

Violation of Cultural Norms and Sanctions Among the Oro People of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study stemmed from concerns regarding the loss of effectiveness of the traditional social control mechanisms in the face of modernisation, religious changes and shifts in social values. It focuses on the violation of cultural norms and associated sanctions among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Particularly attention was given to sanctions regarding adultery, disrespect for elders and traditional authority, desecration of sacred forests and traditional religious practices, and misuse of communal property. The theoretical framework used was Deterrence Theory which highlights the role of sanctions as a tool to encourage conformity with cultural norms. The study adopted an exploratory survey design. Data were gathered using In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings, among others, show that adultery is regarded as serious moral deviation which affects the stability of the family unit and the reputation of the community, and its penalties may include fines, ritual purification, public shame and restitution. This study offers a unique empirical description of cultural norm violations and sanctions within a specific cultural group (Oro) which has not been extensively studied. In conclusion, the study finds cultural norms are still significant tools for controlling behaviour and upholding social order among the Oro people. It calls for more effective cooperation between traditional institutions and modern governance systems, more cultural education to younger generations and the maintenance of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution and social control.

Keywords: Cultural norms, sanctions, social control, Oro people, violation

Introduction

Culture is a key factor in every human society as it offers codes of behaviour, moral expectations, beliefs, customs and sanctions that guide the interaction of people with each other. An English anthropologist, Edward Bennett Tylor, provided a globally acceptable definition of culture. He defined culture as “*that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom and any other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a member of society*” (Tylor, 1871:1; cited in Mboho, 2025). We can say that culture refers to the learned attributes of society, something we already have. Norms are embedded in the culture of people and the very foundation

of social structure and sources of social order. It is generally known as the standards of group behaviour. Norms determine, guide, control and predict human behaviour.

Cultural norms, therefore, are shared expectations and accepted rules that help to keep members of a society in check and to maintain social order, stability and collectiveness. They are the rules we follow in our day-to-day life (Liu et al., 2022). In traditional societies, including African societies, social life is regulated not only through formal legal institutions, but also through informal mechanisms in the form of customs, taboos, religious instructions and sanctions among the community (Mboho & Asangausung, 2024). These norms establish codes of conduct and sanctions for any behaviour deemed to be harmful to the peace of the community (Ette & Udo, 2014).

In fact, traditional institutions like the family, council of elders, secret societies, age-grade associations, and religious leaders played a critical role in enforcing cultural norms in many indigenous communities in Akwa Ibom State (Udousoro et al., 2025; Esara et al., 2024). These institutions of social control enforce conformity to communal values by punishing nonconformists. The traditional sanctions include public rebuke (warning), fine, ritual cleansing, banishment, restitution, taking of an oath, and in some instances, banishment (Umanah et al., 2025). The potential of such punitive measures is not just to correct the wrong, but also to maintain harmony and social equilibrium in the community (Ndem, 2024; Ette & Udo, 2014).

The people of Akwa Ibom State, especially the Oro nation, have a long history of cultural traditions, beliefs, social structures, traditional leadership frameworks, and sacred practices (Udousoro et al., 2025). Oro's culture governs social relationships, behaviour, respecting elders, family life, communal property and spiritual duties. Other institutional structures play communicative and conflict resolution roles in the Oro society as well; they transmit social values and strengthen behavioural expectations of the members of the society (Udomisor et al., 2014). This peace instrument is also noted by Nwoke and Nwagbo (2025). The research on the Oro communication systems indicates that the traditional symbols, injunctions and customs in maintaining order and resolving conflicts within the communities are still valid (Udomisor et al., 2014).

In Oro nation, respect for elders and traditional authority is a significant social norm since elders are custodians of culture, agents of conflict resolution and moral guides in the community. When they perceive the actions as disrespectful to elders or traditional institutions, there is a tendency to condemn them and possibly social sanctions are imposed to restore respect and discipline (Qiu et al., 2024). Similarly, adultery among women whose spouses are still alive is strongly discouraged in many communities in Akwa Ibom State. This is because infidelity affects family stability, lineage continuity and community morality (Udousoro et al., 2025). The violation of these norms accompany sanctions such as fines, public shame, and reconciliation rites aimed at maintaining social cohesion (Udousoro et al., 2025; Ette & Udo, 2014).

Moreover, sacred forests, shrines and ritual places hold great significance in the spiritual worldview of many communities in Akwa Ibom State, including the Oro society (Ekong, 2001). Many taboos and customary prohibitions exist to preserve such sacred areas in the belief that they represent the presence of ancestors, communal identity and spiritual power. Unauthorised entry, desecration or breaches of sacred areas can lead to customary sanctions or ritual purification to remove spiritual pollution and restore balance in the community. The traditional values, like libation and ancestral worship, still promote social responsibility and moral accountability

(Emmanuel 2025; Udoh & Umoh 2025; Udomisor et al., 2014; Ndem, 2024) among the people of Akwa Ibom State.

Moreover, communal property and land ownership remain very fundamental in the social and economic aspects of traditional society (Umanah et al., 2025). Lands are considered as collective property of a family, clan, or community and unauthorised appropriation, destruction, or sale of their communal property can be considered a serious crime against communal survival and identity (Ogbonna & Iton, 2025). Hence, customary sanctions are applied to avoid conflict, to ensure restitution and to maintain communal peace and harmony (Ndem, 2024).

In this era of modernisation, urbanisation, formal legal systems, Christianity, and globalisation, a large number of traditional communities in Akwa Ibom State, including the Oro, still use traditional norms and sanctions as instruments of ensuring discipline and social order. There is, however, little empirical focus on the ways in which the Oro's cultural norms are violated and the fact that these violations are punished, and how these sanctions are used as a tool of social control in the contemporary society. There are several studies in general on traditional communication systems, conflict resolution, public order, and indigenous legal systems in the Oro nation (Udomisor et al., 2014), but with weak focus on the issues of norm violation and sanctions in the study area.

In this context, this study aims to examine the violation of cultural norms and associated sanctions among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State, focusing on disrespect for elders and traditional authority, violation of sexual morality (adultery), violation of sacred space and shrines and trespassing of communal property.

Statement of the Problem

The norms of traditional societies represent an important form of social control, as they specify acceptable behaviour, ensure social order and instil a moral discipline among the citizens of the society. Most communities in Akwa Ibom State, including Oro, cultural norms that deal with respect for elders, sexual morality, sacred institutions, and communal property have historically been used to maintain order, discipline, and a sense of community through informal systems of social control. Traditionally, violations of such norms have always resulted in sanctions, including fines, public condemnation, ritual cleanings, restitution and social exclusion aimed at deterring inappropriate conduct and restoring communal peace.

Although these cultural norms and forms of sanctions have played a pivotal role in the history of these communities, there is increasing concern that they have been undermined by modernisation, urbanisation, formal legal systems, Western education, Christianity and globalisation. Many of the younger generations within traditional societies are less willing to adhere to traditional values and sanctions, and the influence of traditional authorities seems to be decreasing in how they regulate behaviour. In most cases, disrespecting elders, infidelity, desecration of sacred spaces and illegal appropriation of community resources, which were previously seen as cultural violations, are now seen with less fear of traditional sanctions and are now considered a threat to social cohesion and cultural continuity.

Scholars, including Udomisor et al. (2014), studied indigenous justice systems, traditional communication systems, conflict resolution and social control in Akwa Ibom State. Previous studies have not given specific attention to violations of cultural norms and associated sanctions in Oro nation. This therefore leaves a gap in the literature and context as far as the indigenous

Systems of sanctions are concerned and their operation as systems of social control among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State.

Based on the foregoing, this study intends to examine the violation of cultural norms and associated sanctions among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State, with emphasis on the violation of respect for elders and traditional authority, adultery, sacred forests and shrines and communal property; as well as sanctions that follow the violation of the norms and effects thereof on social order.

Research Objectives

The main objective of the study was to examine the violation of cultural norms and sanctions among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

- i. examine the violation of respect for elders and traditional authority and the associated sanctions among the Oro people in Akwa Ibom State.
- ii. investigate the violation of norms relating to adultery and the sanctions attached among the Oro people in Akwa Ibom State.
- iii. assess the violation of norms concerning sacred forests, shrines, and traditional religious practices and the sanctions imposed among the Oro people in Akwa Ibom State.
- iv. describe the violation of norms relating to communal property and the sanctions attached among the Oro people in Akwa Ibom State.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- i. How does the violation of respect for elders and traditional authority attract sanctions among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State?
- ii. What forms of sanctions are imposed for violations relating to adultery among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State?
- iii. How are violations of norms concerning sacred forests, shrines, and traditional religious practices sanctioned among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State?
- iv. What sanctions are given to violations relating to communal property among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State?

Literature Review

Concept of Cultural Norms

Cultural norms are the unwritten rules, values, customs and expectations for behaviour that govern the actions of the members of a society. They are socially approved norms which define appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and are passed on from one generation to the next via the socialisation process, customs, traditions and communal institutions. Cultural norms are the mechanisms of social order because their role is to govern relationships among individuals, maintain social solidarity and strengthen the sense of community. From the sociological view of social regulation, norms are standards or expectations of behaviour that are expected of members of society, and when they do not conform to these expectations, they can face sanctions to make them more likely to conform (Giddens, 2009).

As in traditional African societies, the cultural norms are woven into the indigenous practices, religion, kinship and responsibilities. These norms regulate aspects of life such as marriage, kinship relations, respect for authority, inheritance, sexuality, dispute settlement, and

communal responsibilities. Adherence to cultural norms occurs through elders, traditional leaders, family structures, secret societies, and customary laws that provide guidelines for acceptable actions in the community, among indigenous societies in Akwa Ibom State (Ette & Udo, 2014).

Within the Oro community of Akwa Ibom State, there are cultural rules that dictate the behaviour of respect for elders, sexual behaviour, sacred practice, and community duties. These norms are crucial because they can encourage discipline, solidarity and cultural continuity, and dissuade behaviours that are seen as a threat to social stability and the values of a community. Traditional sanctions are usually applied to violations of these norms, to restore harmony and to reinforce moral accountability (Udomisor et al., 2014).

Concept of Violation of Cultural Norms

Violation of cultural norms refers to anti-social behaviour, conduct or action which are contrary to the accepted norms, values, customs and/or expectations of a particular society. In sociology, violation of norms is considered a form of deviance as it involves an action that diverges from the norms of the society and community. A range of cultural activities that involve disrespecting elders, incest, or the desecration of sacred spaces, or stealing communal resources or the neglect of customary authority might be considered violations (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013).

In traditional societies, non-conformance to cultural norms is seen as a transgression both of the individual and also the collective moral order of the society. This is because indigenous communities generally consider social harmony a communal responsibility, and what is considered deviant is disapproved of by the community and sanctioned by the community. The Oro people have culturally established norms and taboos which, if violated, generate social condemnations and sanctions to maintain order: This includes disrespect for elders, breaking taboos related to sacred shrines, engaging in prohibited sexual behaviour, and unlawfully tampering with communal property (Ette & Udo, 2014).

Concept of Sanction

In penology, sanction or punishment is a penalty or corrective action imposed on a person who has violated a society's accepted rules, norms or laws. It is also a technique of social control to discourage deviance, create discipline, ensure justice, and re-establish social values. Sanctions can be formal (if it comes from a legal institution like a court or a prison) or informal (if it comes from the community, customs or traditional institutions) (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013).

Customary systems of justice and social control, in African indigenous societies, are frequently used to administer sanctions. Traditional sanctions are generally used to restore peace, harmony and balance within the community, and are therefore not only corrective and restorative, but also punitive. Fines, restitution, public shame, ritual cleansing, oath, exclusion from communal life, and reconciliation ceremony are some of the traditional practices of sanctions. Ette and Udo (2014) admit that sanctions in traditional societies of Akwa Ibom State are mechanisms of social control with the aim of prohibiting the commission of offences and maintaining social order. The sanctions may be given by elders, traditional institutions, heads of family or traditional authorities among the Oro. Adultery, disrespect of elders, desecration of sacred places, or misuse of communal property can result in sanctions that may discourage such behaviour in the future and thus promote communal discipline.

Concept of Social Control

Social control is the process of socialising humans to conform to the accepted norms and standards in society, through its mechanisms, institutions, values and sanctions (Khanna, 2023). Social control is used to achieve stability by discouraging deviant behaviour and motivating obedience to communal expectations. It can be through formal institutions like police, courts, and laws or informal institutions like customs, religion, family, peer influence and traditional leadership (Giddens, 2009; Mboho, 2025; Mboho & Asangausung, 2024).

In traditional African societies, social control is mainly exercised by customs, taboos, kinship obligations, religion and indigenous sanctions. Elders and traditional institutions can also be important agents in maintaining moral discipline and regulating behaviour in terms of what is deemed acceptable in society. In an Oro society, sanctions for the violation of cultural norms are viewed as means of social control as they contribute to the reinforcement of moral behaviour, deterrence of deviance and maintenance of social harmony (Ette & Udo, 2014).

Disrespect for Elders/Traditional Authority and Sanctions

Empirical studies have consistently shown that the concept of respect for elders and traditional authority continues to be a key means of social control in many societies in Africa. In Akwa Ibom State, Ndem (2024) studied both the traditional and modern public order system, and concluded that elders and traditional rulers were found to be very influential in maintaining social discipline through their traditional and customary sanctions. The study found that social norms are, for the most part, enforced through informal institutions – notably, the heads of the family, age groups and traditional councils – and sanctions are imposed on individuals whose behaviour undermines communal norms, such as reconciliation, fines and public warning. The study did not, however, focus on one particular ethnic group, and it did not isolate the norms of respect for elders as a separate cultural norm in Oro nation.

Likewise, Umanah et al. (2025) analysed the traditional approaches to crime control in Akwa Ibom State and noted that traditional institutions like elders, lineage heads and secret societies have sanctions that are culturally inculcated and enforced to maintain respect for the elders. Their results indicated that the disrespect of elders generates punitive responses like ostracism, moral condemnation and ritual cleansing, which are designed to restore order and to strengthen obedience to the authorities. However, the study did not have a narrow analytical focus of only looking at norm violations of the elderly in certain communities, but instead examined general crime control systems.

Udomisor et al. (2014) also found that traditional symbols and injunctions are means of behavioural control and settling conflicts in Oron communities. This study suggested that respect for authority is taught through symbolic communication and traditional practices that deter deviant behaviour, elements which are culturally maintained. Although the study pointed to the significance and necessity of traditional authority systems, it did not specifically address how disrespect for elders is sanctioned in modern times, especially among the Oro people.

The reviewed literature shows that while traditional authority has been recognised as a key factor in ensuring social order, there is a lack of detailed empirical study of the ways in which disrespect of elders is specifically defined, experienced and sanctioned among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State. Given this, this study aims to fill this gap. The study is therefore ethnographically oriented and examines the issue of respect violations by elders and the corresponding sanctions system within the Oro communities.

Violation of Sexual Morality (Adultery) and Sanctions

Empirical studies have shown that sexual morality is strictly regulated in traditional African societies, where adultery is regarded as a serious moral and social offence. Ette and Udo (2014), in their study of Anaan traditional society, found that adultery and other forms of sexual misconduct attract strong communal sanctions such as fines, public shame, and ritual cleansing. The study demonstrated that these sanctions serve both corrective and restorative functions by ensuring that social harmony within families and communities is maintained. However, the study focused on Anaan society and did not provide ethnographic specificity regarding other ethnic groups such as the Oro people.

In a broader analysis of customary justice systems in Akwa Ibom State, Udonnah (2025) observed that sexual offences are regulated through community surveillance and traditional adjudication processes. The study found that offenders are often required to provide restitution and undergo moral purification rites, reflecting the restorative orientation of indigenous justice systems. However, the study treated sexual offences as part of a general category of deviance without isolating adultery as a distinct cultural norm or examining its specific sanctions structures.

Similarly, Umanah et al. (2025) found that sexual morality remains one of the most strongly regulated aspects of indigenous social life in Akwa Ibom communities. Their study indicated that violations of sexual norms attract severe sanctions, including social exclusion and ritual cleansing. Nevertheless, the study did not provide detailed empirical evidence on how adultery is conceptualised and punished within Oro cultural settings.

The gap in the literature is that while sexual morality has been widely studied within traditional African justice systems, there is limited empirical documentation on the specific forms of adultery, the cultural interpretation of such violations, and the sanctions mechanisms used among the Oro people. This study therefore fills this gap by providing detailed empirical insight into adultery as a cultural norm violation and the associated sanctions in Oro society.

Violation of Sacred Forests, Shrines, and Traditional Religious Practices and Sanctions

Sacred forests, shrines, and traditional religious institutions play a significant role in regulating behaviour in indigenous African societies. Empirical findings by Umanah et al. (2025) revealed that traditional religious structures function as moral enforcement systems, where sacred beliefs and ancestral worship reinforce compliance with community norms. The study indicated that violations of sacred norms attract both social condemnation and spiritual sanctions, reflecting the integration of religion and social control in traditional Akwa Ibom societies. However, the study did not specifically examine violations of sacred forests and shrines as distinct cultural infractions.

Udomisor et al. (2014) also observed that in Oron communities, traditional symbols and sacred injunctions served as regulatory mechanisms for conflict resolution and behavioural control. The study highlighted that sacred institutions are central to maintaining order because they are believed to be spiritually protected and socially binding. However, the research focused more on communication symbolism rather than empirical documentation of offences against sacred spaces and their sanctions.

Unogwu and Azuwike (2025) further noted that in Nigerian customary systems, sacred institutions are often reinforced by spiritual beliefs that attribute consequences of deviant behaviour to supernatural forces. This reinforces compliance through fear of both social and spiritual sanctions. Nonetheless, the study was comparative and theoretical, lacking community-specific empirical depth.

The gap in the literature is that existing studies do not provide sufficient empirical detail on how violations of sacred forests, shrines, and traditional religious practices are defined and punished specifically among the Oro people. There is also limited evidence on the continuing relevance of such sanctions in contemporary Oro society. This study addresses this gap by examining both the nature of such violations and the sanction systems associated with them in Oro communities.

Violation of Communal Property and Sanctions

Traditional communal property and land ownership are an integral part of African social organisation. It has been found in empirical research that land is managed in a collective way, under customary ownership and regulations. According to Ndem (2024), traditional land use management systems in Akwa Ibom State are based on the customary law and institutions in the community to manage land use, manage conflicts, and stop unwarranted appropriation of communal resources. The study found that sanctions were used against offenders, and common sanctions included restitution, fines and exclusion. The study did not specifically examine Oro communities, however, and it did not go into detail about communal property violations.

In the study of the indigenous policing system in Akwa Ibom State, Okon (2025) reported that the lineage head and age-grade system are responsible for protecting communal property and holding community members accountable for land use. The study showed that offenders receive sanctions which are meant to restore communal ownership rights and to avoid reoffending. However, the study was not exclusively about land protection norms, but also included indigenous policing as a broader category of culture.

The traditional system of resource control and management has also been weakened, which has led to rising conflicts over communal resources in certain communities in Akwa Ibom, as reported by Umanah et al. (2025). The specific cultural conceptions of communal property offences and their sanctions, however, were not explored.

The specific gap in the literature is the lack of empirical evidence that is specific to communal property and land protection norms violations and sanctions among the Oro. The existing literature does not give a detailed account of the offences, cultural interpretations and sanctions mechanisms related to communal land violations in Oro society. In this study, this gap is thus filled by the assessment of communal property violations and sanctions for these violations in Oro communities, an empirical study.

Summary of Empirical Gap

Traditional authority and gender norms, sacred institutions, communal property protection and sexual morality have not been investigated in depth in Akwa Ibom State and in other African contexts, but there is a general lack of empirical studies that focus specifically on the Oro people. Most studies take a general or comparative method and do not capture the specifics of the cultural meaning, violation and sanctions systems that existed within Oro society. It is, therefore, observed that there is a lack of ethnographically based and community-specific empirical data on cultural norm violations and sanctions among the Oro community in Akwa Ibom State. This study is thus suited to close this gap, giving a focused, systematic and empirical study of these cultural dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

Deterrence Theory

Deterrence Theory can be used as a theoretical framework to understand how norms are enforced and why people do or do not abide by norms in traditional societies. It is closely linked to the classical criminologists Cesare Beccaria (1764) and Jeremy Bentham (1789), who believed that people act rationally and make pleasure–pain decisions. In contemporary criminology, the theory has been expanded by works of such scholars as Gary Becker (1968), who, in his work on economic theory and criminal behaviour, covered the concepts of incentives; Jeffrey Grogger (1991), who focused on certainty, severity and swiftness of sanctions as the three most important factors in rule compliance.

Deterrence Theory is based on the premise that people are rational beings and make choices based on the expected rewards and risks of a decision. It presumes that when the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived costs, then there will be some deviant behaviour, such as breaking the law or some cultural norm. The theory also takes for granted that sanctions should be certain, prompt and severe enough to deter deviance. Certainty is the chance of being apprehended; severity is the severity of sanctions; swiftness is how quickly sanctions come after an offence.

The theory also holds that norms of social order can be maintained if they are clearly established and strictly adhered to. In traditional societies, deterrence relies not just on formal legal sanctions but also on informal ones like shame, exclusion, ritual cleansing and communal disapproval—all of which can be as effective at controlling behaviour.

In applying deterrence theory to this study, Oro society is where deterrence theory comes into the picture, explaining how the cultural traits of respect for elders, sexual morality, sacred religious practices and protection of communal property are upheld with sanctions. The theory is that people follow them out of fear of sanctions from traditional leaders, elders or spiritual places.

In Oro nation, for instance, disrespect to the elders is considered a social crime, and could involve a fine, the shame of the community, or exclusion from the group. Likewise, misconduct like promiscuity is discouraged by the threat of social ostracism, purification rituals, or fines levied by custom. Protection of sacred forests and shrines is also provided by spiritual deterrence; that is, fear of supernatural sanctions results in compliance. Similarly, communal property offences are sanctioned by restitution, ostracism, or communal disgrace, which act as deterrents to their misuse or unlawful appropriation.

Therefore, Oro cultural norms are effective as long as traditional sanctions are perceived to be certain and severe, according to Deterrence Theory. If sanctions are strict and enforced, there is a high probability that they are obeyed; if sanctions are lax and traditional authority is lessened, there is a greater chance that they will be broken.

Though it is useful, this theory of deterrence has been heavily criticised. A major criticism is that it places too much emphasis upon rational choice, and that when people make decisions, they do so in a rational way, which is not true in actuality as human behaviour is often shaped by emotion, social pressure and cultural conditioning. It is also claimed that the theory has failed to pay attention to other factors like poverty, inequality and social environment which also play a role in deviancy.

A second objection is that deterrence is not easily measurable, particularly in traditional societies where informal sanctions are not systematically recorded. Furthermore, the theory is based on the standard assumption that people know what sanctions are before they take them, which is not the case in many cultures where norms are internalised rather than consciously

calculated. Other scholars like Bragga (2019) also suggest that the connection between sanctions and deterrence may not be straightforward and that excessively severe sanctions may not translate into enhanced compliance.

Although these criticisms were raised, deterrence theory is well suited for this study since it is actually an explanatory theory of the relationship between cultural norms and sanctions systems among the Oro people themselves. This theory is especially relevant given that sanctions like fines, shame, ritual cleansing and exclusion are extremely important in maintaining social order and regulating behaviour in traditional Oro society. These sanctions serve as a deterrent to discourage the violation of norms.

Moreover, the theory offers a solid foundation to explain the potential for higher levels of violation of cultural norms when traditional enforcement systems become less effective. It also aids in understanding differences in compliance across contexts in Oro communities on the basis of perceived certainty and severity of sanctions. Hence, the theory of Deterrence is chosen due to the fact that it explains the operations of the sanctions system as a tool of social control and its effect on conformity or deviance in relation to cultural norms of the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The study adopted an exploratory survey design. The research design was found appropriate because it provided the researchers the opportunity to explore extensively cultural norms, meanings and practices as understood by the participants in their natural social environment. It enabled the researchers to get detailed narratives of violations of cultural norms and the sanctions systems of the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State. The design can also be used for studying lived experiences, beliefs and perceptions of traditional social control mechanisms that cannot be quantified.

Research Area

The study was carried out in Oro communities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Oro people are spread across the coastal and mainland regions of the state with a very rich cultural heritage, profound traditional institutions and indigenous systems of governance and social control. The local government areas in Oro nation are Oron, Okobo, Udung Uko, Mbo, and Urue Offong/Oruko, where traditional norms are still relevant in sustaining social order.

Population of the Study

The study population comprised adult members of Oro communities in Oron, Mbo, Okobo, Udung Uko, and Urue Offong/Oruko Local Government Areas. The traditional rulers, elders, youth leaders, women leaders, members of age-grade associations, and other community stakeholders who know cultural norms and traditional sanction systems were included. They were chosen as they have a direct role in enforcement, interpretation and experience of cultural norms in the communities.

Sampling Technique

Forty (40) participants were chosen for the study. This included 20 participants who were engaged in the In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and 20 participants in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which involved those who had much information and experience of Oro cultural norms and traditional sanctions. Snowball sampling was also used to identify further participants who were knowledgeable and were suggested by other participants, in this instance to locate elders and custodians of cultural knowledge.

Procedure for Data Collection

Field visits to the selected Oro communities were conducted for data collection. The researchers obtained permission from community leaders and the traditional leaders before involving participants. Interviews and group discussions were set at convenient times and held in safe and familiar community environments to promote open expression. The collection of data took several weeks to cover all aspects of the study in the thematic areas.

Sources of Data

The main data sources were primary sources, which were gathered directly from the respondents by using interviews and focus group discussions. To support the study, secondary data were also reviewed from textbooks, journal articles and published materials to provide contextual and theoretical support to the study.

Data Collection Technique

Two qualitative methods, In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD), were used in data collection. The IDIs provided detailed personal accounts from elders, traditional rulers, and other knowledgeable persons. The FGDs gave the researcher a space for discussion with community members, in which he would get a sense of community meanings, disagreements, and community understandings about the norms and sanctions systems.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interview guide and Focus Group Discussion guide were the major instruments used for collecting the data. Both types of instruments included open-ended items aimed at uncovering cultural norms in Oro society and types of norm violations and the sanctions associated with them. Simple language was used in the design of the instruments to enable clarity and allow participants to voice their opinions. Content validation of the tools was done by experts before use in the field.

Method of Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews and FGDs. This included transcribing recorded responses, re-reading the data many times and identifying emerging themes to the study goals. Themes were grouped around the concepts of respect for elders, adultery, sacred institutions and communal property. Interpretation was carried out by comparing the results with the already available literature and the theory of Deterrence in which the study was guided. Where appropriate, key findings were supported by verbatim quotations.

Limitations of the Study

Some of the participants were not ready to discuss the culturally sensitive topics openly, like infidelity and traditional sanctions, which were found to be a limitation of the study. There were also time constraints that reduced the number of communities that were covered within the Oro

nation. Nevertheless, the study offers valuable and trustworthy information on cultural norm violations and sanctions systems.

Ethical Issues

The study was conducted with utmost care of ethics. All participants gave informed consent for data collection. The participants had been informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of participation, and no details of the participants were incorporated in the presentation of results. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw from the study at any point. Throughout the research process, cultural norms were respected, and traditional values were taken into account to prevent the study from offending or disturbing the harmony of the community.

Results

Disrespect for Elders/Traditional Authority and Sanctions in Oro

Results from the IDI and FGD showed that respect for elders is still a fundamental aspect of the Oro culture. Throughout, it was noted that elders are considered the bearers and custodians of tradition and moral instruction, and that disrespect for elders is unacceptable in the society. In an IDI, an elder said:

In Oro land, if a young person insults an elder, the whole community is insulted and will be punished by the family or the village council. The sanctions could be a verbal warning, flogging, a fine or tendering of a verbal apology.

Likewise, in the FGD, participants mentioned that disrespect can be verbal insults, failure to follow instructions, or embarrassing elders. These activities are regarded as serious violations of cultural norms. In the realm of sanctions, respondents mentioned several sanctions: fines handed out by the heads of the family; forced apology rituals; and, in more extreme cases, banishment from community events. Participants also reported that perpetrators can be asked to bring something to reconcile with or a beverage.

As a deterrence, respondents agreed that shame and social exclusion are strong factors that deter younger people from disrespecting elders. Some of the participants reported that modernisation has reduced the power of elders, particularly educated young people. In general, the data signal that respect for elders is still important in a cultural sense, but has become more difficult to enforce due to social change.

Violation of Sexual Morality (Adultery) and Sanctions in Oro

The subject of “adultery or sexual immorality” was the second theme. The IDI responses indicated that adultery is considered a grave violation of the moral right and law, with a potential impact on a family’s stability and community’s honour. One female FGD participant said:

If a married woman commits adultery, it is a disgrace to the husband and family. If noticed, the husband or family members must not keep quiet to avoid anger from the gods. The affected woman (adulterer) must confess her guilt. A man who sleeps with someone's wife owes death. There are traditional approaches to resolve such conflict. One such approach is confession and presentation of traditional items to appease the gods.

The participants described how adultery can be revealed through confession, through the suspicion of the community, and traditional approaches to conflict, such as those of elders. Sanction mechanisms suggested range from fines imposed on the person who is wrong, reconciliation between families, public humiliation and even ritual purification in certain cases of the person who is wronged. It was also mentioned that the aggrieved spouse is typically either remunerated or symbolically rewarded.

But the respondents noted that the enforcement has been declining recently because of Christianity, legal systems and public embarrassment in today's context. The theoretical aspects of deterrence are based upon the fear of stigma, shame and financial penalty. However, the participants pointed out that the traditional sanctions have lost their deterrent effect due to their being weakened.

Violation of Sacred Forests, Shrines and Traditional Religious Practices and Sanctions in Oro

The results of the IDI and FGD revealed that there was a high level of cultural attachment to sacred forests, shrines and traditional religious practices. These spaces were referred to by participants as being spiritually protected and connected to ancestral reverence. During an IDI, an elder explained that:

Permission is required to enter certain forests or shrines; otherwise, not only is one offending people but the gods of the land as well. Some places are sacred. Violations attract payment of a fine to the traditional authority.

Offences are defined as trespassing in sacred forests, damage to shrines or to the ritual itself. These are extremely offensive and spiritually perilous actions. Sanctions found were social and spiritual. Offenders may be expected to do cleansing rituals and pay a fine to the traditional authority, the respondents reported. There are some instances when a person is thought to have bad luck as a result of their deeds, which are thought to be caused by the spirits.

FGD participants cited that fear of supernatural repercussions is a major deterrent, even for younger generations, though some young people today are less sensitive to such fears. Based on the analysis, the non-formal enforcement is seen as a limited deterrence compared to spiritual beliefs.

Violation of Communal Property and Sanctions in Oro

Community protection of communal land and property was the fourth theme discussed. Throughout, participants indicated that land ownership and the rule of land is customary, and that it is collectively owned and collectively ruled by customary laws in Oro communities. One of the FGD participants said:

There is no right to sell or take community land without the approval of elders; if you do, you are in serious trouble.

The issues singled out are the sale of communal land, encroachment, and the misuse of communal resources. Those acts are considered a breach of the trust of the people. Sanctions include restitution of land or property, high fines, seizure of illegally acquired property and, in the extreme case, banishment from the community. They are enforced, mainly, by the elders and family heads.

Participants wrote that land disputes are frequently resolved in customary courts and not in the formal courts, although there is more involvement of modern courts. Deterrence is a significant controlling factor, in terms of fear of loss of social identity and property. But the pressures of the economy and external land interests have become a threat to conventional enforcement mechanisms, respondents said.

Summary of Findings

The findings showed that the Oro people still have strong cultural habits that are entrenched in their social life and continue to influence people's conduct through traditional sanctions. Respecting the elderly has not been omitted as a cultural value from the list of values along with sexual morality, sacred institutions and the protection of communal property. Modernisation, legal pluralism and shifting social values, however, are causing an erosion of those norms in practice. Yet, shame, fines, ritual cleansing and spiritual penalties still have some effect on behaviour, though less so in some places.

Discussion of Findings

Disrespect of Elders/Traditional Authority and Sanctions in Oro

The results of the study indicated that respect for elders and traditional authority constitute a fundamental value in the Oro culture and that disrespectful actions like verbal abuse, not following instructions or embarrassing elders are sanctioned by fines, public shaming and forced apology. The study also determined that deterrence is effective due to the fear that comes from shame and community disapproval. The results corroborated the findings of Ndem (2024), who noted that elders and customary councils in traditional institutions in Akwa Ibom State enforce social order by means of sanctions like fines, reprimands and reconciliation processes on offenders. Likewise, Umanah et al. (2025) reported that disrespect towards traditional authority in Akwa Ibom communities is controlled by ostracism and moral condemnation that is designed to foster conformity to social norms. The implication is that traditional authority remains as a regulating institution in Oro. As with Deterrence Theory, however, the effectiveness of such sanctions is dependent upon the certainty and legitimacy of sanctions. However, when these norms are less effective (due to modernisation), there is likely greater violation of the norms.

Violation of Sexual Morality (Adultery) and Sanctions in Oro

The study has shown that adultery is considered a serious violation in terms of culture and a threat to the unity of the family and the reputation of the community. Sanctions include fines, public shame, family reconciliation and ritual cleansing. But the participants observed that enforcement has become weak because of Christian influence, modern laws and evolving values of society.

These results corroborate the results of Ette and Udo (2014), who found that adultery in the traditional society of Anaan brings sanctions like fines, shame and purification rituals for the

purpose of maintaining social harmony. Likewise, Okon and Odey (2024) reported that sexual offences in Akwa Ibom communities are managed with a focus on compensation and purification, with no emphasis on imprisonment. These results suggest that infidelity or adultery is still socially regulated, albeit increasingly contested in modern times. As per Deterrence Theory, the decline of traditional enforcement mechanisms leads to decreased perceived threat of sanctions, leading to decreased compliance with sexual norms in some segments of society.

Violation of Sacred Forests, Shrines and Traditional Religious Practices and Sanctions

The results indicated that among Oro people, sacred forests, shrines and traditional religious practices are highly protected cultural institutions. Offences range from trespassing or defilement and attract sanctions including ritual purification and payment of a fine. The results confirm the findings of Udomisor et al. (2014), who found that sacred symbols and injunctions are regulatory mechanisms used to control behaviour and resolve conflict within Oron communities. Similarly, Umanah et al (2025) discovered that traditional religious institutions in Akwa Ibom are also used as a mechanism of moral enforcement, with consequences of violations comprising both social and spiritual sanctions.

The results are also consistent with the findings of Unogwu and Azuwike (2025) that in Nigerian custom, spiritual beliefs are used to reinforce compliance, as any deviation from them is connected to the supernatural. This shows that there is both social and spiritual fear of sanctions to act as a deterrent in sacred contexts. But modernisation and religious changes have diminished confidence in traditional spiritual sanctions among some young people, which diminishes the effectiveness of deterrence in this area.

Violation of Communal Property and Sanctions in Oro

The study found that communal land belongs to the commons in Oro communities and that laws and regulations are enforced on the violation of the rights on the land, with the penalties ranging from restitution, fines, confiscation and banishment. Traditional authorities and elders are important players in enforcing these sanctions. The findings are corroborated by Ndem (2024), who noted that customary institutions in Akwa Ibom State preserve social order by practising restitution and barring overcommunal property. Likewise, Okon (2025) observed that indigenous policing systems are based on lineage and age grade in Akwa Ibom to keep communal assets safe and punish the culprits.

The results also corroborate with the findings of Umanah et al. (2025), that the efficacy of traditional enforcement systems has been eroded, thereby contributing to the rising disputes over communal resources and reinforcing the importance of customary regulation. Communal land protection is sustained by fear of economic loss, social exclusion and loss of identity from a

deterrence perspective. But the economic pressures and external land interests have undermined traditional control mechanisms, and customary sanctions have lost their intimidating effect.

In general, the results showed that cultural values within the Oro community are still present as social control systems, and they are made effective by social, economic and spiritual sanctions. The impact of these sanctions, however, is slowed by the influence of religion and legal pluralism and modernisation. Acceptance of cultural rules is influenced by the certainty, severity, and legitimacy of sanctions, in accordance with the Deterrence Theory of adherence to cultural rules. Where there is a strong traditional authority, violations of traditional norms are rare, and where there is a weak traditional authority, violations of traditional norms are more likely.

Conclusion

This study considered the violation of cultural norms and sanctions among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The four objectives of the study dealt with respect for elders and traditional authority, sexual morality (adultery), desecration of sacred forests and traditional religious practices, and abuse of communal property. The study found that respect for elders is still embedded in the cultural norm of Oro, and if the elders are disrespected through insult, disobedience, or being humiliated in public, the offender must face sanctions, such as fines, forced apologies, and, to some extent, banishment.

The study revealed that adultery is regarded as a deviant behaviour which damages family cohesion and communal reputation, and the suspected offender may be sanctioned through public shame, ritual cleanings and fines, upon confession of guilt, though this has become less effective with modernisation and religion.

In addition, the study identified sacred forests, shrines and traditional beliefs as very well-guarded cultural institutions, and violations received both social and religious sanctions such as ritual cleansing and some perceived supernatural consequences. Communal land and property are jointly owned and protected through customary laws, and if the rights of others are violated, restitution, a fine, seizure of property and even banishment are applied in extreme cases.

The study findings are that the cultural norms are important control mechanisms among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State. These norms continue to make claims on behaviour through informal systems of sanctions, based on tradition, morality and spirituality. With modernisation, legal pluralism, religious change, and evolving social values, however, the effectiveness of these is slowly decreasing. However, traditional institutions remain an integral part of ensuring order and upholding cultural identity despite the challenges. The findings of the study also suggest that in Oro, sanctions are predominantly deterrent and restorative, designed to correct the conduct of the offender, restore harmony and maintain community values rather than cause pain.

The results have several implications for social order, governance and cultural sustainability. First, the persistence of cultural norms implies that traditional institutions are still significant complementary mechanisms of social control in addition to formal legal institutions. Second, a decline in traditional sanctions suggests there is a risk that non-compliance with the norms may increase, particularly among younger generations who are less subject to traditional norms and sanctions. Third, the results suggest a rise in land conflicts, ethical norms and norms of respecting authority if the traditional ways of guaranteeing these norms are weakened. Finally, it is noted that there is a need for combining traditional and modern systems of governance to ensure robust community governance in social regulation and conflict resolution.

This study demonstrated that cultural norms among the Oro people of Akwa Ibom State are valid social control tools that regulate the observance of respect for elders, sexual morality, sacred institutions and ownership of communal property, and that violation of these cultural norms brings about traditional sanctions which are aimed at deterrence, correction and restoration of social harmony but are becoming less effective as a result of modernisation and socio-cultural change.

This study made several contributions to the body of knowledge. It offers a unique empirical description of cultural norm violations and sanctions within a specific cultural group (Oro) which has not been extensively studied. Second, it broadens knowledge of the concept of traditional social control in connection to specific cultural areas, including respect for the elderly, sexual morality, sacred institutions, and protection of communal property. Third, the study adds to the criminological and sociological literature on the way in which Deterrence Theory functions in indigenous African society where sanctions are essentially informal, communal and spiritual.

Comparative studies of the Oro people with other ethnic groups in Akwa Ibom State should be done to reveal similarities and differences in cultural norm enforcement, so that the scope of this study could be expanded in the future. The effects of religion, especially Christianity and Islam, on the reduction of traditional sanctions should also be investigated. Also, quantitative research can be used to assess the effectiveness of the traditional sanctions among various age groups. Finally, future studies should explore the possibilities of combining formal legal systems with customary ones in order to further enhance community social control and conflict resolution processes.

Recommendations

In accordance with the research objectives and findings, the following recommendations are presented:

The first recommendation is to reinforce discipline and moral upbringing by enhancing the traditional institutions like councils of elders, age grades and family heads in the Oro community in the context of violations of respect for elders and traditional authority. Programmes of community sensitisation should be introduced to sensitise younger generations on the cultural significance of respecting elders, and traditional sanctions like mediation, apology rituals and community service should be consistently implemented to increase their deterrent effect.

Second, when it comes to adultery or infidelity, it is recommended that traditional institutions should cooperate with religious leaders and community stakeholders to teach morals and stability in the family. Cultural values should remain, but sanctions should still focus on reconciliation and restitution (not stigmatisation) to keep families together. Awareness campaigns to discourage sexual misconduct and encourage responsible marital behaviour should also be strengthened in the community.

Third, on sacred forests, shrines and traditional religious practices, it is recommended that sacred sites be documented, preserved and protected through community bylaws and traditional regulations. Traditional authorities should step up sensitisation on the spiritual and cultural value of these sites; and ensure that sanctions on violations are equally maintained to maintain their deterrent effect. There is also a need to coordinate between cultural custodians and local governments to avoid encroachment and destruction of sacred spaces.

Fourth, on communal property and land protection, it is recommended that customary land governance mechanisms be further strengthened by providing better documentation of communal boundaries, which will entail better records management by traditional land councils. Illegal land

sales and conflict between traditional institutions and government land agencies can be minimised. Sanctions including restitution, fines and confiscation should be applied consistently with the aim of discouraging illegal appropriation of communal resources. In general, it is suggested that there should be a balanced integration of both traditional and modern legal systems so as to improve social control, promote justice and uphold the cultural heritage of the Oro people in Akwa Ibom State.

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