual dialogue is what Jeff Todd Titon (2008) draws from Gademer's philosophical hermeneutics in his fieldwork, then developed the concept of the hermeneutics of "empathetic participation" to highlight the relationship between a researcher and traditional culture keeper. By this, Titon states, "I experience fieldwork not primarily as a means to transcription, analysis, interpretation, and representation, although it surely is that, but as a reflexive opportunity and an ongoing dialogue with my friends which, among other things, continually reworks my ''work'' as ''our'' work" (2008:32). Titon sees those he met in the fieldwork as his friends. He also sees his "work" as "our work." That means he considers them as collaborators who participate in his project. He further argued that "a reflexive look at the types of relationships fieldwork engenders reveals that fieldworkers, and those who are the subjects of fieldwork, bring identities to the encounter and are cast in a variety of roles" (Titon 2008:33). To Titon, the ability of a researcher to conduct effective fieldwork and interpret texts lies in their relationship with the interlocutors who in this context are culture bearers. Observing a culture, interacting with the participants of the cultural activities and performances and the information accumulated constitute texts. How a researcher analyzes these texts and interprets the dialogue and symbols matters to overall meanings.

However, to interpret folklore and its meanings, it must be contextualized (Dan Ben-Amos, 1982). This is why Timothy R. Tangherhni's (1994) work on Danish storytellers considers legend – a genre of folklore – as texts to be interpreted culturally within the lens of the tellers. Furthermore, the meaning and cultural memory embedded in stories cannot be interpreted

outside the context of the people who shared the stories. These features and symbols found in stories indicate how hermeneutics is interacted within the framework of folklore.

Textuality of Oral Tradition

Previously, we established that oral tradition produces texts. With respect to salt producers, there are legends, myths, and other storytelling features functioning as texts and embodying cultural meanings.

However, the above frameworks and ideology focus on Western epistemological perspectives. They are important in this discourse because I am studying in the Western philosophical framework and education. But, since this research focuses on African tradition and cultural practices of salt production, it is vital to understand the concept of hermeneutic phenomenology within the African perspective. There have been debates between universal philosophy and ethnophilosophy in African scholarship. Several African writers approach interpretation of indigenous texts through the colonial lens while others argue against it through a decolonial lens. To understand hermeneutics from a decolonial African perspective, several notable African scholars have constantly argued the need for ethnophilosophy. For instance, an Eritrean philosopher and scholar Tsenay Serequberhan (2013) in his book, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse* argues that the study of African philosophy is determined by the development of hermeneutic approach in Africa. To him, African philosophy does not recover African thought but critically interprets African experience, which has been shaped by colonial domination and the struggle for colonial liberation. Serequberhan approaches hermeneutics in African philosophical concepts as a dialogue existing between the tradition and people, and how the past is reinterpreted, as well as the response to colonization in the context of

resistance. That shows that hermeneutics in African context grounds itself with interpretation of African worldview outside the context of colonial epistemology. Serequberhan draws his argument from an Igbo philosopher, Theophilus Okere (1983) who argued that African thought and worldview must be analyzed and understood through interpretation of cultural symbols, tradition, and language. While Serequberhan (2013) built upon the argument of Okere (1983) to contextualize hermeneutics in African setting as a form of decolonial philosophy, Okere applied the Igbo worldview as a basis for his argument by "singling out some such values as extended family system, polygamy, respects for elders, deep religious instinct, and ability for social organization as veritable elements on which cultural identity could be pegged and from where we could launch our own mode of life" (Anselm Onuorah, n.d).

On the other hand, some Igbo scholars like Romanus Egudu (1973) and Donatus Ibe Nwoga (1978) interpreted Igbo proverbs, folktales, and symbols as a way of analyzing Igbo philosophy and by extension, African philosophy within a contextual tradition. The Igbo have their own philosophy and symbols which are deeply enshrined in proverbs and words of wisdom. This reality of the Igbo is manifested in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe, which turns out to be foundational for African modern and colonial literature. In addition, what makes the book successful is the features of Igbo oral traditions and hermeneutic elements of tradition contained in it. The proverbs, idioms, narrative performances contained in the book are like everyday life of an Igbo man. For instance, the saying from the text that "those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble" (Achebe 1958:16), highlights how proverb is a part of everyday life which influences people's relationship and experience with others. Humility, listening, and exchanging experiences are aspects of the Igbo worldview. This is in connection with the previous discussion about Titon's

(2008) idea of "hermeneutic of empathetic participation" where a researcher should maintain a certain level of humility and see field informants as a part of their projects. That means, the Igbo proverb also contributes to how we share our experience with others and what we do with the experience of others when they share with us, during and after fieldwork.

In my thinking about hermeneutics, I draw from the Western based assumption which is believed to be universal to apply it in a way it appears in African settings. While some African scholars argue that interpretation of texts within African perspective must be done without the lens of Western epistemology, I argue that whereas decolonization of African thought is important, the general theory of hermeneutic phenomenology can be domesticated while interpreting African thoughts and indigenous studies. The question lies on the hermeneutic factors in play and who is doing the interpretation of these texts. The etic and emic interpretative experiences differ. For instance, the experience of a foreigner who observes and interprets the Okposi-Igbo salt producers differs from an Igbo scholar from the same community who observes and interprets the same text. But both can employ the same generally accepted framework, eventually resulting differently.

But what differentiates Igbo or African hermeneutics, hermeneutics in Africa or other hermeneutics? Experience! The Igbo and other African tribes share a common experience different from the European one, rooted in colonialism. The colonial experience of the Igbo reshaped their worldview which contrasted with Europeans'. The positionality differences in terms of gender experience and colonial experience are diverse perspectives in Igbo or African hermeneutics and Western/European hermeneutics. For instance, colonizers subdue elements of Igbo or African traditions that deserve preservation. In Okposi-Igbo, women had a complete institution in which their economic and political agencies were upheld. This value began to

change drastically when the Igbo had encounters with colonizers who brought both foreign religion and governmental control to destabilize the traditional institution. Prior to colonizers, the Igbo women oversaw markets, leading diverse agricultural industries, and supporting household and community developments. Gracia Clark studied the West African market women with a particular interest in the "matrilineal organization of the dominant Asante ethnic group" in Ghana, narrating that "West African markets were reported to be among the most dynamic contemporary marketplace systems, expanding rather than withering away under long contact with capitalism (2010: xviii). She further added that "relatively skeletal formal sector there, restricted partly because their own vigor, clearly left market traders with considerable economic autonomy" (Clark 2010: xviii). The Igbo women, just as other West African market women "shaped and were shaped by colonial economies" (Byfield 2018:145). In addition, Igbo women participated in indigenous education through oral traditions: folktales, proverbs, idioms, performances, dance – which are elements employed during salt production. However, after colonialism, these values changed. The introduction of foreign religion and worldview impacted the traditional belief system, education, and occupation. Despite these changes, the Okposi-Igbo still retain some element of salt production in which they interpret based on their experiences and worldviews.

In the context of this thesis, the texts that exist in a world of experience and experience vary. In theorizing hermeneutic phenomenology, the experiences I have and gathered through fieldwork are what constitute the texts I am analyzing. Things are no longer the way they used to be, and I am analyzing salt production based on my experience and findings and not how tradition was practiced centuries ago. Therefore, I am interpreting my experience and the experience of others by engaging in textual writing, reading, listening to stories, and observing

the processes of salt production. My text, however, is based on salt and its production. I will analyze the text based on how the story of salt production was told and the way people told the story. In this analysis, I will focus on two major things:

1. Interaction as text, and
2. Interpretation of text

Overall, salt making is a gendered-labor that gives Okposi-Igbo women economic and political power. This autonomy was disrupted through colonialism. But the practice continuously acts as a way of resistance, reimagining women's power. By exploring hermeneutic phenomenology, the experience of the salt producers and mine as a researcher will be interpreted as texts in this thesis by intersecting folklore and gender studies in African context. In the next chapter, I will present data as texts and interpret the texts using the context of Okposi-Igbo women salt producers. I will analyze my experience with salt: how salt tastes, the function of salt, and how my experience influences my interpretations. Also, the next chapter will explain the history of salt production in Okposi-Igbo – its process, significance, challenges, usage – and why it is women dominated the trade.

II

History of Salt Production in Okposi-Igbo Community

Introduction:

This chapter will explore the history of salt production in Okposi-Igbo community and how women produced the salt in the past (precolonial) and currently. History includes the oral narratives associated with salt, mythology, taboos, uses, and sense of identity. The chapter also addresses the reasons that salt production is a woman-dominated trade and the level of economic power it accords the Okposi-Igbo women, the cultural memory of salt, and its significance to the broader Igbo history in time of war and healing. I will do this by presenting and analyzing data gathered from salt producers, as texts.

History of Salt Production

The history of salt, salt production, and mining span ages from ancient Mesopotamia, Near East salt mines and caravan trade focusing on Palmyra growing out of it; and including the famous trade of gold and salt in West Africa and Europe in early 16th century A.D.[3] Despite the vast history of salt and how it traveled across centuries, every human civilization has a way to embrace it as part of their tradition through foodways and expressive cultural identity. These underline the traditional practices found in its production.

[3] Potts Daniel, "On Salt and Salt Gathering in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 27, no. 3 (1984): 225–71. https://doi.org/10.2307/3631848. 225

Salt production and its methods are influenced by culture, geology, and geography. Groenenberg et. al stated that "the techniques applied in solution mining depend upon the geological characteristics of the salt and particularly upon its internal structure" (2025: 611). To produce salt, one must study the geology and structural components of raw materials involved. In Europe, especially in Netherlands of the past, "salt was produced from natural brine springs by evaporation. In the coastal areas of the Netherlands, it was produced by the burning of peat wetted by salt water" (Groeneberg et.al 2025: 611). Different cultures and people have their own processes of producing salt which can be similar or different. Whereas the Netherlands as cited above applied a traditional method of burning of peat wetted by salt water to produce salt, the method is also applicable to the traditional salt production techniques of the Okposi-Igbo women where the natural brine is evaporated through open fire and heating. In line with this, Okposi-Igbo elder and salt producer Mama Eto narrates, "we often fetch the salt water from the lake very early in the morning. Some also fetch the water from the lake in the evening."[4] Unlike the Uburu's salt lake that has a tidal situation and could be fetched only in the rainy season, the Okposi's salt lake has no outflow and never gets dried out at any season.[5] While some women like Mama Eto fetch it in the morning, others fetch it in the evening. According to the locals, the timing determines the kind of clean water one fetches for production of salt. Some believe that mornings and evenings are when the salt water is clean and ready to be fetched. The water body has rested and is ready to be used. In the afternoon, the Salt Lake is left to filter itself and purify its internal structure. Therefore, the nature of the brine and the time it is fetched determines the outlook of the finished product: whether the finished salt will be clean or not.

[4] A female salt producer from Okposi community in interview with the author, June 29, 2025.
[5] A neighboring town to Okposi, known for salt making too. Uburu and Okposi salt are always used interchangeably by some people.

Furthermore, Michael L. Jeremic (2020) in his book, *The Rock Mechanic in Salt Mining,* explained the process of salt making through the salt-saturated water. He narrated that "an arm of the sea is isolated by a barrier or sill over which periodic influxes of fresh sea water occur; the rate of water evaporation in the region is typical of a hot climate" (2020:1). Jeremic further said that "under these circumstances water in 'bar-basins' becomes concentrated in salt solutions, as the process of evaporation progresses" (2020:1). In Okposi-Igbo community, there was no salt production without the presence of salt-saturated water which the locals called *Mmahi Ezi* – salt lake.[6] The climate of Okposi is hot and the situation is similar to what Jeremic explained except that Okposi Salt Lake is not close to the sea nor has any history of being isolated by a barrier, from the sea. Also, the use of evaporation as a method of salt production is done manually and not totally dependent on the hot climate, although the hot climate helps in easy manual evaporative processes.

Mythology of Salt

While the Okposi-Igbo women produce salt through evaporation which can be influenced by climate, mythologies are also parts of the process. The salt producers collect stories about the beliefs, origin, and supernatural narratives of the *mmahi*.[7] In addition, these mythological elements are expressed by both men and women, then passed down to generations. Onyibe Ekechukwu told me that the salt lake was discovered by a male hunter who was thirsty and found himself a little hole with water.[8] He saw water and scooped it with his hand to drink. When he drank it, it tasted salty. He ran to the community of Mgbom Na Achara – a community in Okposi

[6] Mmahi Ezi is the name of the Okposi-Igbo Salt Lake where the women of the community fetch the salt brine they refine into salt. Mmahi is also believed by the community to be the name of the goddess of the Lake. It is a feminine name and represent the feminine power of spirituality in charge of the salt tradition.
[7] *Mmahi* in this context means Salt Lake.
[8] Interview with Onyibe Ekechukwu, an elder in his 90s. July 6, 2025.

– and told people about it. "He then sacrificed his son to the goddess of the lake, and the salt lake expanded." [9] This happened in the mythic past and is retold as a cultural memory.

While the above supernatural element of mythology was shared by a man, I decided to ask about similar stories of salt lake: how it came to be, who discovered it, and what people believe about it. I also wanted to find out whether female narrators have more and broader stories different from the male narrator, since the salt production is exclusively the role of women in Okposi-Igbo. Then, I engaged with four women in a focus group, and they are salt producers. One of them shared:

> Let me tell you, the man who discovered mmahi, his name is Ekuma Chita from Okposi Echara. He was hunting in the forest when he became thirsty. As he got to this place called *Mmahi* – salt lake – today, he was very thirsty, then he bent over, scooped some water to drink. That was when *Mmahi was* speaking. The man began to communicate with the salt lake called *Mmahi.* After the conversation… he had an only son. The *Mmahi* told him that for it to expand and help his people, he must sacrifice his only son. He will use his only son as a sacrifice. He nodded and returned to his people, then informed them about his experience and what Mmahi said. He took his son; it was an Orie day. That is why you don't fetch the mmahi on Eke Market Day. He had an encounter with Mmahi on Nkwo, he told his people on Eke, on Orie he took his son to sacrifice for Mmahi.[10] That is why mmahi expanded. It was no longer tiny but expanded the way we have it today.[11]

Other three women were nodding in agreement, and the one of them added:

> Yes, the salt lake was not flowing forward or backward but stood still till now. When mmahi expanded after the sacrifice, our ancestors took their hoes and other farm tools to build walls around the mmahi – salt lake – for protection. Men were sent from different clans to watch over the salt lake to avoid invaders taking over the lake.[12]

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[9] Interview with Onyibe Ekechukwu. July 6, 2025.
[10] Eke, Orie, Afo, and Nkwo are the four days of Igbo week. In Igbo calendar, four days are a week, and each represents trade and market. Also, they represent Igbo spiritual days and each of them has a unique and specifically associated ritual.
[11] Interview with Third Woman – what I used to identify a woman in a focus of four because she chose to be anonymous. July 3, 2025.
[12] Interview with Second Woman – what I used to identify a woman in a focus of four because she chose to be anonymous. July 3, 2025.

The above narratives from the women are more detailed than compared to the one a man shared. What is constant in the narratives is that a hunter discovered the salt lake. The female narrators remembered the name of the man while the male narrator did not specify the name but vaguely told the story. In Okposi-Igbo oral tradition and narratives, the spirit, the nature, the animal, and human interact and live in a single world of reality. This is why the spirit spoke through the salt lake and informed the hunter what must be done for expansion of the lake.

Moreover, the female narrators descriptively portrayed the Igbo worldview about the spiritual days and weeks of the Igbo. While the Gregorian calendar has seven days for a week in the Western view, the Igbo world and calendar exist in four days. These four days are marked with markets each; and they are spiritual days. They include Eke, Orie, Afo, and Nkwo.[13] It is important to note that each of these days are unique to the Igbo and influence everything they do and the name they bear. Thus, four days make Igbo's one week which is contrary to the Gregorian Calendar of seven days. However, the female narrator explained that brine cannot be fetched on Eke market day because it was a day the hunter shared with his community, the story about his encounter with the salt lake goddess – *Mmahi.* It is also believed he encountered the *Mmahi* goddess on Nkwo day, then sacrificed his son on Orie day. Also, because the goddess of the salt lake was feminine, that is why only women could fetch and produce the salt. One may ask: why is it that a man discovered the salt lake, sacrificed his son for it, and men cannot fetch it or produce it except women? In the second woman's corroborative story, men gathered with hoes and farm tools to build a fence around the salt lake; they watched over it to avoid external invasion of the lake, yet, men are not allowed to fetch or produce the salt, except women. The

[13] Eke, Orie, Afo, and Nkwo are the four days of Igbo week. In Igbo calendar, four days are a week, and each represents trade and market. Also, they represent Igbo spiritual days and each of them has a unique and specifically associated ritual.

reason, from what I have observed, is the division of labor and principle of gender role in Igbo cultural traditions. Men are charged with provision, discovery, and protection, while women are charged with nurture and preservation. Also, men go to war; women do not go to war. Since there was a fear of other communities invading the salt water by, men had to protect the resources, allowing women to continue refining the salt without fear of any possible attacks.

Furthermore, different beliefs exist as to why supernatural forces prevent external and human forces from extracting the salt lake beyond customary and traditionally accepted practices. Augustine, one of my interlocutors explained that "the government has tried to manufacture salt here, but mmahi destroyed their equipment mysteriously because the purpose of the salt is to serve the community and not for expansionism and industrialization."[14] This supernatural belief is widespread among many Okposi-Igbo people. Some men and women tell the stories and different versions exist. For instance, one of the women I interviewed from a focus group also added to the general narrative that mmahi – salt lake – destroyed the tools used for its modern industrialization. This idea is connected to gendered labor – women's responsibility for protecting cultural traditions and maintaining the community when she explained:

> Mmahi was bursting the pipes of those who wanted to refine and industrialize it beyond what was expected. The reason it is breaking the pipes is because it is not our culture and tradition to put strange and technological tools alien to our land into the mmahi.[15]

Another woman corroborated the narrator and said:

> They dug a hole to get some sand from the salt lake, to extract it. After digging, a big stone covered everywhere, particularly where they were digging to put a pipe to draw the brine. The brine would destroy the pipe. They became frustrated and screamed that Mmahi was powerful. They would use guns to blow off the stone and continue digging; another stone would cover it up. They did that repeatedly without any positive result, then they became tired and gave up. These people wanted to extract all the salt from the lake. They said that salt water is different from sand. The sand is the real salt, and they had to extract them all. Without this claypot used to fetch the brine, nothing else will be used to fetch it. You don't use any other thing to fetch mmahi: you cannot use plates or plastic of any kind to fetch the salt water.[16]

[14] Interview with Augustine. June 29, 2025.
[15] Interview with the Fourth Woman in the focus group. July 3, 2025
[16] Interview with Third Woman in a focus group of four female salt makers. July 3, 2025.

These narrators described the supernatural beliefs of the Okposi people over the salt lake and how the resources are meant for the people with stipulated customs and tradition. The Igbo concept of *odinaala* signifies how natural resources like salt lakes and rituals associated with it must exist and serve the people: they should not be taken away from the land in which they exist for use elsewhere. [17] Should there be any form of production, those who have the traditional power and rights to the production must be supported to continue producing the salt in the original forms in which the ancestors were permitted to avoid supernatural attacks on both the tools and the people going against the laws.

In addition, these traditional tales conform with the past beliefs of men who were guarding the lake after its expansion by building walls around it. Although when I went there, there were no walls built around the lake. However, the narratives of the lake guarded by men and walls had been passed down as what happened in the past rather than present. Presently, people must keep the salt lake clean to avoid encountering supernatural forces guarding it, hence I was told by Augustine to pull off my shoes before getting close to the salt water.[18] This incident and traditional belief instantly connected me thoughtfully to the mythological element and motif of Biblical Moses removing his sandals before the burning bush on Mount Sinai.[19] Also, the salt belief of a hunter killing his son to sacrifice for the greater good of the community indicates the relationship between gender and power. Sacrifice reflects gender complementarity in Okposi-Igbo community. While men are responsible for difficult tasks involving protection and provision, women are responsible for nurturing and sacrificing personal desires for their family and community. The myth of a hunter sacrificing his son makes me rethink the Christian Biblical

[17] *Odinaala* means what is in the land. In the other hand, tradition.
[18] Interview with Augustine. June 29, 2025.
[19] Exodus 3:5

story of God sacrificing his only begotten son for the salvation of mankind and Abraham ready to sacrifice Isaac to his God.[20]

Colonialism and Indigenous science of Salt Production

The ongoing conversation of salt production has explicitly shown the indigenous epistemology and scientific inquiry about nature, environment, and survival. Gregory Cajete et. al defined indigenous science as "a product of a different creative journey and a different history than the one of Western science" (2023:92). Production of salt has been an agelong tradition among the Okposi-Igbo women – centuries before they had an encounter with the British colonizers. Not until early 20th century, the Okposi-Igbo women (the major salt producers) in Igbo land had never met any Europeans. That is to say that contrary to widespread notion about European civilization in Africa, certain scientific discoveries have been made by some Africans through their contact with their environment and nature.

As Gloria Snively and Corsiglia John expressed, "indigenous science relates to both the science knowledge of long-resident, usually oral culture peoples, as well as the science knowledge of all peoples who as participants in culture are affected by the worldview and relativist interests of their home communities" (2001:6). Clearly, none of the women I interviewed was educated in the Western epistemology. However, they understood a scientific method and principle like evaporation even without knowing what they meant in Western Science. The concept of using *oba* – dried-calabash to add into a boiling brine to extract dirt and purify the salt is knowledge that springs through oral culture and local practices resulting to indigenous science. The system of applying firewood to boil and process salt matches the

[20] John 3:16

quantity of salt being produced; and the calculation is always correct. How did they learn this process without attending any formal education or contact with foreigners?

This is because tradition, nature, and environment intertwine to create a unique educational system built upon the foundation of indigenous epistemology and science. As a result, a woman in a remote village could fetch water and extract a solid from a liquid without reading the process from any chemistry textbook written by foreigners.

Moreover, several scholars have written extensively on how indigenous science contributes to the advancement of developing countries and societies. For instance, Digby Swift posits that "the extent to which science and technology contribute to the quality of life in developing countries is likely to be strongly influenced by the extent to which indigenous knowledge is employed" (1992:1). He further argued that "a country with limited natural resources and overseas investments can only obtain this wealth by improving the overall productivity of its population (1992:1)." Similarly, the Okposi-Igbo women have improved their quality of lives, family members, and that of their communities through finding solutions to create wealth from indigenous science and technology associated with salt production. Instead of depending on external investments and importation of products like salt, they take advantage of their local realities to solve both economic, cultural, culinary, and scientific problems.

The Place of Salt in Nigerian Civil War and World War II

In addition to the Okposi-Igbo women's contribution to indigenous science of salt production, salt itself is a part of broader Igbo history. While it is produced in a few communities in Ebonyi State like Okposi and Uburu, it represents a cultural memory of the entire Igbo communities who faced shortage of salt during the civil war that broke out in Nigeria between

1967-1970. In a personal communication with elder Onyibe Ekechukwu, he said: "during the war, people came from different parts of Igbo land and beyond to buy salt. Then, women were producing a lot of salt as there was shortage of it across Biafra land." [21] Ekechukwu continued: "Ohaozara became famous, especially our women, because of salt." [22] In support of his view, my mother who traded salt emphasized on how the women contributed to food security and economic freedom during the war by using the proceeds they got from salt to provide food for their husbands who were fighting war and supporting their children. During the war, there was no economic progress in Igbo land as every grown-up male, and even male children, were conscripted into the Biafran army. However, the Igbo women produced and traded salt to raise and support the local economy, thereby creating food security for sustenance. The salt gave women agency and created economic development.

While some women of Okposi and Uburu produced salt, Igbo women from other communities without the knowledge of salt production bought salt from the producers and resold it in their various communities, thereby circulating this materiality across Igbo land. In that way, salt became a widespread business for women across Igbo land, with no bound within a specific community. Salt became synonymous with Igbo women and not only the Okposi-Igbo women but was identified with all Igbo women during the war. Therefore, when salt is mentioned as a commodity, everyone's attention is called to women because without the Igbo women, it would be impossible to have food security at the time when men were fighting for survival.

[21] Biafra was a Republic that seceded from Nigeria and existed between 1967-1970. The Republic was predominantly Igbo. The secession from Nigeria caused a civil war that killed millions of Igbo.
[22] Ohaozara is the local government council in Ebonyi State Nigeria where Okposi is in, including Uburu, another salt producing community and a neighboring town to Okposi.

The role women played using salt during the Nigerian-Biafran War made it significant, and salt symbolizes bravery among the Igbo women. This bravery was on display during the "Ahia Attack." [23] During the civil war, there was absolute restriction of movement in Biafra – Igboland. This restriction included a food blockade policy and economic strangulation. Some Igbo men, women, and children were dying of starvation. However, many Igbo women saw their children dying of kwashiorkor because of lack of nutrients and salts, they risked their lives and through the nights, moved in groups to look for food and salt (Ibeawuchi 2021; Ezedinachi 2025). [24] What was more important at that time was salt because it was the most expensive commodity in Igbo land then (Ubesie 1973). Some people believe that the salt preserved the lives of the Igbo during the war, and that is why it is of great significant to them. But it is not only the salt people fed with during the war. Christie Achebe, a Nigerian scholar of education and Igbo women's history, expressed the role of these Igbo women at this critical time, that "a few courageous ones, disguised as Nigerian market women, surveyed enemy formations and movements, reconnoitered the enemy lines in formal military operations, and then ventured into the occupied territories to procure food and other "survival items" (2010:794). These brave women were not only the economic powerhouse of the Igbo race at a time of conflict, but agents to revive lives, facing existential threat.

[23] "Ahia Attack" is an expression used to narrate attacks women faced where they were struggling to get food across different channels. "Ahia" means market. "Ahia Attack" could loosely be translated as a "market attack." There was food blockade policy by the Nigerian government against the Igbo. Food was scarce and salt became expensive and scarce. Then, the Igbo women risked their lives to source for food and salt. That condition then was called "Ahia Attack," because it was a risky economic adventure.

[24] Kwashiorkor is a severe form of malnutrition caused by a lack of protein in the diet which affected Igbo children during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. It is estimated that millions of Biafran children died of kwashiorkor because of lack of nutrients in the food. Many Igbo believe that lack of salt was the major cause of kwashiorkor during the civil war.

Another factor is that Okposi-Igbo women became famous and rich through salt making. My grandmother was among the women who produced and traded salt during the war. She told me how she trekked with salt on her head from Okposi to Enugu, spending days on the road to have her salt sold. Despite the risk of the war, she made a lot of profit through salt, as did other women. My grandmother bought and own properties in our community – benefits she got from the salt business.

In a personal conversation with one of the female salt producers, she said, "during the war, our people were the only people producing salt. Women from other communities like Amechi, Ameluegu, Mebiokpa, Mebiowa, Umuakuma, Umuka, Mgbom Nechara cooked with *mmahi* during the war." [25] Another Okposi-Igbo female salt producer expanded on this saying, "during the war, our women used to sell salt at Odenigbo market. [26] It was the only market where salt was sold, and people came from different parts of the new country – Biafra, to buy it. We made sales and many women became rich." [27] When the civil war ended in 1970, many Igbo women through their experience in indigenous science and manufacturing of salt helped in rebuilding the region destroyed by war, thereby contributing to nation building.

However, it is worthy of note that salt production in Okposi-Igbo community and its economic contribution to the Igbo society was not only tied to the period of civil war in Nigeria, but also during World War II when there was salt scarcity in the colonial Nigeria. During World War II, Gloria Chuku, a historian, states that "salt became scarce not only in the Igbo region, but also throughout colonial Nigeria during the years due to decline in shipping, wartime maritime

[25] Interview with Mama Eto. June 29, 2025.
[26] Odenigbo is a popular market in Okposi with different historical monuments. It was a major market for slave trade and a major market for salt traders. Women who refine salt take their finished products there, while retailers buy to supply the final consumers.
[27] Interview with Second Woman in a focus group of four women. July 3, 2025.

hazards, and import restrictions resulting from the concentration of British factories on ammunition manufacturing" (2005: 56). I argue that salt scarcity at this point made people to see salt as a treasure because the colonial Nigeria was in search of the commodity, as it became too expensive for consumers, just as gold, silver, and diamond were, to some. Chukwu further argued that "Okposi and Uburu, for once since the inception of colonial rule, witnessed an economic boom in salt and an increase in the number of traders who visited their markets" (2005:56). Different regions within colonial Nigeria who faced scarcity of salt around the 1930s came to Okposi and Uburu market to trade the commodity, for survival and economic advancement. Therefore, salt is highly symbolic in Igbo worldview in connection to economy and surviving difficult times. From the analysis and evidence presented so far, salt production was indeed identified with Igbo women's economic and sociopolitical agency.

Current Salt Production in Okposi-Igbo Community

While salt production has a historical memory tied to the civil war in and World War II in Nigeria, it survived the time through cultural transmission and tradition passed down by women to this day. The idea of salt production began with the existence of a natural water body filled with salt. The salt lake in Okposi-Igbo community is situated outskirt of people's homes and surrounded by trees and vegetation (*Fig 2.1)*. The water is clean and transparent, so that one can see the sand. Whoever wants to fetch it would come to the place it is located and take it to their various homes within the community of Okposi Okwu community, where the salt lake is currently located. Refinement must take place there, while the finished products can be taken anywhere.

The salt at this location (*Fig 2.1)* is invisible except for someone to taste the water and find out. During my fieldwork in Okposi-Igbo community around June and July 2025, I went to the salt lake. Bending over to scoop some water with my hand I could not see salt in any form, but only water. When I drank the water, however, I could taste salt on my tongue. How does this water become solid salt for people to use? What processes do Okposi-Igbo women follow in producing salt today?



Fig 2.1 Mmahi Ezi – Okposi Salt Lake, Ohaozara L.G.A Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Credit: Ogbonnaya Okoro

Old ways of producing salt are similar across different cultures. For instance, the traditional style and technique of producing salt in Deutch is largely the same with the Okposi- Igbo women. In the Deutch traditional salt making, "the peat was then burned; water was added to the ashes and subsequently the ashes were removed from the water and the water evaporated to produce the salt" (Groenenberg et. al, 2025:612). What is constant in comparison of this method with the Okposi-Igbo women is the "burning of peat" and "water evaporated to produce the salt." Again, the use of ashes occurs among some Igbo salt producers. In a survey carried out about salt producers in Igbo land, Chinasa Iwuchukwu et. al (2021:1) stated that "the majority (86.6%) indicated using ash to filter the brine…" This shows that not every salt producer uses ashes,

instead they fetch the salt-saturated water with a clay-pot designed for it, then burn the brine without adding any water. As they burn the brine, the water evaporates and turns into solid salt. While the outcome is similar, the process by which the product is completed is different. Also, the use of ashes to filter the brine among the Okposi-Igbo women seems to be an old practice. When I was engaging a few salt producers, they said they witnessed their mothers and grandmothers doing that, but they do not currently use ashes. The carbon that is part of the ashes purifies the water – ingredient in water purifying tablets and stomach medications. From my observation too, I did not see any salt producer who used ashes to filter the brine. But the practice is part of the Igbo process of salt production which is similar to the old methods practiced in Netherlands and elsewhere.

Ahmed Mushtaque et. al (2003:109) affirmed that "the process involves multiple evaporation and/or cooling, supplemented by mineral and chemical processing." Among the Okposi- Igbo women, the methods of salt production involve extracting the raw minerals – the brine– heating it on the open fire – and distilling it until the liquid turns to solid. I witnessed several women doing this. One of the women fetched the brine from a clay pot and poured the water into a bigger pot, then covered it up (*Fig 2.2)*. The bigger clay pot containing the salt water was placed close to the kitchen for easy accessibility, serving as a refinery. Four tree trunks formed the pillars of small, open-air kitchen, that was covered by some worn-out pieces of roofing to prevent rain from obstructing the salt production. From the bigger clay-pot, she poured out the natural water into a boiling pot.

The boiling pot is made of steel, thick, and round. It had the appearance of a pan, but deeper (*Fig 2.3)*. While the boiling pot containing salt water was placed on three big stones placed in triangular form, functioning as stoves, heavy firewood was placed beneath and set

alight. The fire and heavy heat coming out from the firewood put the boiling pot's contents under pressure. [28]



Fig 2.2 Clay pot used for storing the brine for refining. The salt water is inside it. Credit: Ogbonnaya Okoro

[28] This outdoors's setting makes it possible for the smoke from the kitchen to escape without hurting the women producing the salt. The production does not require a closed-door kitchen, but an open-air environment. Some refine the salt in their compound or in open fields, especially during the summer/dry season. During the Fall season, like when I went there for fieldwork, however, a traditional kitchen is required due to rain which might wet the firewood and make the salt production impossible. As the heat affects the salt, it also affects the producers, hence the need for an open-air kitchen with enough ventilation.



Fig 2.3 Boiling or cooking pot used to produce salt, resting on three triangular big stones in an open kitchen with heated firewood beneath it. Credit: Ogbonnaya Okoro

The chemical in the saltwater produces a substance which is then extracted using a local calabash called *oba.*[29] I saw some pieces of *oba lying* on the kitchen's roof (*Fig 2.4*); when I asked one of the women producing salt what they were used for, she stated: "Those are added into it while processing the salt. The dirt will be absorbed by the *oba* and purify the salt. From time to time, you bring out the oba and add another one. As the salt-water boils in the processing pot, dirt goes straight to the *oba.*" [30] I watched her add some pieces of dried calabash into the production pot. What happened was that the calabash absorbed the dirt and purified the salt for purification. She

[29] *Oba* is a dried calabash carved out for many purposes in Igbo land. Some use it to fetch water and pour into a claypot from the stream. Some carve it in form of a cup for drinking water, palm wine, and other liquid substance like herbs and traditional medicine. However, women who produce salt use the same oba to purify salt and absorb dirt to ensure the finished product is clean and healthy for consumption.

[30] Mama Eto – Okposi-Igbo female salt producers in an interview with the author, June 26, 2025.

removed them, showed me the dirt, then added another calabash into it. As the water boiled, evaporation was taking place.



Fig 2.4 Oba – dried calabash used to absorb dirt and purify salt. Credit: Ogbonnaya Okoro

Evaporation is a fundamental component of the art of traditional salt production among the Okposi- Igbo women. It plays "a key role in the transfer of water and energy from Earth's surface to the atmosphere" (Yannis Markonis 2025:1). Simply stated, evaporation is a process of turning liquid into vapor. The traditional Okposi-Igbo women understood this science while they produced salt by heating up the brine, eliminating the liquid, leaving behind the salt-containing solid. One of the female salt producers narrates about her process: "When we use this claypot to fetch it, we pour the water into this boiling pot that looks like a plate, then we will put firewood under it and light it up with fire. We will keep adding firewood and making sure the fire is sustainable until it dries up. If I keep boiling it and the water is drying up, I will be adding more

salt water into the boiling pot so that I can produce more quantity of salt. When it dries, what is left is crystal."[31]

Thus, these women have mastered the act of using firewood and fire to formulate enough heat to evaporate the water and leave behind the salt components. To increase the quantity of salt production, the traditional Igbo salt makers constantly add more brines to already evaporating water to keep pace with evaporation, which reduces the quantity of the salt's productive outcomes. That means the more heat mounts pressure on the boiling pot, the more the brine dries up; and the more the brine dried up, the more salt is being produced.

Duration of Salt Production

While salt production requires techniques and expertise, timing is also put into consideration. The traditional production of salt takes hours to complete. In a research survey conducted on Igbo women salt producers "the majority 97.2% reported that it takes less than 1 day to produce filtrate" (Chinasa Iwuchukwu et.al 2021:1). In addition to the duration, Peter-Jazzy Ezeh while narrating about the production of salt in Okposi-Igbo highlights that "the final production is by evaporation through boiling in an open fire. It takes about six hours to fully evaporate 20 liters of brine" (2023:374). From my observation, there are no specific hours this process takes. However, the determinant of the duration is based on several factors like availability of firewood, the quantity being produced, and climate conditions. For instance, one of the salt producers I interviewed in a focused group of four women expressed, "If there were a lot of firewood, by this time tomorrow (time was 4:20 PM) I would produce more than 6 pots of

[31] Interview with the author July 3, 2025. She did not give out her name as she wants to be anonymous.

salt water I fetched and poured into the boiling pot. That is if there is enough firewood." [32] Another woman stated that "it takes six or more hours to produce salt. As this has been cooking since afternoon, it will dry up at night. You can fetch ten pots of salt water from the lake and pour it into this boiling pot or pan. Heat the firewood beneath it." [33] These two women, although I met them at different places and time, corroborated each other's story. From their stories, what is determinant of salt production in Okposi-Igbo is firewood. Firewood determines the duration of salt making: the more firewood, the longer production. Thus, you need the temperature to get to 100 degrees Celsius, then you need to at least maintain this temperature.

Unlike in New Guinea where salt is crystallized through "burning salt plants and collect the salt grains from the ashes and charcoals" (Pierre and Weller 2014:16), and other cultures that apply "natural evaporation," the traditional Igbo salt makers only boil the brine. Also, this practice of boiling brine to produce salt is famous in different West African regions, as well as the Zigong and Chengdu areas of China. In Okposi-Igbo community, the process has not changed from the traditional system of using firewood to boil the brine. I witnessed it and participated in adding more firewood while one of the women processed the salt (*Fig 2.5).* From this experience, I gathered the importance of firewood and heat in the traditional refinery of salt.

[32] I used **First Woman** in my fieldnote to identify this woman. It is not her original name as she wants to remain anonymous. She is among the women I interviewed – about four of them in a focus group of salt producers. She is in her 70s. The interview took place on July 3, 2025. Time 4:20 PM.
[33] I used **Mama Uka** to identify her in my fieldnote during an interview with me on July 5, 2025. Time 5:20 PM.



Fig 2.5 I am in the kitchen helping a salt producer add more firewood to help process the salt.

However, in Okposi-Igbo community, the finished salt is passed through a wooden basket for filtering impurities *(Fig 2.6)*. According to Mama Eto, "when the water is dried up in the *ogbonaa* (the boiling-pot), you use this (she shows a plate) to scoop the salt into the basket. The basket will sieve away the remaining water and leave the solid. Then, we bake it into a certain plate designed for it. We will mold it like one molding a block."[34] Another woman narrated: "After boiling the brine and the water dries up, the salt becomes crystal. Then we use a small

[34] One of the famous female salt producers in Okposi community whom I witnessed her producing salt and interview her on June 29, 2025.

stainless plate because *njaagba* is no longer in existence and carve the salt in different sizes for use." [35] In both narratives, crystal salt is carved and molded for the purpose of use. I witnessed this when one of the women was holding a flat stainless-plate, scooping the boiled salt and pouring it into a wooden-weaved-basket. The basket was placed on an empty basin of water or an empty big bowl. When the scooped salt got into the basket, leftover water was sieved through and dropped inside the bowl or basin. The boiled salt will cake inside the basket, from there, the woman was baking them based on different shapes, sizes, prices, and use. I carried the finished salt on a tray as one of the women baked them into sizes and prices (*Fig 5.6)*.



Fig 2.6 An Okposi-Igbo woman holding a stainless plate with particles of salt and wooden-basket used in sieving produced salt. Credit: Ogbonnaya Okoro

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A defunct flat-steel-plate used by Okposi-Igbo women to scoop the completely boiled salt for filtering of impurities and remaining water. The njaagba existed till the late 80s. There was no photograph or image for this cooking pot at the time this fieldwork/research was conducted. It is imaginatively described based on what the female salt producers narrated.



Fig 2.7 I am holding a tray of finished salt after production

Difficulty and Challenges of Salt Production

Salt production comes with heavy tasks and challenges. The system of production, from extracting the brine, walking a distance from the Salt Lake to various homes where the salt is locally refined pose challenges. This, however, is because of cultural and traditional changes that have taken place over the years. In the past, women refined salt around the Salt Lake. There were no provisions for taking the brine out of the lake to refine at home. Instead, there was a local

refinery called *Ewe*. [36] The refinery consisted of thatched-roof, mud house, wherein every process of salt production took place. Women would fetch firewood and other tools they used to produce salt and keep them in the house close to the Salt Lake. After making crystal salt, they would go home and sleep, then return to the site the following day. *Ewes,* however, have long-gone into extinction, and today women fetch the brine with a clay pot, rest it on their head and take it home. It is stressful for them, particularly as many of them are getting old, and the culture of salt has rules in which not everyone is authorized to fetch it. The stress of fetching the salt water from the lake and taking them home for final production instead of refining it around the lake is one of the challenges and difficulties salt makers face.

As Mama John explained, "I am no longer producing salt; my elder sister does." [37] When I tried to understand why she had stopped making salt, she complained about the distance between the Salt Lake and her home as well as her age. The difficulty of distance was sorted out in the past when women refined salt in *Ewe*; but now the hut is no more. It is difficult for women who have been married outside the community in which the Salt Lake is located to continue with the business. One could use a car or other forms of transportation to bring the lake's raw materials home, but this is against the traditions of the people. Only those who have the strength to walk into the lake to fetch the brine could do so. Not everyone has such an opportunity in terms of good health as most salt producers have aged.

Another challenge Igbo salt producers have is the issue of climate, particularly weather conditions. When addressing similar challenge among salt producers in Indonesia, Helmi Alfian,

[36] Ewe is a mud hut roofed with thatch or raffia-mat around the Mmahi – Salt Lake. An ewe has an industrial layout where all the business of salt production takes place. However, they are no longer in existence. The last Ewe is believed to have existed in late 80s and early 90s.

[37] Mama John, one of the Okposi-Igbo female salt producers in an interview with the author, Ogbonnaya Okoro July 5, 2025, Time 2:30 PM

and Masatoshi Sasaoka posit that "salt producers operate with an expectation of some degree of variability in the climatic conditions for production and typically have developed a number of strategies to cope with such annual and inter-annual variability" (2018: 88). The Okposi-Igbo salt producers also know about these climate challenges and are prepared for it. In the past, constant rainfall during the rainy season further justified the establishment of *Ewe* - the local hut where salt production took place. It prevents the rainfall from quenching the fire used for distillation and evaporation because the rainfall causes firewood to be wet, thereby making it impossible to generate heat.

In addition, some notable scholars like Alfian and Sasaoka (2018) had the same view about the difficulty faced by local salt makers in respect to rainfall when they investigated the condition of Sampang people in Indonesia. They explained that rain during salt season is always "fatal" for production of salt, causing low yield of salt as the density of the salt water is affected and the "salinity of condensers and crystallizers" begins to decrease[38]. In this situation, the salt producers will wait a few more days before they start working. Additionally, with respect to the impact of climate change on salt producers in the Philippines, Norma Muyot and Asuncion Cheryl explained that "beyond competition, the biggest struggle salt producers face in salt making is climate change. Sudden rains in summer and extended wet season seriously affect production" (2022: 7). Going by these views, if the rain continues falling, it will affect the quantity of salt production and invariably impact the local economy. Similarly, the Okposi- Igbo salt makers face the same challenges. The June and July months when I carried out my fieldwork were part of the rainfall period. I went to the Salt Lake and observed how the density of the salt

[38] Helmi Alfian, and Masatoshi Sasaoka, "Dealing with socioeconomic and climate-related uncertainty in small-scale salt producers in rural Sampang, Indonesia," *Journal of rural studies* 59 (2018): 88-97.

has been impacted. However, the women devised a means to meet up with this through building a kitchen with enough ventilation at home; roofing it with aluminum zinc as opposed thatch in the past; and having enough firewood to match up the impacted saltwater's density. However, this does not come without a financial burden.

As Mama Eto narrates, "it is easier to produce salt during the dry season (summer) than the rainfall season. For instance, as I bought this firewood for ten thousand naira, you will use it to make a lot of salt. But now we are in the rainfall season, it takes more firewood. Any little thing you do will take more firewood." [39] Other women I interviewed also complained about the cost of firewood. In the rainfall season, there is hardly any sunshine, and firewood is usually expensive because the weather is usually damp. Only those who saved firewood during the dry season sell them during the rainfall season because fetching firewood during the rainy season is difficult and almost impossible. The theory of supply and demand impacts the salt producers because they are willing to buy firewood, but those in possession of firewood are few, and set their prices higher than usual. As a result, the number of women who produce salt during rainfall season always reduces drastically because of the high cost of sourcing raw material - firewood. During the dry season, however, the number of salt producers multiply, because then the density of salt water is stable and raw materials are available. Mama John corroborated with this when she narrates:

> We are eight in number who are still producing salt. But in the dry season, there will be more people because of the dry weather. However, a lot of people are not into business now because it is the rainy season. The rainfall is heavy. Producing salt in the fall season consumes more firewood. Like this firewood you see here, we buy it for 2000 and that makes people run away from it. If it were when fuel was cheaper, I often went to Umuka

[39] Interview with Mama Eto. June 29, 2025

> or Umunuka to buy firewood or pay a commercial driver to convey firewood to my place. That is the problem we have –firewood. [40]

Although gas is currently used by some people in Okposi-Igbo community to cook their meals, firewood is their major cooking source; and only used for salt production. It is hard to source during the rainy season and not easy for salt producers to get firewood in the dry season. These female salt producers travel to other communities to source for firewood and even pay a lot of money to get this firewood delivered to their places. However, it is easier and cost effective to produce salt in the dry season than in the rainfall season. In addition to this, Chinasa Iwuchukwu et. al, in their survey of female salt makers in Igbo land state that "about 63% of the salt makers engaged in salt production during the dry season (2021:1). This indicates that climate conditions heavily influence the productivity of salt production. From my observation, a few numbers of women were active in salt production during the rainy season. They informed me that their number will increase by the dry season.

Apart from the climate change and the cost of firewood befuddling most Igbo female salt producers, another difficulty they face is an issue of replacing their old tools and materials for continuance of salt production. As I observed, some of the tools they used in refining salt are old and worn out. The natural chemical contained in the salt made a hole in the tools. One of the women I interviewed showed me her old boiling pot used in producing salt. It was completely corroded, and the only one left was the one she used to boil salt the day I visited, which was also old (*Fig 2.3)*. Mama Eto – the woman narrates about this challenge:

[40] Interview with Mama John, June 29, 2025

> We need this kind of pot used in boiling salt water. We no longer see it; what we have nowadays is a stainless pot.[41] To get the cooking-pot for salt production is hard. If any of this develops a hole, just as this one (*Fig 2.7)*, we will take it for welding work because we cannot replace it anywhere. Before, we used to buy the main cooking-pot for boiling salt in Eke market. [42] We often got it from a man called John Anoke who has passed. Currently we no longer get the tool. Except you see someone who will travel to Enugu and get it, which is rare because no one knew where John Anoke used to get the pots from. If you use the pot to boil salt and it develops faults, it will create a hole from there. So, the problem is how to get the cooking pot used for refining salt. There is one I used to refine salt, but it is worn out now….

I felt the emotions and frustration in her voice, then requested to see the old boiling-pot and everything she described was true. The boiling-pot had holes all over and looked underneath like a collection of books in the library eaten up by ravenous termites. She only had one cooking pot for salt production and feared that if she lost it to wear-out, she probably might not see any replacement for continuity.



Fig 2.8 Mama Eto holding an old worn-out boiling pot for salt production. Image by Ogbonnaya Okoro

[41] The original ones are cast iron.

[42] Eke is the fourth day in Igbo calendar. The Igbo calendar has four days in a week and each day is a market day with spiritual symbolism. The biggest market is Eke and it runs every four days. That is where Okposi-Igbo women always buy items they need for salt production.

More interesting is how one's death could impact cultural materiality and continuity in respect to salt production. This is evident with the case of John Anoke [43]– the man who supplied these women with the tools they used to produce salt – who is now dead, and they find it hard to get the materials' replacement. Thus, this situation is like the generic assumption of monopoly. When monopoly fails apart, it "hinders healthy competition due to the large barrier to entry, the ability to manipulate pricing, and the hoarding of crucial industry infrastructures such as electrical lines and plants" (Minh Tri Nguyen 2024: 1). This, however, leads to shortage and high pricing of goods because there is less replacement (Aine Doris, 2021). Monopoly has created a problem which has impacted the productivity of salt because if John Anoke had competitors, it would have been easier for the female salt makers to keep getting replacements for their old tools. Now he is dead; a certain element of continuity is gone with him. This further emphasizes how an individual could influence cultural and traditional continuity, and the need to pass down not only cultural practices but trades associated with them.

Cultural Restriction of Salt

However, for traditional continuity, every indigenous product has a body of rules or customs guiding them. Salt production in Okposi community in Igbo land, Southeastern Nigeria is not exempted from these rules. In the case of mmahi there are practices and indigenous rules guiding the salt lake and its production of salt. [44] One of the major cultural restrictions is that the occupation of salt production is gender-based and only women could fetch the brine and produce

[43] John Anoke was a famous trader in Okposi, Ohaozara who sold equipment for salt production. He was known for household items too, and women across Okposi communities recognized him a lot, because he often traveled to other states to source materials which they used in producing salt. After his death, women could not access certain equipment anymore.
[44] Mmahi is what Okposi salt lake is called indigenously.

it. However, men are not allowed to fetch the brine or produce salt. Okposi society practiced division of labor. While men focused on agricultural practices like cultivation of yam, women focused on salt production; through salt making, rites of passage regarding womanhood are practiced. Therefore, salt production is a feminine occupation which also marks a symbolic rite of passage. Marriage is a symbol of womanhood, and only a married woman makes salt. A single woman cannot process salt according to the tradition. In addition, when a woman gets married, she gets initiated into the practice of salt production through training by older women who had been in the business of salt making for years. This marks the transition of women from an incomplete to complete state.[45]

Mama Eto narrates that "a woman must be married before she fetches *mmahi*[46]. Marriage is significant to salt production because it is a sign of responsibility and maturity to carry out tasks as a provider for both family and community. "However, when a woman is seeing her menstrual flow, she is forbidden from fetching it." [47] The Okposi-Igbo women do not fetch the brine or produce salt while in their menstrual period. Instead, they wait after their monthly flow is over before they engage in salt production. When I asked the reason for this, a male informant and a cultural custodian by name Nnadi Ogo stated that the tradition had been passed down from their ancestors, and nobody could state exactly when it was made. Instead, "everyone obeys the custom because nobody dares to disobey the ancestors." [48] His story corresponds with Mama Eto's narrative that a woman in her menstrual flow does not go close to the salt like to fetch the

[45] A single woman in Okposi-Igbo community is seen as an incomplete woman until she gets married and have children. Marriage is the customary mark of completeness. Similarly to men too. Men are seen as complete men when they are married and have children. The culture recognizes both gender as complete when married but incomplete when single. Marriage is a prerequisite for salt making; and salt making is a type of womanhood.
[46] In this context *mmahi* means salt brine.
[47] In interview with Mama Eto June 29, 2025.
[48] Interview with Nnadi Ogo, a traditionalist in his 80s who performs sacrifices in a shrine called *Oduogo.* June 29, 2025.

brine and produce it. The reason I would later find to be that women who are in their flow are traditionally seen as unclean and should not infiltrate the salt water with their blood.[49]

However, there is a contrast between the narratives given by the female salt producer – Mama Eto and a male traditionalist – Nnadi Ogo. Nnadi Ogo for instance stated that the tradition forbids any woman who is still in the stage of childbearing from fetching the brine and processing the salt. According to him, a woman must have completed her childbearing before she ventures into the business of salt production. However, Mama Eto expressed that a woman who is still bearing children can fetch it. The two basic rules are: she must be married and must not fetch the brine when she's seeing blood. Seeing this from a gender perspective, Mama Eto's narrative is more realistic because she has been in the business of salt production for decades and she is a woman – the occupation is for women; while Nnadi Ogo is a man whose view of salt production is from an etic perspective. Nevertheless, both informants agreed to a common cultural restriction of salt production when a woman is seeing her monthly flow.

Another cultural restriction of salt forbids people approaching the Salt Lake with footwear. I approached the salt lake with my shoes on, because on the day of my visit, there was a heavy downpour which made the ground muddy and slippery. The moment I got closer, Augustine, a commercial cyclist I hired, who accidentally turned to my tour guide and informants instructed, "it is against the tradition of the land and the Salt Lake to wear your shoes. Don't wear it beyond that spot; remove your shoes." [50] I removed my shoes but became more inquisitive to ask why I must remove them. He continued: "That is the tradition from the days of

[49] Blood is sacred in Igbo tradition and spirituality. Women who are seeing their menstrual flow are categorized as unclean and not permitted by tradition to practice certain rituals until after their cycle is over.
[50] Personal communication with Augustine. June 29, 2025. Augustine is in his 50s. A commercial motorcyclist who conveyed me from place to place in Okposi and assisted in organizing women I interviewed. He also became an informant during my fieldwork at the Salt Lake.

our ancestors. *Mmahi* has rules." [51] The salt lake is pure and clean; therefore, wearing footwear could pollute it because cleanliness and purity are parts of the labor tradition of salt production. This rule is made because salt is a source of life, and every local food contains salt. Thus, it could be poisonous to have a leg stepped on dirt into the salt lake. "Can I drink it?" I asked. He said yes. I bent over – but without shoes – scooped some with my bare hands into my mouth and drank it. It was salty, chilled, and refreshing. But another cultural restriction of salt was given by Augustine: as a man, I was unauthorized to leave the lake with even a drop of salt water. I could only drink salt water there but not take a drop of it out of the premises.

Furthermore, the rule of salt also states no woman could fetch the brine with a plastic bowl. There is a particular claypot designated for it. In the past, the rule stated that once the brine was fetched, it must be passed through open fire for evaporation. This has changed now; the *Ewe* is no longer there. Women now fetch the brine and take it to their various homes to process, and no form of production is done in the surrounding of *mmahi* – salt lake. This emphasizes the indigenous dynamic rules existing in salt production. In addition to the claypot used in fetching it, a well carved calabash is used to scoop the brine. Another bigger calabash can also be used to fetch it home. Most traditional customs guiding salt are observed and obeyed at the lake. Whoever defaults pays a fine to the community.

Usage of Salt: Traditional Medicine and Healing

While salt gives taste and nutrients to food, the *mmahi* – salt produced by women of Okposi – is beyond a spice used to garnish food but a means of traditional medicine and healing

[51] Interview with Augustine. June 29, 2025

[52]. In retrospect, when I was growing up and had stomach pain, my mother took a pinch of salt and added it into a glass of water and asked me to drink. I could remember how better I felt afterwards. This stimulated my interest in understanding the magic of this salt and how it constitutes healing. Unlike other iodized and non-iodized industrial salt, many Okposi-Igbo people use this traditional salt for healing and as a form of traditional medicine. “This salt is also called *unu Igbo*. [53] It cures all kinds of upset stomach better than industrial salt. But you must add a little pinch of it into a cup of water, turn it with a spoon, and drink.” [54] I also witnessed others applying this method to heal their stomach or for detoxification.

The medical uses of the salt are not only for detoxification and upset stomach. The salt heals other dangerous infections and sicknesses. For instance, Mama Eto claimed that “the salt is used to cure elephantiasis, and it is a strong traditional medicine.” [55] I was curious to know the process by which salt could be used to traditionally heal elephantiasis. She continued, “when one contacts elephantiasis, the salt is added into hot water and used to wash the surface of the elephantiasis." [56] This traditional way of boiling hot water and adding salt to clean the surface of elephantiasis is claimed by the people to be an effective healing method. Furthermore, this salt does not serve only as a source of food but a way in which various illnesses can be healed traditionally without orthodox medications. To corroborate my personal experience of drinking salt-contained water served by my mother when I had stomach upset, Mama Eto explained that “when one has their stomach upset, this kind of salt is added into the water for the person to

[52] *Mmahi* used in this context means the indigenous salt produced in Okposi-Igbo by women.
[53] *Unu* is an Okposi dialect for salt. The standard Igbo word is *nnu.* So, *unu Igbo* means Igbo salt. This separates the salt from other industrial salt not produced by the Okposi-Igbo women.
[54] Interview with Margret Ogudu, my mother. July 2, 2025.
[55] Interview with Mama Eto. July 29, 2025.
[56] Interview with Mama Eto. July 29, 2025.

drink; after which the stomach pain or diarrhea will stop." [57] This traditional healing and medical technique are widely adopted by many within the Okposi-Igbo community.

In addition, another female salt producer in her claim about the potency of the indigenous salt states, "this salt, if you keep it in in your house or office, or you lick or drink from the salt water, whoever has bad intentions for you will suffer the same thing they wish for you." [58] A male elder, Onyibe Ekechukwu expressed similar view stating that produced salt is used for spiritual cleansing and it wards off evil spirit and reverse aura. [59] This portrays the view that the indigenous salt protects one from bad people and cleanses away bad aura, returning one's intentions be it positive or negative. I asked the woman if the salt retains its healing power now, another woman who was also in the focused group said, "even now, it cures all types of sickness."[60] The third woman in the focus group supported the first and second woman, saying, "if you live in the city for instance and someone poisons you– now you are here – if you drink the salt water from the lake, you will vomit the poison." [61] From these points, the people of Okposi view the indigenous salt beyond a cooking ingredient but with a lens of spirituality and medicine, traditionally produced to heal different forms of sickness both physical and spiritual. The use of indigenous produced salt to heal in Okposi is not a thing of the past, instead, the tradition is still in practice till date where people apply it into their water to drink, as a way of healing themselves from stomach upset of all forms.

[57] Interview with Mama Eto July 29, 2025
[58] Interview with First Woman – what I used to identify a woman in a focus of four because she chose to be anonymous. July 3, 2025.
[59] Interview with Onyibe Ekechukwu, an elder in his 90s. July 6, 2025.
[60] Interview with Second Woman – what I used to identify a woman in a focus of four because she chose to be anonymous. July 3, 2025.
[61] Interview with Third Woman – what I used to identify a woman in a focus of four because she chose to be anonymous. July 3, 2025.

Additionally, Salt is an essential nutrient. While it is the king of food condiments, it also functions as a means of preservation. When Igbo people look at salt as an object, they envision other interpretations of it. For instance, salt is added to raw food to preserve it. I used to see my mother grind *egusi* — melon seeds used to make soup and add salt to it. This happens when one is not using the melon seed to cook immediately. If melon seed is kept for days without adding any form of preservatives, it will develop a foul smell and spoil. But if dried under the sun without being ground, there is no need for preservation.

When food is preserved through salt, it has no side effects, unlike some modern chemicals. However, it is not only on ground food items that salt is used for preservation. When added to cooked food, it helps to protect the food from getting soured. That means salt keeps food longer.

Also, some people grind raw food with salt, as I witnessed. They did this by placing the seeds for soup on a flat and heavy grinding stone, then they used another small smoothen hand-stone to grind it. One of the fascinating scenes I witnessed was peppers being ground that way. Salt was added to pepper, and they were ground together. When I interrogated the reason for this, I was told that salt helps to reduce the hotness of the pepper in the food and give it another flavor. Some Igbo people add crayfish, together with pepper, salt, and onions to give their meal another flavor. The functionality of salt in this form is beyond flavor but also has a sense of history and identity.

Sense of Identity and Recognition

Salt is a part of the identities of the Okposi-Igbo community, and very significant to the image of Ebonyi State – one of the states in southeastern Nigeria with a motto: “Salt of the

Nation." It is important to note that the salt produced by women in Okposi gives the state a symbol and national recognition. Nira Yuval-Davis et. al. in addressing a place of woman in both "ethnic and national communities" state that women are "signifiers of ethnic/national differences as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction, and transformation of ethnic and national categories (1989:7). In addition, Yul-Davis et.al. reemphasized the importance of women as "reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups" (1989:7). When Ebonyi state is mentioned, people think about the salt, and at the same time, the women of Okposi who produce salt. Okposi-Igbo women are not only reproducers of culture, but they provide care, healing, and spirituality through their labor.

On the other hand, the women who produce the salt are identified and recognized through their skills and crafts. "Fetching the firewood and making of the salt are the key economic activities for women in the traditional division of labour here" (Ezeh 2023: 374). By "here," Ezeh is referring to the women of Okposi-Igbo in Nigeria. These women are recognized through their occupation– salt production. When I was growing up, I listened to my grandmother, Obaji Nwaigbo Unegwu telling me stories about the salt she produced. [62] Before I was born, she was honored with the highest traditional titles for women at the time because of her economic strength which she mustered through salt production before she diversified to other trades. She told me how she bought a horse for my father – which was an act of honor and a sign of accomplishments and social status only a few men could attain at the time. The news of her action spread to the community and till date, people remembered her for her industriousness and the economic agency which her involvement in salt production accorded her.

[62] She died in 2010 at 120. She told me a lot of stories about salt production and trade, including war, precolonial, and colonial stories when I was a child.

Outside this reflexivity, one of my informants narrates how her occupation as a salt producer endears her to people. “In the past, the wife of the then Governor of Ebonyi State, *nwunye* Elechi sent for me. [63] I took the salt I made to Ichu (Isu) where they were, and we met. [64] I made some profit because I always sieve mine and refine it to be clean.” [65] One may wonder why the First Lady of the state sent for only this woman whereas there were other female salt producers. She narrates that she carefully makes her salt to be clean through different processes of purification. This may set her salt apart from others, but it might also be that someone who may have bought the salt in the past had spoken to the First Lady about her. Through that connection, her occupation was recognized.

Furthermore, several journalists, researchers, filmmakers, and content creators have traveled far and wide down to the Okposi community to get information from these female salt producers, thereby recognizing their occupation. Some salt producers narrated how the recognition of their occupation and people making inquiries about their work make them feel special and give them a sense of belonging. “We produce salt today, not for the sake of money, but preserving the tradition we inherited from those who came before us.” [66] Many of these women today are no longer producing the salt as a means of livelihood, but a way to preserve their traditions handed down by their forebears. While they appreciate certain recognition they receive, they expressed their hope for political support through the possibility of Intangible Cultural Heritage, then their occupational recognition will be completed.

[63] *Nwunye Elechi* means Elechi’s wife. She was the First Lady and wife of the Executive Governor of Ebonyi State, Martin Elechi between 2007-2015
[64] Isu is a town in Ohaozara Local Government Area of Ebonyi State. It is a few kilometers away from Okposi where salt is produced.
[65] Interview with Mama Eto. June 29, 2025
[66] Interview with Mama Eto: June 29, 2025

In this chapter, I have presented the data and analyzed the history of salt production in Okposi-Igbo community and how women are vehicles and medium of culture across history and time (past and present). Also, I discussed why salt production is a women dominated trade which gives them intangible economic power; the process of salt making and the significance of salt. In the next chapter, I will explore the women roles in colonial resistance through salt production.

III

Colonial Disruption of Women's Trade in Igbo Land and Resistance through Salt Production

Introduction:

This chapter explores the relationship between colonialism and gender in Igbo land. It explains the concept of gender and gendered labor in precolonial Igbo society and how Igbo women were vehicles of cultural export through trades and salt production. For a long time, these women held unto their traditions – both political and economic power – passing down traditions of salt making and other trades until colonialism tried to disrupt them. This chapter analyzes how traditions of salt making and trades became action of resistance as women continued making salt despite colonial obstacles; and how the Igbo women keep the salt market open as vehicles for a medium of culture.

The Economic and Political Power of the Igbo Women in Precolonial Era

Precolonial Igbo society recognized flexibility in gender roles. Kaneme Okonjo, a sociologist opines, "Igbo societies typically had a "dual sex" system of governance within which each sex generally managed its own affairs and had its own kinship institutions, age grades, and secret and title societies" (1976:47). Women were of great importance to the system through their involvement in economic and political leadership (Chuku, 2004). This power of agency stemmed from their occupation and creativity. The Aro cultural group of the Igbo even once had a female king known as Nnenne Mgbokwo Udo Omini Oke Nnachi, who reigned between the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This Aro cultural group of Igbo extended across all

nooks and crannies of Igbo land at one point. There are Aro descendants in Okposi and Uburu where salt is being produced.

In addition to material culture as a means of power control, the Igbo women exercised power through women organizations (Chuku, 2004) and leadership. For instance, the western part of Igbo land had *Omus* – female leaders with powers. The *omu* oversaw female leadership, and they had their palace like the male monarch while presiding over women's economic and personal matters in the market and community. Also, these omu had the responsibilities of settling economic disputes in the market. Similarly, the Okposi-Igbo women had their leadership structure through a hierarchy based on age. Age is an indication of experience, and the more time one has practiced salt making, the more influence one has over others.

To emphasize on leadership position of traditional Igbo women were the *umuada.* *Umuada* is a political structure based on lineage, a society that combines daughters of the same kinship, divorced, married, widowed, or single with the power to make decisions that affect women in their homes. *Umuadas* settled any marital dispute between a husband and his wife. "As individuals and as a group, their contributions as farmers, civil workers and managers of human welfare are central to the ability of households, communities and nation to tackle the challenges of poverty and conflicts" (Obasi and Nnamani 2015: 256). These *umuada* coordinate with each other to ensure that women's needs in the community are met. In Okposi-Igbo community, they also have "unyom," which is slightly different from *umuada*. It is a linguistic umbrella that collectively housed all the women married in the community. However, in the specific villages where salt is produced, these women are qualified to produce salt while determining the market cap.

Therefore, the perception of gender in a traditional Igbo setting is not completely male dominance. Instead, there is gender role and labor where women dominate some trade, while men dominate other trades. For instance, pottery production, cloth weaving, mat making, salt making, active participation in agricultural production, food processing, craft and industry, and marketing are dominated field by Igbo women, while the Igbo men dominated industries like blacksmithing and wood carving (Chuku, 2004: Chuku, 1999). The men's trades are more physically and energetically demanding.

This kind of gendered labor exists in other parts of the world, too. In Mattiyarenthal village in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, for example, growing chile pepper was an occupation of women while men "prefer to take on the agricultural jobs that involve finances, such as supervising and selling, leaving the menial, labor intensive jobs to the women" (Kamala, 2026). In this village of India, the nature of the chile pepper and the demanding work discourages men while women see the chile as "a godsend" because of the profit they make. However, while there exists similarity in terms of gender division between the Okposi-Igbo salt production and chile pepper farming in Mattiyarenthal village, the reasons contrast. For instance, in Igbo land, men do not engage in salt production because they do not see it as labor intensive. In fact, the Igbo believe that difficult work is for men while soft work is for women. The tradition of salt production and salt as an object is categorized under food and kitchen which the Igbo believe belong to women.

The concept of Odoziaku, which functions linguistically like "Mrs." in the Igbo language, means "one who manages wealth." The wealth here symbolizes family properties: food and

financial management. The traditional process of farming such as tilling the land, making the mounds and other difficult jobs are done by Igbo men, while women only support in weeding the unwanted grasses, cultivating feminine crops like cocoyam, and growing vegetables. Then, after the harvest, women take care of the food in terms of preparation and commercial duties. Therefore, while men provide, women prepare and manage. This ideology is found in the myth surrounding the *mmahi* Salt Lake in which a hunter – a man, discovered the lake and performed a sacrifice with his son. The real work has been done, then passed unto the women to process the food – salt. In Igbo land too, selling of food products was women's trade. Even after yam and other men's crops are harvested, women are engaged with selling them in the market. Precolonial Igbo women controlled the market and economy, thereby holding onto economic and political powers which opposed some Western notion about gender suppression in African patriarchy society. Hogan, Patrick Colm expressed about the precolonial Igbo women that "the freedom and power of women had quite significant, and certainly went far beyond anything known, in say, nineteenth-century England" (1999:47).

Mary Modupe Kolawole argues that "in addressing gender in Africa, historical and cultural contexts are fundamental" (2002:92). Understanding the cultural contexts of gender study helps to escape certain "misconceptions." To key into this argument, one should note how the West understands gender is different from the way Africans do, particularly the Igbo. I agree that male dominance is understood to be the idea behind patriarchy. I also argue that Igbo society is a patriarchal, but the concept of patriarchy within the Igbo worldview is different from the West because the Igbo traditional and political structure balances gender roles and labor

This gender equilibrium in terms of labor existed in Igbo land until the arrival of the British colonizers who brought about the "local development policy" that targeted men and

discriminated against women (Korieh, 2001). The imposition of colonial control weakened the economic and political power of Igbo women and their traditional autonomy (Chuku, 2004; Van Allen, 1972). Colm stated that "it was only with the coming of European colonialism that the status of women in Igboland declined" (1999:47). But how have Igbo women and their crafts, including salt production, survived the colonial rule and recontested their agencies?

Salt Production as a Part of Colonial Resistance

Colonialism brought drastic changes to the Igbo gender position and economic landscape. Historically, the British colonizers ruled Nigeria through a system of indirect rule which was unsuccessful in Igbo land because the Igbo had a decentralized system. "The colonial policy of indirect rule in Nigeria was a system of administration through which the British governed by utilizing indigenous rulers as intermediaries rule over the colony" (Goji et. al., 2025:68). While the Hausa and Yoruba (two other major ethnic groups in Nigeria) had a centralized government through *Oba* and *Emir*, the Igbo had no king but ran an egalitarian system with a leadership structure through kinship called *umunna*. Therefore, it was difficult for the British Government to have a total control of the Igbo region, including its traditions and trade. To fill that space, the colonizers forcibly imposed Igbo men on others as their kings for the sake of tax collection. These men were called "the Warrant Chiefs."

In going to the markets to collect tax, the British government discovered this commerce – including salt – across Igbo land was controlled by women, and not men. The commercial dominance of women was a challenge to the colonial government, because the women refused to pay tax. How can a stranger come to their land to impose taxation on their sweat? The Igbo women's disobedience of the colonial order led to the British government using force on them

(Afolabi and Akeen, 2022; Uchendu and Okonkwo, 2021; Ndubuwa and Oko, 2021; Van Allen, 1975; Van Allen 1972). To resist this force and taxation, the Igbo women staged a protest which led to what is popularly known as the Aba-Women's Revolt of 1929. The Igbo women who were involved in the revolution fought against the men who were the representatives of the British colonizers, the Warrant Chiefs. This revolution became the first women's colonial resistance in Nigeria. Thus, the collective nature of Igbo women's participation was reimagined as colonial resistance.

Despite the colonial impact on changing the gender relations in Igbo land, certain trades such as salt production resisted the pressure and remained a female dominated industry. For instance, the Igbo-women have been continuously producing salt to this day, although a very small percentage of people are in the business. However, salt at this point is not just a means for gaining profit but also a form of resistance to cultural erasure and a threat of colonialism. The production of salt, for these women, aims at ancestral reconnection to foster cultural memory. Salt is not just a spice, but a way of life and a symbol of survival and cultural continuity is maintained through gender roles.

Women in Igbo worldview symbolize generation and reproduction. Nduka, Udeagha, and Nwamah Ozioma stressed that "The feminine gender by nature is sanctioned with the chief responsibility of reproduction. The female body is formed and fashioned by Chineke (God the creator) to carry pregnancy, give birth, breastfeed and nurture babies" (2019:277). Without these female biological roles, it will be impossible for any society and culture to exist. Therefore, women are the symbolic vehicles, transporting culture from generation to generation; and one of the ways they do it is through language. As Mama Eto mentioned in an interview that, "when we are producing salt, we sing. We also share stories." These stories they share include folktales and

legends. To teach the younger women the process of salt making, it requires linguistic knowledge and experience from older women. Therefore, language in this form is a tool for nurture, containing all elements of expressive culture.

Cultural Continuity and Change

Several scholars have described cultural continuity as a dynamic narrative contextualizing disconnection and reconnection of culture in its ongoing form (Monique, 2016; Flynn and Ledoger., 2014; Hunter et al., 2006; Lecero, 2010). In this journey of cultural disconnection and reconnection, changes take place. This kind of contextual change depends totally on both generations to which a certain tradition is passed down: how they accept it, how they perceive it, and how they practice it for sustainability.

Salt production among the Okposi women in Igbo land is a practice handed down from generation to generation. While the culture of salt production has existed for centuries, I am analyzing what people told me about the occupation and what I observed during my fieldwork. To reconnect with the salt making culture, some young people watched their mothers and other women in the community process salt, but they could not participate because it is a ritual only permitted by cultural restriction to be carried out by married women in a form of rite of passage. When one of the women I interviewed was processing the salt, I saw some younger girls watching her, and I asked if they could assist her or engage in the production, she replied:

> They can learn by watching me and understand the process, but they cannot fetch the brine from the salt lake and process it until they come of age and get married. At this

> point, they may only assist me by washing some of the tools I am using to work or help me in gathering firewood.[67]

From my observation and opinion of this woman I interrogated, the continuity of salt production exists through a method where young people watch older people carry out the business of salt making. They see and know the process. Young girls can go to the salt lake; some do go with their mothers and other neighbors. The only difference is that they cannot fetch the brine or process it, but they can learn the process through observation. Thus, continuing this tradition of salt production when they are of age and enter what the locals call the stage of a "complete woman."

In contrast, some women did not learn about salt production through observation from childhood. The reason was because their part of Igbo community or family had no salt tradition, but they learned the process and the culture through marriage to a family whose occupation was salt making. Mama Eto is in this category when she recalls:

> I learned salt making from my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law in the olden days taught me when they used *njaagba* to cook it. After refining it with *njaagba,* they would take it to Odenigbo – market designated for it. Only in Odenigbo market, the salt was sold and not in Eke Okposi. People came to Odenigbo to buy, then took the salt to Ukawu and other places to resell.[68]

Stepping back, one can see that she learned salt making through her mother-in-law which shows that marriage is a tool for cultural continuity in the context of salt production in Igbo land. Marriage does not serve only the purpose of procreation and preservation of family lineage but accompanies kinship and lineage with cultural practices and material cultures associated with a

[67] Interview with Third Woman. July 3, 2025
[68] Interview with Mama Eto: June 29, 2025

family tradition which is passed down. In that spirit, the older women would teach their daughter in-laws how to make salt, thereby transferring the tradition from generation to generation. When these daughters-in-law have their own daughters who are married within the community where the salt is produced, they teach them the system of salt making as well. On the contrary, if they have sons, they will wait until they get married, then teach their sons' wives how to produce salt to continue their legacy. The legacy of salt production through family lineage in Okposi-Igbo is preserved via women and not men. Women in this context serves as vehicles for cultural continuity in respect to salt production, from generation to generation.

While the continuity of salt making is preserved through marriage as exemplified by Mama Eto, there is also a change in the style of continuity as I observed today. This happens when some young women married into various families known for salt making are not interested in the business. The reason relates to modernity and mobility. A lot of young people do not like to stay permanently in the village; instead, they prefer living in metropolitan cities where the tradition of local salt production is unknown. Instead of using the indigenous salt to cook, they use industrialized or imported salt. This reality brings about a change in how the practice of salt making is preserved. However, some young women remain living in the communities where salt is produced or marry within the communities and learn the process of salt making. According to some members of the community that I conversed with – the number of such women have declined compared to decades ago.

In addition to this change, I remember when I was growing up in the village, I used to see women from different communities as early as 5:00 am, with a claypot resting on their heads,

and heading to the *Mmahi* Salt Lake. Those women came from communities such as Ukawu, Ugwulangwu, and Umuka. They would go there, fetch the brine and produce the salt in *Ewe* – a hut built around the Salt Lake where the salt was refined. When I turned a teenager, I was no longer seeing the same women. Most of them were old and could not walk some distance again, while some were dead. However, the tradition was not passed down through those women as their children had focused on other trades, education, and white-collar jobs. In my community, Umuka for instance, there used to be some female salt makers like my grandmother; but today, there is no single salt producer in the Umuka community. The few people who are still producing salt today in Okposi are some women who live in proximity to the Salt Lake in Okposi-Okwu and Mgbom, and some are found in Uburu.

Another drastic change in the tradition of salt production is the tools in which the salt was produced with. Most women I interviewed mentioned *njaagba.* Njaagba was a round thick pan used for boiling salt. I have not seen it and the pictural evidence has been documented, but I used my imagination to picture it the way the women told me about it. *Njaagba* was a famous and only tool women used to make salt. According to some people I engaged in conversation, the last time they saw it was in the 1980s. Despite the absence of *njaagba*, the women improvised another means for continuity of salt making by using another thick pan that looks like a stainless water-basin. This implies that, while lack of material or tools for local manufacturing can bring about change, this change can be incorporated back into the tradition.

Also, purifying salt through traditional methods continues to be sustained. Mama Eto and other women I had personal conversations with talked about *oba* – dried calabash. They add the

broken calabash into the boiling brine to absorb dirt. While they take it out after the dirt has accumulated, they add another one until they are done with production. Every new salt maker is learning to adapt with such indigenous science.

Furthermore, Mama Eto's experience of being taught the production of salt by her mother-in-law includes the use of broken calabash, a practice that has not been changed. But while her mother-in-law took the salt to Odenigbo market for end users and resellers, she also highlighted that Odenigbo market was the only market designated for the purpose of salt. It was known as a salt market. This narration of Mama Eto is in correspondence with what my grandmother used to tell me about Odenigbo market. She used to sell her produced salt in Odenigbo market before and after the civil war (1967-1970). But Odenigbo is no longer a designated salt market as the market ceased to exist for decades except in the cultural memory of the Okposi-Igbo community. The women now sell the produced salt in other markets without breaking the local customs which in some decades ago could be frowned at.

However, in the past, the indigenous salt used to be the only salt used for both food and other traditional belief systems in relation with healing, but today, industrialized and imported salt has saturated the market which sidelined the indigenous salt. Some now use the salt on rare occasions but not as their usual cooking spice. This lack of patronage has impacted the quantity of productivity and discouraged the local producers, who mostly supply salt based on custom orders and not for mass production, as it used to be. On another hand, orthodox medicine now replaced the belief system of using indigenous salt to heal certain illnesses like elephantiasis and diarrhea.

Additionally, culture and traditional practices are dynamic. While the traditional refinery for production of salt around the lake called *Ewe* has gone extinct, that did not stop the continuation of the tradition. Instead, the salt makers devised a means to continue the craft of salt making in their various homes, while maintaining other local laws associated with salt. Nobody sleeps around the salt today like before, and nobody watches after the salt lake like before; yet the craft is still active, and, through stories and beliefs, the members of the community obey the rules of the land even when nobody watches them. That further illustrates the continuity of both the belief system and indigenous norms by some members of the community, despite the cultural dynamics resulting from modernity.

Furthermore, I witnessed different changes in production methods. Earlier I discussed how the current tools used for production are modern compared to those used in the ancient time contained in the oral history; however, while certain tools like *njaagba* (boiling pot) have gone extinct, some old traditional tools like hand-made baskets from the palm trees are still in use today. The boiling pot has changed from what it used to be to another set of modern pots because its production lacked continuity. When the craftsmen died, the creative materiality died with them. However, the absence of such continuity gave rise to change and adaptation of new tools which are currently used to continue the production of salt.

Another interesting observation is that certain old tools are still preserved from ancient times, without any apparent form of change. As I observed, some clay pots used in fetching and storing the brine are not modern and hardly get old or worn-out. They are mostly handed down in a form of traditional material culture from a mother to her daughter or daughter-in-law. This act

of cultural sustainability preserves family tradition and shares deep stories of the lineage history of salt production. In addition to this, some of the women I interviewed corroborated this idea by sharing how they retained certain production tools from their mothers-in-law and mothers who passed down the tools to them.

The act of passing down cultural materials is folkloric as a form of artifact which "acknowledges its historicity and attests to its durability and utility for human beings" (Robert Georges and Michael Jones, 1995:59). However, one can be engaged in folkloric activities through preservation of artifacts without knowing that. For instance, the female salt makers in Okposi Igbo are just living their everyday life by sharing their historicity in the form of material culture. They see salt production as an aspect of their identity and what their forebears did and passed down to them without thinking of any "ism" attached to it. While outsiders may see their activities and indigenous science as a big deal, these women use different lenses to view through their work. But their actions in continuous salt production mark resistance to colonial cultural erasure.

Economic Change

Globalization has played major roles in the transformation of economic structure. As Miles Kahler noted, "globalization has undermined the traditional definition of economic security that centered on economic vulnerability to other states" (2006:1). The contemporary structure of salt making in Igbo land is impacted by economic vulnerability.

In the past, salt was the main occupation of Okposi-Igbo women which served different purposes. The tradition of salt making gave Okposi-Igbo women economic and political agency

as they contributed widely to the social, political, and economic growth of the community. Before, during, and after the civil war in Nigeria, the Okposi-Igbo women produced, distributed, and consumed the local products which ensured financial circulation within and outside their community. But today, there are drastic changes in this economic structure.

While salt production was the major source of economic growth among women in the past in Okposi community, a lot of women no longer see that as a full-time job. Many have moved into other trades and farm work; some are educated and working; others are living in various cities outside the community where the salt is situated, and some see the practice as primitive and not worthy of the modern woman. These factors and many more have made it impossible for many people to engage in the business of salt making. However, a handful of people are still preserving the tradition. For instance, when I interviewed Mama Eto about the number of women who are still producing salt in her community, she said:

> We are eight in number who are still cooking it. But in the dry season, there will be more people because of the dry weather. Therefore, a lot of people are not into the business now because it is the rainy season.[69]

From Mama Eto's narrative, my observation, and discussion with others in the community, there are not as many people producing salt as a full-time job as there used to be. The more they create awareness, the more patronage, and the more patronage, the more economic advantage. However, this is not the reality of modern Okposi-Igbo women regarding salt production. Only about eight people were active during the rainy season when I visited; others focused on other businesses while abandoning the salt business. But during the dry season, more people would

[69] Interview with Mama Eto: June 29, 2025

join – but not as much as in the past. This creates a shortage in the financial circulation of the industry.

While many Okposi-Igbo women used the profits they made from salt to purchase land, own properties, support their household, and to train their children, it is almost, if not totally impossible to do that today. This is because some no longer consider salt production as being a "good job." I figured this out through my observation and interaction with the locals. For instance, when I asked Mama Eto about the willingness of the younger women today to learn and preserve the tradition of salt making, she said that "a businessperson will not have the time for it, except some of us without a good job." [70] While I would consider her view as an acknowledgement of humility on one hand, I consider it a sign of admitting to the current economic situation of indigenous salt making. A few decades ago, nobody would playfully consider salt production in Okposi-Igbo as not being "a good job," because some believe women who engaged in the art were among the richest demographic in the society. My grandmother, who took traditional titles because of her economic strength through salt making and agriculture, would not be regarded as having a good job. However, the modern view of salt making as not having a good job comes through the cultural changes in which colonialism and globalization transformed.

Colonialism brings about ideology that opposes indigenous industriousness, while globalization promotes capitalism and competition. Except for some people who attend universities and work in the office, hospitals or schools, they do not consider themselves as

[70] Interview with Mama Eto: June 29, 2025

having a "good job." A good job in this context implies working a foreign job introduced by the European colonists. Some members of the community have assimilated this ideology and see everything about themselves as primitive, including the production of salt and usage of it in their meals. This brings about cultural change, impacting the continuity of salt making in the Okposi-Igbo community. Thus, many indigenous people abandoned their tradition of salt making and local economy to seek jobs in the cities, leaving the skills for older women whose products are no longer valued as most people patronize what they see as foreign salt which they believe is superior to the indigenous resources because the "Whiteman" produced it. [71] The summation of this reality negatively impacts the female salt makers like Mama Eto who, despite her efforts in improving the local economy, still believes that her hours of work spent in making salt means not having "a good job."

However, when I assured Mama Eto that her job was valuable, that I had traveled from the United States of America to engage with her and learn from her, she was excited and said: "But I am famous for the trade. People know me everywhere because of salt." This shows that despite the change in patronage and belief of salt production, there is a consistent unique recognition of salt makers. In line with this, film makers and digital content creators are meeting with these women, interacting with them and making their voices heard – that is a tremendous change compared to the past when there were no digital platforms and means of preserving this tradition. A lot of information has been lost about the tradition because of lack of proper

[71] Whiteman is what many Igbo or Nigerians often used to describe a European or Caucasian. It is synonymous to a foreigner or used in the context of colonialists. When addressing a European colonist, many Nigerians always mention Whiteman. It is a translation of the Igbo word "onye ocha" – someone who is white. But in this context, a white colonist or foreigner who produces things imported to Nigeria.

documentation which is different today where the practices are being documented for young people who may want to venture into the trade in the future to learn, improvise, and continue with it through innovations, so that they can compete with the global market.

Religious and Belief Change

The Igbo religion is rooted in their tradition and culture. Chukwuma Okeke, Christopher Ibenwa, and Gloria Okeke noted that "Religion in Igbo traditional society partakes fully of all the features of world traditional religion, including its beliefs, sacred myths, oral qualities, strong appeal to the hearts of the adherents, high degree of ritualization, and possession of numerous participatory personages such as officiating elders, kings, priests, and diviners" (2017:2). The Igbo style of religion includes all the oral traditions and set of beliefs elders pass down. The myths, folktales and beliefs associated with salt production are aspects of Igbo religion.

However, this religious belief of the Igbo has been faced with a rival from a foreign religion – Christianity. When Christianity arrived in Igbo land in 1857 (Nwadike 2002), it created a contrasting ideology which contradicts the Igbo traditional belief system. Certain practices, rituals, and traditional beliefs of the Igbo are seen through the Christian lens, i.e., as idolatry. While the Igbo traditional religion initially resisted the demonization brought by Christianity, the Igbo embraced mostly Christianity, and this has affected the continuity of the belief system associated with material cultures like salt making. For instance, the people of Okposi-Igbo through traditional tales believed that a hunter discovered the *Mmahi* – salt lake while hunting and communicated with the salt goddess who demanded human sacrifice. The man

sacrificed his only son to ensure the expansion of the salt lake. Some of these traditional oral histories and myths as I observed, have been questioned by some Christian converts who believe that salt production is a trade of unbelievers and tied to idol worshipping. To some of them, any belief in goddesses and supernatural beings outside of the context of Christianity is demonic. Therefore, some women who were deeply in the trade of salt production, observing the traditional laws, and rituals associated with it abandoned it because it did not conform to their new belief system.

Furthermore, the traditional belief like removing footwear while fetching the brine has been recently misread as idol worshipping as the arrival of evangelical groups created a greater number of these accusations. The original practice of removing footwear had nothing to do with worshipping the salt-water goddess of *Mmahi,* but keeping the environment and water clean from contamination. After all, in ancient times, people walked barefoot with no sandals or any form of footwear. The culture of the Igbo wearing footwear developed recently through contact with Europeans. Therefore, it is unfounded to assume the removal of footwear while fetching the brine is paying obeisance to the idol. But this is what some Christian converts believe in within the community. These contradictory beliefs as I witnessed caused division between the traditional religious believers and Christian believers. This division negatively impacted the production of salt, its consumption, and larger scale continuity of local salt making because most of the Igbo are Christians.

Some estimated the population of the Igbo who are Christians to be 98% (Joshua Project). When the majority no longer believe in their tradition but see them as inferior, the

continuity of certain cultural practices and beliefs will face a hurdle. This is tied back to the effect of colonialism in Igboland, which Hogan, Patrick Colm expressed that "...under the colonial rule, Igbo women were systematically deprived of all forms of autonomy…they lost their livelihood, their cultural practices (replaced by far more rigidly patriarchal Anglo-Christian practices) and their political position" (1999:47). I argue that colonialism which brought Christianity in Igbo land did not completely make women lose their livelihood, but the belief, power and agency associated with their trades are impacted. For instance, Christian belief admonishes women to be under the leadership of their husband through total submission. [72] This colonial legacy changed the traditional setting and positionality of Igbo women where they had respect for their husband and still in control of their own political and economic autonomy. But despite these changes, the practice of salt making is still ongoing in Okposi-Igbo community as a form of resistance, medium of culture exchange, and re-contestation of economic and political power as women still dominate the local industry.

In this chapter, I have argued the economic and political position of Igbo women in precolonial era where they maintained their autonomy and dominated certain trades like salt production and market leadership. These political and economic autonomy have been disrupted by colonialism which brought drastic changes and imposed power on Igbo tradition. But despite colonial control and its legacy, the Okposi-Igbo women, and broader Igbo women through their crafts and market traditions resisted by continuously engaging in open salt market and being

[72] Ephesians 5:22-33

medium of culture exchange across generations. In the next chapter, I will conclude by restating on the purpose and importance of this study.

IV

Restatement of Purpose and Importance of Study

Salt production is a material culture-based and gendered labor practice of Okposi-Igbo women which predated the 19th - 20th centuries' British colonialization of Nigeria. Salt making here is not just an occupation, but a mark of identity projecting women's strength, power contestation, and economic leadership in a world dominated by men. Although male dominance in Igbo traditional setting accounts for certain physical labors such as blacksmithing, hunting, and farming, women dominated mat making, salt making, and food processing. Among these trades, salt production is the most significant occupation among Okposi-Igbo women and, by extension, Igbo women from other communities, because of its historical, cultural and social significance.

Salt itself, here, symbolizes economic, historical, and cultural memory beyond a spice added to food for taste. For instance, during World War II, there was a shortage of salt in colonial Nigeria which made salt an expensive commodity. The shortage arose because the imported salt introduced by the colonists was suspended as attention was focused on winning the war. Nigerians had to solve their food problems at the time without relying on the foreign salt. The salt produced by Okposi-Igbo women became famous, attracting people from other parts of Nigeria to travel to Okposi and Uburu to buy salt. This trade not only enriched Igbo women but showed the economic power and value Okposi-Igbo women had in the society. Women from other parts of the country joined the trade as well. While the Okposi-Igbo women produced the salt, other women distributed it to their various communities. This economic structure was

successful in times of crisis because the Okposi-Igbo women already had the skills and traditional practices in place for managing the salt, before the arrival of the British colonists.

Another instance that reinforced the value of salt as a symbol of survival is the Nigerian-Civil War that lasted between 1967-1970. A food blockade – a policy designed by the Federal Government of Nigeria against the Biafran region – and millions of Igbo starving to death. While the Igbo men were struggling to protect lives and properties, the Igbo women embarked on food production to sustain the lives of their husbands and children. Salt at this point became a priceless commodity. Okposi-Igbo and Uburu women focused on mass production of salt, while many Igbo women from other parts of the defunct Biafra risked their lives amidst the civil war to look for salt. They engaged in an economic expedition called "Afia Attack," through the forests and bush paths, to buy salt from Okposi and Uburu, and resell to other women in their various communities who in turn, used it as a part of food for survival. Therefore, salt was not just a source of income, but a means of survival for the Igbo, in which women played a vital role.

The cultural significance of salt in Nigerian history is associated with Ebonyi State, where Okposi salt lake is located. "Salt of the Nation" is an expression that echoes with ethnic pride, referring to the fact that salt which is produced in this region by women gives the nation (Nigeria) its flavor. Contrary to some scholarly arguments about gender in Africa and how patriarchal societies promote male dominance and supremacy, I argue that whereas Igbo is a patriarchal society, the interpretation of patriarchy in this context is different from Western ideology. Igbo traditional society recognizes differentiated gender roles. While men have their trades, women also have their trades and dominate the industry. Salt production is one of the industries Igbo women dominate. As mentioned earlier, the roles of these women during the

World War II and Nigerian Civil War are what gave them both their economic and political agencies. The cultural memory of these events gives meaning to the expression.

Furthermore, salt production in Okposi-Igbo community reflects an identity which is transmitted generationally. Okposi-Igbo women who produce salt teach their female children and daughters in-law how to make salt. There are secrets of salt making that an uninitiated person will not know. To pass down the tradition, it takes a process of family history and initiation of other women married into the community where the salt is produced. The epistemological transmission of salt production includes indigenous science, materials, timing, understanding of the taboos, and market values. The idea of gender roles in Igbo land contrasts with the generalization of patriarchal society as male centered.

The Igbo traditional society is patriarchal but permits women to have both economic and political power. The *umuada and omus* are Igbo leadership institutions where women take care of their affairs. Markets in the world of the Igbo are for women. In western Igbo even today, the *omu* is a woman leader of markets. The *Omu* female leadership structure survived the colonial power that changed gender relations in Igboland. The British colonists encountered gender, economic, and political resistance in Igboland as their system of indirect rule failed. When the colonists discovered that the Igbo women oversaw the market, it was difficult for them to collect taxes and influence the markets. It was easier for them in Northern Nigeria where there was an *Emir*, and Western Nigeria where there was an *Oba*. Meanwhile, it was difficult for them in Igboland because the Igbo had no king or any centralized system of government. This challenge made the British colonists nominate some Igbo men and impose them upon the population as leaders under the title of "Warrant Chief." One of their responsibilities was to tax women in the market who oversaw the Igbo economy. However, the Igbo women resisted and fought back in

an event known as the Aba Women's Revolt. With this history in mind, I argue that male dominance of the market leadership – as it is today – in Igbo land, is a colonial invention and legacy. Patriarchy as an ideology of male dominance and supremacy in the realm of trade and market leadership is un-Igbo-like but instead was introduced to the Igbo as a colonial legacy. Christianity is another colonial legacy in Igboland that influences the dynamics in understanding of gender and power. Under this religious system, women are taught to be submissive, and men are leaders. This ideology discontinued the gender equilibrium in terms of the division of labor which existed in Igboland prior to the colonial era. Traditional salt production in Igboland, however, resisted this gendered colonial influence, as women were the only ones producing salt and determining its market value. But the legacy of colonialism and modernization still impacts how salt is produced, who produced it, and its usage today. Despite these changes, I argue that Okposi-Igbo women are vehicles for medium of culture.

These arguments are important because they demonstrate how folklore and gender studies can intersect to aid in understanding the underrepresented voices in society. Gendered labor exists across world cultures. The study of Okposi-Igbo women salt producers and what the salt means to them contributes to the scholarship of both folklore and gender studies. The arguments also contribute to academic debates on how gender and labor is understood in the African context. This is the future direction of this work.

Limitation of this Work

This thesis is written with recognition of some limitations. First, little has been published about the Okposi-Igbo women and salt production. Therefore, getting materials and recent works published on the topic makes it difficult to cite more scholarly materials in my analysis and

argument. I worked to overcome this limitation by engaging in a fieldwork project where I intended to gather as many primary sources as possible. On this note, I faced another limitation. I had in mind to interview at least 20 female salt makers, but I ended up interviewing 8 women. Unfortunately, I went to the field site during the rainy season when the number of salt producers declined. The number of women who were producing salt at the time I went there for my fieldwork were eight. These women said that during the dry season, more women will embark on the production of salt. For me to have more people to interview, timing and weather is important.

Another limitation was that I did not interview Uburu female salt makers but could only focus on Okposi ones. I did mention Uburu in some places in this study. Uburu is another salt community sharing a boundary with Okposi. Its salt lake is also called *mmahi,* but it rests across the river and easily gets dried. The Okposi salt lake never gets dried, in part because it is bigger. The Uburu and Okposi salt lakes tend to be mentioned together when discussing salt history in Igboland. However, this work limited the discussion to Okposi-Igbo. In the future, I will expand my fieldwork to include the Uburu salt makers and go during the appropriate season, so that I will have more women to interview. It is also important to note that both Uburu and Okposi salts are produced by women, and they share similar salt cultures and rituals. However, given that I identify as a man, I have limited access to women's knowledge on salt production.

Theoretical Implication

While this study draws on a hermeneutic framework to understand salt production beyond its economic value, but focusing on the interpretation of human lived experience and its meaning as texts, the analysis is limited to that aspiration as it is not fully realized. This is because hermeneutic tradition incorporates many more first-person narratives, emotional

textures, and embodiments of experiences. Although participants shared their experiences in relation to salt production – the process, history, myths, oral tradition – the analysis focused more on thematic interpretation, colonial, historical, and social dynamics rather than affective, sensory, and emotional experience. Therefore, embodiments remain underdeveloped in this study. This study is better understood as a developing project, aspiring toward hermeneutic tradition rather than fully developed hermeneutic embodiment analysis.

Hermeneutic analysis is not limited on interpretation of textual meaning but lived experience of participants. Incorporating many more first-person experiences, emotional expressions, sensory, and descriptive body movement would have strengthened the interpretation of this work and allow the voice of participants to directly and continuingly shape the analysis of the study.

Salt production is interpreted not as a material culture, but as an experience of identity, survival, inheritance, resistance, and intergenerational practice. This contradicts the assumption that labor is only economically motivated. While the economic importance of salt produced by Okposi-Igbo women cannot be completely ruled out, the cultural meaning of salt and its interpretation of gender participation and cultural memories are significant.

Furthermore, the findings suggest the interpretative relationship between Okposi-Igbo women and their environment. The Okposi-Igbo women, through their experiences, dialogue with their environment by understanding the weather conditions and the process of salt making. Also, through interaction with their environment, the Okposi-Igbo women have local customs and taboos to keep the salt lake clean. Such rules like removing the shoes while fetching the briny water and fetching with some designated clay pot underscores the level of relationship in terms of sanitation between the women and their environment. Theoretically, the traditional

practice of salt production by Ọkpọsị-Igbo women is understood through their interaction and experience with their environment, and how their worldview shapes such relationship.

This study contributes to discussions associated with hermeneutic phenomenology especially as it relates to the African context where cultural symbols, tradition, worldviews are analyzed with a view of decolonization. This suggests that experience varies. While Africans experienced colonization, the Europeans did not. Therefore, the interpretation of texts and the meanings in this study are based on what the salt means to the Igbo and their experience.

The findings project salt production as both a metaphor and object of identity, women's economic and political power, resistance, ethnic pride, and practical world of experience in which the Ọkpọsị-Igbo women understood themselves by promoting cultural continuity and maintaining their relationships with labor, place, and tradition. Through this method, they regain their power and agencies which colonialism and modernism impacted.

Political, Economic, and Social Implication

Precolonial Igbo society practiced gendered labor division. Each gender dominated certain trades. While men dominated blacksmithing, women dominated salt production. However, the colonial impact changed the occupational, political, and economic trajectory of the Igbo. While women in the past controlled trade, markets, buying and selling, such practice has changed, and today men are in charge in most Igbo communities, including the Okposi-Igbo. The state government collects taxes from the markets, and the leadership structure has changed.

In the case of Okposi-Igbo where salt is produced, the number of women who used to produce salt in the past have reduced. The reason is because they lack institutionalized support as the leadership system has been influenced by the colonial legacy of which the current

government is part of. The implication is that lack of support from the government impacts the production and economic benefits associated with the indigenous salt. However, to ensure the culture of salt production is maintained and sustained, this study presents the following recommendations:

1. The government of Ebonyi State or Nigerian Government should give the women financial support to encourage them to keep producing this salt. Many of these women today are no longer producing the salt as a means of livelihood, but a way to preserve their traditions. Therefore, one of the ways the government could assist is through getting them equipment as some of the salt makers complained of the corrosive wear of their tools.
2. The government could support an Intangible Cultural Heritage designation for traditional salt making. A Mini-museum about the salt tradition and the wars — both World War II and Nigerian Civil War – should be constructed. The *mmahi* site will teach history and how salt provided economic and political support in times of crises. This museum will impact the next generation and promote cultural, indigenous, and historical epistemology.
3. The Ewe— which was an old refinery built across the salt lake in Ọkpọsị-Igbo, and no longer in existence could be rebuilt by the government. This will attract more tourists who will visit and watch the women process salt around the salt lake, as it used to be in the past. Through this means, the female salt producers will get the recognition they truly deserve. It will also motivate them to train other younger women who will keep passing on the tradition to the next generation.

4. While the government should provide support to women, the leadership of the salt and the traditions associated with it should be left to the women's decisions. This positions women to regain their agency.
5. The Government could also support funds for documentary film making.

Considering the above recommendations, salt is very important in daily lives of, not only the Igbo, but the world. Through government support and modern technological innovations, empowering the Okposi-Igbo women will create vibrant economic viability, as salt will be distributed across Nigeria and beyond. Taking this type of action creates the possibility of a sustainable cultural, social, and economic community. It also helps women to regain fully their economic and political autonomy disrupted by colonial legacy.

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