

## The Role of Cultural Symbols in Crime Prevention: A Case Study of Nembe, Bayelsa, Nigeria

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### Abstract

**T**his study investigated the role of cultural symbols in crime management within Nembe, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, focusing on how these symbols influence behavior and community cohesion. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of Cultural Criminology and Symbolic Interactionism, it aims to explore the dynamics between cultural practices, perceptions of crime, and safety. Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study sampled 130 participants through purposive and judgmental sampling, incorporating Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) for data collection. Key findings reveal that cultural symbols, including the revered Ekine Society, the Ogidiga deity, and masquerades, effectively deter criminal behavior by embedding community values and enforcing collective norms. Participants highlighted that extramarital relationships are seen as taboos, invoking spiritual consequences that influence conduct. Additionally, cultural festivals enhance community bonds, fostering collective responsibility towards crime prevention. Despite the positive impacts, concerns about rigid community expectations were noted, indicating that fear of social judgment may hinder crime reporting. The study recommends that local leaders be involved in crime prevention initiatives, more cultural events be organized, and educational programs introduced to enhance understanding of cultural values' significance in crime management.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Symbols, Crime Prevention, Symbolic Interactionism, Cultural Values, Nembe*

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## **Background to the Study**

Crime management is a critical area of research that seeks to understand the factors influencing criminal behavior and develop effective strategies for crime prevention and control. One significant factor that has gained attention in recent years is the role of cultural symbols in crime management. Cultural symbols encompass a wide range of elements, including language, music, art, trust, social capital, violence, and public art, which have been found to influence crime rates and crime prevention efforts in various contexts (Adeleke, 2017). Cultural symbols are viewed as the shared representations or expressions of a community's values, beliefs, and traditions. These symbols shape the cultural environment in which individuals live and can have a profound impact on their behavior, including involvement in criminal activities (Kerr, 2002). Drawing from Kerr's (2002) viewpoint, cultural symbols, such as language and music, play a significant role in shaping criminal behavior among youth. Kerr (2002) further suggested that the cultural expression of language and music can either deter or promote criminal activities. Suffice to say that when cultural symbols align with pro-social values and norms, they foster positive behavioral patterns and discourage engagement in criminal activities. However, when cultural symbols promote violence or antisocial behavior, they may act as contributing factors to criminal behaviour (Ogadi et al., 2012). Another critical aspect of cultural symbols in crime management is the influence of trust and social capital. In communities with strong social capital, characterized by high levels of trust, reciprocity, and collective efficacy, crime rates tend to be lower (Rosenfeld, 2009). Trust and social capital serve as cultural symbols that promote cooperative relationships, social harmony, and a shared sense of responsibility for community safety. These cultural symbols can create an environment that deters criminal activities and facilitates crime prevention efforts.

Violence, as a cultural symbol, also plays a significant role in crime management. Cultural acceptance or glorification of violence can contribute to a higher incidence of violent crime within a particular community or society. LaFree and Drass (2002) explored the relationship between cultural symbols associated with violence and gender differences in violent crime. The study suggests that addressing cultural symbols that promote violence, particularly in relation to gender, is crucial for effective crime management strategies. Furthermore, public art installations serve as cultural symbols that can contribute to crime prevention efforts (Holmes, 2009). Public art encourages community engagement, enhances public spaces, and creates a sense of collective ownership. When embedded with positive cultural symbolism, public art can transform the physical environment, promote a sense of security and reduce crime rates.

In Nigeria's multicultural context, traditional cultural symbols and belief systems rooted in communal cohesion, respect for elders, shared responsibility, and spirituality influence behavior and crime management. The traditional justice system relies on customs, rituals, and community leaders to resolve conflicts and promote rehabilitation, reconciliation, and deterrence (Eze, 2012). Similarly, Nembe in Bayelsa State of Nigeria, specific cultural symbols help maintain social order and deter crime. The Ekine Society upholds justice and enforces ethical standards, with its judgments serving as a deterrent (Iwarimie-Jaja & Raimi,

2019; Ikine, 2019). Masquerades embody ancestral spirits, instilling awe and discouraging crime through fear of spiritual retribution (Alagoa, 2020). The Olowu/Traditional Chiefs command reverence and uphold law, order, and cultural traditions, reinforcing accountability (Alagoa, 2009). These symbols reinforce cohesion, ethics, and peace in Nembe.

Previous studies have explored culture and crime broadly. For instance, Adeleke (2017) focused on cybercrime and youth culture; Akinbola (2014) examined criminal gangs in Lagos; Akinyemi and Dayo (2016) dealt with juvenile offenders and cultural norms; Alo (2015) ventured into crime, culture, and corruption; Ayodele (2019) extended this further by examining the same phenomenon within Yoruba and Igbo societies; Eze (2016) and Babamale (2018) studied community perspectives on culture and criminality; Nwangwa and Okoro (2017) focused on traditional punishment; Ojo and Akintayo (2015) looked at juvenile offenders; and Olawale and Awosusi (2018) examined the role that socialization plays in culture and criminality. While previous studies highlight culture's role in crime, they do not specifically examine how cultural symbols influence crime prevention strategies. Existing studies lack focus on the specific cultural symbols, practices, and beliefs in Nembe that could shape crime prevention. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring Nembe's unique cultural nuances to develop culturally sensitive and effective crime prevention interventions that leverage cultural symbols for community safety and well-being.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Traditional Cultural Symbols in Nembe***

The cultural symbols of a community play a significant role in preserving and promoting its identity and heritage. In Nembe kingdom, several cultural symbols are used to express their cultural heritage and informed identity. For instance, Egbe-Isambe (Masquerades). Among the diverse cultural symbols in Nembe, masquerades hold a prominent place. The Egbe-Isambe are distinct masquerades known for their elaborate costumes and performances during festivals and special occasions (Raimi & Ekpenyong, 2011; Oyedele, 2018). These masquerades embody ancestral spirits and serve as a form of entertainment and religious expression. Another notable cultural symbol within the Nembe kingdom is the Egeri (War Canoe). The Egeri is a traditional war canoe used by the Nembe people. These canoes, often adorned with intricate carvings and symbols, represent the prowess and courage of the community in times of war (Idigo, 2016). The Egeri serves as a symbol of unity and strength for Nembe warriors. Also, the Ekine society is a secretive and revered institution within Nembe culture. It is composed of initiated men who are entrusted with maintaining the spiritual and social balance of the community (Osokane, 2015). The Ekine society employs various symbols, such as masks and sculptures, in its rituals and ceremonies to convey spiritual messages and teachings.

Furthermore, the traditional attire of the Ijaw people, including the Nembe communities, holds great value as a cultural symbol. The vibrant and intricately-designed fabrics, such as the "George" wrapper, showcase the unique aesthetics and craftsmanship of the region (Uzairue, 2019). Wearing traditional attire is not only a representation of cultural identity but also signifies respect for the heritage and customs of the Nembe people. Nkali (Traditional

Pottery), is another significant integral part of Nembe culture for centuries. Nkali, the traditional pottery of Nembe, serves functional and symbolic purposes (Emmanuel et al., 2020). These handmade clay pots are used for cooking, storage, and ceremonial rituals, representing the practicality and artistic skills of the community. Hence, the traditional cultural symbols in Nembe hold immense importance in preserving their identity and heritage. They serve as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge, history, and values to younger generations. By actively promoting and protecting these symbols, the Nembe people ensure the continuity of their customs, traditions, and distinct cultural practices. Therefore, it is noteworthy that these traditional cultural symbols in Nembe, Bayelsa State, represent the rich history and heritage of the community. From the Egbe-Isambe masquerades to the Ijaw traditional attire and Nkali pottery, these symbols deeply connect individuals with their roots and contribute to the cultural diversity of the region. Recognizing and preserving these symbols is crucial to maintain the cultural fabric and identity of Nembe society.

#### *Cultural Symbols and Criminal Behavior*

As previously mentioned, cultural symbols reflect the values, beliefs, and norms of a society. These symbols can play a role in shaping individual and group identity, and they have the potential to influence behavior, including criminal behavior. From previous perspectives, there is existence of influence around cultural symbols and criminal behavior. For instance, Johnson (2017) argues that cultural symbols can serve as both motivators and inhibitors of criminal actions. Furthermore, Jones and Brown (2019) emphasize the role of cultural symbols in shaping subcultures and the behaviors associated with them. To substantiate these perspectives, Smith & Williams, (2018) noted that cultural symbols can vary widely based on factors such as ethnicity, religion, and region. These symbols can include clothing styles, body modifications, music genres, and other forms of cultural representation. For example, the wearing of certain gang colors or displaying gang-related tattoos can be indicators of affiliation with criminal activities within specific subcultures (Smith & Williams, 2018). Please note that cultural symbols can provide individuals with a sense of identity, belonging, and status. They may also establish boundaries and social hierarchies within a community (Johnson, 2017). Therefore, the adoption of certain cultural symbols associated with criminal behavior can act as markers of rebellion, defiance, or a desire for power and control (Jones & Brown, 2019).

Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge that cultural symbols do not directly cause criminal behavior but rather play a role within complex social contexts. Factors such as poverty, marginalization, peer influence, and individual characteristics interact with cultural symbols to influence criminal choices (Jones & Brown, 2019; Raimi & Bieh, 2020). Researchers must consider these multiple variables when studying the relationship between cultural symbols and criminal behavior. So, cultural symbols can both motivate and inhibit criminal actions, depending on the context and subcultural meanings attached to them.

#### ***Role of Cultural Symbols in Community Cohesion and Crime Prevention***

Community cohesion refers to the social bonds and connections between individuals within a community. It encompasses shared values, norms, and a sense of belonging. In the context of

the Nembe Kingdom, community cohesion plays a fundamental role in preserving and transmitting cultural symbols, which are essential components of the community's heritage. Within the Nembe community, various cultural symbols hold deep significance and act as communicative tools, reinforcing social norms, and preserving collective memory. Eze M. (2018) highlights the importance of traditional festivals, such as the Nembe Parrot Dance and each community's sacred python, as cultural symbols that strengthen community cohesion. These festivals foster interaction among community members, enhance social bonding, and create a sense of pride and unity in Nembe identity. In addition, Ikine, (2019) pointed out that the relationship between community cohesion and cultural symbols in Nembe is mutually reinforcing. Cultural symbols promote community cohesion by providing shared experiences, strengthening group identity, and fostering social integration (Ikine, 2019). In another study by Ogbegbe and Okolo (2020) suggests that the passing down of cultural symbols through generations strengthens intergenerational bonds and helps maintain tradition, thereby promoting community cohesion. Elders act as custodians of cultural symbols, transmitting knowledge and ensuring their continued practice.

Additionally, cultural symbols serve as a source of resilience during difficult times. In their study, Johnson and Olowu (2017) found that during periods of conflict or crisis, cultural symbols acted as a rallying point for the Nembe community, promoting solidarity and collective action. Overall, the Nembe community's cultural symbols significantly contribute to community cohesion by fostering unity, identity formation, and intergenerational connections. Cultural symbols, such as traditional festivals and sacred artifacts, serve as a means of social integration, preserving collective memory, and sustaining cultural traditions. Percy & Farrington, (2018) posited that Strong community cohesion enables the development of informal mechanisms of social control, such as peer surveillance and neighborhood monitoring. These informal structures enhance crime detection and reporting, making it difficult for criminals to operate covertly (Percy & Farrington, 2018). Similarly, the study by Sampson et al. (2015) indicates that communities with high levels of trust have lower crime rates, as residents are more likely to report suspicious activities, cooperate with law enforcement, and actively participate in crime prevention programs when trust and open communication among community members are strong. As for Wickes (2019), community cohesion fosters social support networks and interventions that aid in preventing crime. Close-knit communities are better equipped to provide resources, mentorship, and positive role models, reducing the risk factors associated with criminal behavior, particularly among vulnerable youth. Kelling & Coles, (2018) also noted that when a community is cohesive, residents are more likely to implement target hardening techniques, such as installing security systems, forming neighborhood watch groups, and implementing proactive safety measures (Kelling & Coles, 2018). These efforts act as deterrents, making potential criminals think twice before engaging in criminal activities. Suffice to say that while community cohesion plays a crucial role in crime prevention, some challenges must be addressed to enhance its effectiveness. These challenges include social inequalities, community fragmentation, and limited resources in disadvantaged neighborhoods.



### **Cultural Dynamics of Crime Prevention**

Crime prevention programs are essential in maintaining public safety and reducing criminal activities within a community. An understanding of the cultural dynamics influencing crime prevention is crucial for the development and implementation of effective strategies. One important aspect of cultural dynamics is the influence of cultural values on crime prevention strategies. Cultural values encompass societal beliefs, ideals, and goals that shape people's behaviors. These values can either support or inhibit crime prevention initiatives. For instance, cultures that prioritize individualism might focus on personal security measures rather than collective crime prevention efforts (Morash, 2020). Another essential aspect of cultural dynamics is collective efficacy. This refers to the sense of shared responsibility and trust within a community. It plays a significant role in crime prevention as communities that foster trust and cohesion tend to invest in proactive measures to prevent criminal activities. A study by Sampson et al. (1997) found that neighborhoods with high levels of collective efficacy displayed lower crime rates due to their effective informal social control mechanisms. There is what is also referred to as culture and crime hotspots which tend to emerge in certain areas due to a combination of various cultural, social, and economic factors. Cultural dynamics can influence the formation and maintenance of these hotspots. Schuurman et al. (2018) found that neighborhoods with high crime rates had specific cultural characteristics, such as a tolerance for deviant behavior and a lack of social cohesion. Understanding these cultural dynamics can assist in tailoring crime prevention strategies to address the unique needs of high-crime areas. Additionally, in multicultural societies, the diverse cultural backgrounds of individuals require crime prevention strategies that acknowledge and respect cultural differences. Effective programs must be culturally sensitive and inclusive, considering factors such as language barriers, religious practices, and cultural norms. This can be achieved through community engagement, cultural awareness training for law enforcement, and collaboration with community leaders (Wooditch, 2020).

Lastly, the influence of broader social, economic, and political factors on crime prevention efforts such as societal norms, legislative frameworks, and public support play critical roles in determining the success of crime prevention strategies. A study by Flewelling et al. (2012) demonstrated that cultures with stricter gun control laws experienced lower firearm-related crimes. In any case, cultural context highlights the significance of considering legal and policy frameworks in designing crime prevention programs. Therefore, the cultural dynamics of crime prevention encompass a variety of factors, including cultural values, collective efficacy, crime hotspots, cultural diversity, and cultural context. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective and inclusive crime prevention strategies. By acknowledging cultural differences, fostering collective responsibility, and tailoring approaches to specific communities, crime prevention efforts can be better tailored to meet the needs of diverse populations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts the Cultural Criminology perspective by Jock Young (1997) and the Symbolic Interactionism theory by George Herbert Mead & Herbert Blumer (1930s-1940s)

as frameworks for guidance. Cultural criminology emphasizes how cultural symbols and meanings shape criminal behavior. According to Young (1997), cultural expressions, such as music, art, and media representations, play a significant role in forming perceptions of crime. This perspective allows researchers to delve deep into the social and cultural context that informs crime, illustrating how certain actions are justified or condemned based on cultural interpretations. For instance, the way society views certain subcultures can influence criminal behavior associated with them. If a group's cultural practices are misunderstood or marginalized, individuals within that group may engage in deviant behaviors as a response. Thus, cultural criminology helps unpack the complexities behind criminal behavior by highlighting the impact of cultural narratives on individuals' actions (Young, 1997).

On the other hand, Symbolic Interactionism focuses on the meaning's individuals ascribe to symbols and how these meanings affect their interactions and behavior. George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer emphasized that people act based on the meaning things have for them, which are developed through social interactions (Blumer, 1969). This theory posits that crime is not merely an act of breaking the law but is also a socially constructed phenomenon influenced by shared meanings. For example, symbols such as gang signs or specific styles of dress can carry distinct meanings that inform individuals' identities and behaviors. Symbolic Interactionism helps explain how these meanings are negotiated within social settings, guiding how people interpret their reality and subsequently respond to it (Mead, 1934). This insight is critical for understanding how individual behavior in the context of crime is influenced by social interactions and the subjective meanings assigned to cultural symbols.

Bringing Cultural Criminology and Symbolic Interactionism together enriches the analysis of how cultural symbols influence criminal behavior and societal reactions. Cultural Criminology provides the broader illustration, illuminating how society's cultural narratives shape the perceptions of crime. In contrast, Symbolic Interactionism dives into the individual level, exploring how personal interpretations of those cultural symbols affect behavior. The combination of these two theories allows for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between culture and crime. For example, when exploring a community where youth engage in gang-related activities, Cultural Criminology helps articulate how media representations and societal attitudes toward gangs contribute to the youth's identity formation. Simultaneously, Symbolic Interactionism sheds light on how individual members within that community navigate, interpret, and enact those identities based on interactions with peers.

### **Research Methods**

This study employed a qualitative research design using the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to examine the relationship between cultural symbols and crime management in Opu-Nembe, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. IPA was selected for its capacity to explore how individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to their lived experiences (Bourdieu, 1984). The approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, beliefs, and practices regarding cultural symbols and their role in crime prevention, while

foregrounding the subjective voices of community members within their socio-cultural context. The research was conducted in Opu-Nembe, one of the largest communities in Bayelsa State, notable for its rich cultural heritage, distinct dialect, and diverse ethnic composition. The community's historical interactions and evolving cultural practices provide a relevant setting for analyzing how traditional symbols intersect with contemporary crime dynamics and community safety mechanisms. The study population consisted of approximately 95,000 residents of Opu-Nembe (National Population Commission, 2022). A purposive sample of 130 respondents was drawn using purposive and judgmental sampling techniques to ensure representation of key informants with firsthand knowledge of cultural symbols and crime management. Participants included community members, cultural custodians, traditional leaders, and law enforcement officials selected for their specialized expertise and experiential relevance to the research question (Cresswell, 2013).

Data were gathered through 30 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and 10 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) comprising 100 participants, supplemented by non-participant observations. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure consistency and depth across interviews and discussions, allowing for the exploration of diverse perspectives on cultural symbols, local norms, and crime prevention practices. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and themes relating to the types of cultural symbols present in Nembe and their contribution to crime management. This method enabled a systematic interpretation of how cultural symbols shape perceptions of crime, inform prevention strategies, and reinforce community safety and cohesion.

## Results

**Theme 1:** *Cultural symbols, practices, and beliefs in Nembe that are relevant to crime prevention efforts.*

As captured in the literature review, cultural symbols, practices and beliefs are relevant not only in terms of crime prevention but also any socially affiliated endeavors. As Taylor (1871) clarified, culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Suffice to say that this definition affirms the significance of symbols as a people recognized capability that shapes the world around them including the management of criminal activities. In line with this understanding, one of our participants identified certain cultural symbols and practices that exist in Nembe and contribute to crime prevention efforts. According to this participant;

*Here in Nembe, we have series of cultural values and symbols that helps to tame criminal tendencies or activities. For instance, it is a taboo and considered a criminal offense if a man should have an intimate sexual affair with a married woman. In the event of this kind of eventuality, the land is considered a sacred artifact that works against such individuals until they confess and carryout certain cultural rituals to avert the consequences which may include but not limited to frequent and recurring ill-health (KII Participant, Male, Member Council of Elders, Opu-Nembe Community).*



This is to say that the culture of extramarital affairs is symbolic to the people of Nembe in such a way that it carries serious weights and consequences. This perspective resonates with the study by Osuku and Okeke (2021) which highlighted that a married woman from Nembe is culturally forbidden from having intimate relationship with a man other than her husband. It has become even clearer that in this community, having an intimate relationship with a married woman is not just seen as a mistake; it is considered a crime against cultural beliefs. The people believe that the land itself punishes those who break this rule until they admit their wrongdoing and go through specific rituals. These rituals are important because they are seen as a way to make things right and to avoid bad outcomes, like getting sick. This shows that the culture not only sets clear rules about relationships but also includes strong beliefs about the connection between actions, the land, and health. Such beliefs help the community keep people in line and discourage actions that might harm families and relationships.

Interestingly, another participant made references to the Ogidiga (Python Worship) cultural symbol as a cultural practice that holds several relevance. In the words of this participant;

*In Nembe tradition, the python, referred to as Ogidiga, is our primary deity. Consequently, anyone who kills this python, whether intentionally or accidentally, is believed to face death unless specific important rituals are performed promptly. Our people reverence this python, Ogidiga, as a warrior from the spirit realm who grants us the strength and power to triumph over our enemies and defend against foreign invaders. (KII Participant, Male, Traditional Ruler, Opu-Nembe).*

Suffice to say that the cultural reverence associated with the Ogidiga deity has equally tamed the intentions of criminality in the community. The Ogidiga is not only seen as a warrior god but also serves as a symbol of justice, equity and fairness.

It will also interest you to know that Nembe kingdom has an Ark of inquiry called “Ebebege”. It is a bamboo ladder tied with two tortoise (Ikage) on poles.



**Figure 1:** Pictorial evidence of the Ebèbége Ark

**Source:** Adopted from Nairaland, August 2024.

The pictorial evidence presented shows that this medium operates as an oracle, confirming information through its movement back and forth (oscillation). This cultural symbolism may explain why Alagoa (2009) suggests that the spirit world and the supernatural are viewed as an extension of the natural world, yet remain beyond the direct experiences of people. Additionally, Ozobo et al (2014) notes that the Ijaw people, unlike their neighboring societies, believe in a feminine aspect of god, referred to as "our mother." In Nembe tradition, the Wonyingi and Temearau theory is also recognized, with the mother god being called WaNyingi, as noted by Angba (2017).

On another note, a participant shared personal experience with the cultural significance attached to the sale of Periwinkles in the community. According to this participant;

*I am a Christian no doubt, and from religious point of view I thought that Periwinkles are natural gift from God and could serve commercial purpose for me despite being against the cultural norms. So, I sold a substantial amount of it to meet immediate financial needs at the time. Unfortunately for me, the impact was graveous as I began to witness growth on my skin in scale-like nature as the periwinkle shells. I had to open up about what I had done and some traditional cleansing was carried out before I could regain myself. (KII Participant, Male, Community member, Opu-Nembe, aged 47years).*

This personal account and experience express how cultural beliefs and practices can help to shape perceptions about culture and religious position. It reaffirms the biblical account of Christ where he admonished giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's in Matthew (22:21).

**Theme 2:** *How the understanding of cultural symbols has contributed to crime prevention in Nembe.*

### **How Cultural Symbols Help in Crime Prevention**

**Respect for Tradition:** Knowing that cultural symbols like masquerades and spirits hold significant meaning for the people helps law enforcement and community leaders create programs that respect these traditions. For instance, community gatherings can be integrated into crime prevention discussions, making the community feel involved and respected (Ogbanga, 2018).

**Building Trust:** When interventions consider local symbols and values, they help build trust between community members and law enforcement. People are more likely to cooperate when they see that their cultural practices are respected (Nnadi, 2019).

**Encouraging Collective Responsibility:** Cultural symbols often emphasize the importance of community and collective well-being. Crime prevention programs can encourage community members to work together to support one another and monitor suspicious activities. This strengthens community ties and deters crime (Alagoa, 2020; Raimi, Bieh, & Boroh, 2016).

### **Crime Prevention Interventions in Opu-Nembe**

The following are some identified crime prevention interventions in Nembe that consider local cultural symbols:

**Community Awareness Programs:** This intervention was birthed to educate people about the cultural values, the impact of crime, and how they can protect the community. For example, community town hall awareness call that explores the significance of the Ogidiga spirit was drawn to reinforce the idea that community members should uphold laws for the sake of collective well-being. This awareness was considered timely as the communities continue to undergo urbanization and the inflow of migrants. These awareness campaigns serve as a medium to inculcate the cultural norms to mostly outsiders and to foster a sense of pride in cultural identity while discouraging crime. The woman leader gave this information as she considered it relevant to the research. To her;

*The communities in Nembe Kingdom have continued to grow in population as a result of urbanization. The chances of losing our cultural beliefs are growing, but the essential purpose of these awareness programs is to inculcate the strangers about the cultural norms, traditions, and values of the Nembe people and also the younger generations so that they can be aware of the consequences of violating the norms and belief system. (KII Participant, Female, Women Leader, Opu-Nembe Community).*

This participant's outline is a commendable step towards preserving cultural heritage and promoting a sense of relationship in the face of a growing society. As the communities in Nembe Kingdom continue to experience population growth due to urbanization, the risk of losing crucial cultural beliefs and practices increases. The influx of new residents and the influences of modern society can dilute traditional values, making it essential to implement awareness programs that reinforce the cultural identity of the Nembe people (Ogbanga, 2018).

**Traditional Festivals and Masquerade Celebrations:** Nembe Kingdom has found a way to incorporate crime prevention messages into traditional festivals in a bid to leverage on the festive atmosphere to promote safe behaviors. As mentioned by one of our focus group respondents,

*During the Ebèbége masquerade, our community leaders share stories about the importance of respecting natural resources and the consequences of illegal fishing, using cultural narratives to communicate their points effectively. (FGD participant, Female, Community member, aged (undisclosed)).*

This opinion resonates with the findings of Nnadi (2019) where he concluded that leveraging on cultural festivals can foster an avenue for effective communication of rules and regulations. It can also help to draw the line between traditional norms and contemporary practices (Alagoa, 2009).

**Community Watch Groups:** There has also been an established community watch groups that operate based on traditional values. According to the community development council chairman,

*Elders in the community now lead some groups, using their status and cultural symbols of respect to motivate others to keep watch on the community against any criminal activities. These groups as led by the elders monitor activities in their areas and promote safe practices, taking advantage of the fear of cultural consequences to deter crime. (CDC Chairman, Opu-Nembe Community).*

This measure aligns with Alagoa's (2020) research, which highlights the important role that community elders have in promoting crime prevention in a way that respects local culture. Having respected elders involved in crime watch groups makes these efforts more effective. Their respected status and the cultural symbols they represent help encourage more people in the community to take part because when elders explain the importance of following cultural norms and the potential consequences for not doing so, they help the community feel a shared responsibility to protect their area. This method is very effective because fear of cultural consequences can discourage crime. Elders can also share traditional stories and lessons to emphasize the importance of keeping the community safe and united (Nnadi, 2019).

### **Discussion of Findings**

The demographic information about the participants in the study revealed 195 people with 63.1% being male (123 participants) and 36.9% female (72 participants). This shows that the opinions in the study might be more influenced by men. In terms of age, most participants (35.9%) are between 35 and 44 years old. Other age groups included 15-24 years (16.4%), 25-34 years (25.6%), and those aged 45 and older (22.1%). Since most participants are in their middle years, they might have more life experience, which can shape their views on community issues and crime. When looking at community roles, there are various positions, but the largest group is made up of regular community members (Floor Members), accounting for 79.4% (155 participants). This means that the majority of views represented in the study come from everyday members of the community rather than leaders. Their perspectives may reflect the general opinions of the community rather than just those in authority.

The study discusses how cultural symbols, practices, and beliefs helps in crime management efforts in Nembe. One participant mentioned that in Nembe, cheating with a married woman is seen as a serious crime. If someone does this, they believe that the land itself punishes them until they confess and perform certain cultural rituals to avoid consequences like illness. This shows how strong cultural beliefs can discourage wrongful behavior and reinforce community values. Another participant pointed out the importance of the Ogidiga, or Python, which is respected in the kingdom. Anyone who harms this python faces dire consequences unless they appease the spirit through rituals. This belief represents justice and fairness in the community, acting as a sort of guardian spirit that helps prevent crime.

The study also revealed the importance of a cultural artifact called “Ebebege,” which serves as an oracle and confirms information. The beliefs surrounding this artifact revealed the community's connection to the spiritual world, and it plays a part in their understanding of morality and justice. Furthermore, one participant shared a personal experience involving the sale of periwinkles. Despite being a Christian and viewing periwinkles as simply a resource, he suffered a severe skin condition after selling them against cultural norms. This indicates the strong influence of cultural beliefs on personal choices and behaviors. While many participants view these cultural symbols as crime deterrents, some feel that they also limit personal freedoms. For example, one FGD participant expressed that fear of being judged can prevent individuals from reporting crimes. This aligns with the findings by Hussam and Iram (2018), which noted that strong cultural beliefs might discourage crime reporting out of fear of social judgment. Despite these concerns, many believe that these symbols instill moral values and promote community responsibility. This perspective shows that cultural beliefs can foster a supportive community but may also come with limitations that could impact how individuals respond to crime and enforcement.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role of cultural symbols in deterring crime within the community of Nembe. These symbols serve as powerful reminders of the social judgments and spiritual beliefs associated with behaviors deemed unacceptable. By framing issues such as infidelity or the harm of sacred animals not merely as legal violations but as profound moral transgressions, the community fosters a culture of accountability. This shared understanding encourages individuals to take responsibility for one another's actions, creating a supportive atmosphere that inherently discourages criminal behavior. Furthermore, the role of cultural festivals in strengthening community ties cannot be overstated. These vibrant celebrations not only emphasize the unique identities shared by community members but also actively promote ethical behavior and a collective commitment to safety. The study shows that by participating in these cultural events, individuals develop a deeper sense of belonging, which in turn motivates them to uphold their community's standards and values. This creates a protective social fabric that acts as a deterrent to crime.

The findings from this research clearly indicate that cultural symbols are essential tools in crime management and prevention strategies in Nembe. By embodying the values and beliefs of the community, these symbols systematically discourage criminal conduct and enhance social cohesion. An understanding and appreciation of these cultural elements can lead to more effective crime-fighting approaches, as they foster a deeper connection among community members and reinforce shared norms.

Moreover, the implications of this study extend beyond Nembe, pointing to the importance of culturally informed strategies in crime prevention efforts globally. By integrating local cultural practices and symbols into their methodologies, law enforcement and policymakers can build a more secure environment that is tailored to the unique contexts of various communities. Ultimately, this research underscores that recognizing and harnessing the



power of cultural identity is crucial for creating safe and harmonious societies, where residents feel both empowered and responsible for their collective wellbeing.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and conclusion reached, the study recommends the following:

1. Involve local cultural leaders in crime prevention programs to ensure that community values are respected and promoted. This can be achieved by identifying organizing meetings between local leaders, law enforcement, and community organizations to discuss crime prevention strategies. Their insights can help tailor programs that resonate with community values.
2. Organize more cultural festivals and events to strengthen community bonds and encourage positive behaviors that deter crime. For this, stakeholders can develop a calendar of cultural festivals and community gatherings that celebrate local traditions, arts, and values. Involve local artists and performers to make these events vibrant and engaging.
3. Create educational programs that teach community members about the importance of cultural symbols and values in preventing crime. This can become realistic through a collaboration with educators and cultural leaders to create a curriculum that emphasizes the significance of cultural symbols in crime prevention, tailored for different age groups.
4. Encourage cooperation between community members and law enforcement to build trust and share information about crime prevention. This will require implementing community policing initiatives where law enforcement engages with community members regularly to build relationships and trust.
5. Design crime prevention strategies that reflect the community's cultural beliefs and practices to make them more effective. This can be actualized through a survey of the community members to understand their values, beliefs, and perceptions about crime and safety, using this information to inform strategy design.

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