

Spirit, ritual, and cultural survival: Representation of sacred tradition in *King Emene* and *Storms of Ogori*

Karena Shote ^{1,*} and Cecil Ozobeme ^{2,*}

¹ Theatre Arts Department, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

² Theatre Arts Department, College of Education, Warri, Delta State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

African dramatic literature has consistently drawn on indigenous spiritual traditions to interrogate questions of identity, morality, and communal continuity. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the relationship between sacred traditions, ancestral consciousness, and cultural memory in selected Niger Delta plays. This study examines the representation of sacred traditions in Zulu Sofola's *King Emene* and Ben Binebai's *Storms of Ogori* to demonstrate how both playwrights transform ritual practices, ancestral presence, festivals, and indigenous performances into mechanisms for preserving cultural identity and ensuring communal survival. The study adopts Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory Theory and Wole Soyinka's Fourth Stage Theory as complementary analytical frameworks. Using qualitative textual analysis, it explores how the selected plays dramatise the interaction between the visible and invisible worlds and employ sacred traditions as repositories of historical consciousness and indigenous values. The findings reveal that while *King Emene* presents sacred traditions as uncompromising moral laws whose violation results in communal catastrophe, *Storms of Ogori* portrays them as restorative forces that inspire courage, resilience, and cultural renewal during periods of crisis. Despite these differences, both plays affirm that rituals, ancestral spirits, and communal performances function as living cultural archives through which collective memory and identity are transmitted across generations. The study concludes that sacred traditions in African drama transcend their religious functions to become dynamic instruments of cultural preservation, historical remembrance, and social continuity. It further contributes to scholarship by offering a comparative reading that integrates sacred traditions, ancestral consciousness, and cultural memory as interconnected strategies of cultural survival in contemporary African dramatic literature.

Keywords: Sacred traditions; Cultural memory; Ancestral spirits; African drama; *King Emene*; *Storms of Ogori*.

1. Introduction

Historically, African societies have conceived existence as an interconnected relationship between the visible and invisible worlds. The ancestors, spirits, deities, and the living abound together in a continuum that governs societal life, including moral conduct and cultural identity (Mbiti 74-83; Idowu 173-85; Olupona 23-31). Ancestral spirits in a traditional African setting are regarded not as distant supernatural beings but as active participants in human affairs who guide, protect, and regulate the affairs of the community (Mbiti 81; Magesa 45). This perspective is particularly evident in many Niger Delta societies, where the spiritual consciousness permeates social institutions, political structures, festivals, rituals, and even artistic expressions and everyday social practices (Alagoa 56-61). Therefore, in the cultural imagination of the people, the sacred occupies a central position and constitutes an important source of dramatic material for playwrights in the region.

* Corresponding author: Cecil Ozobeme

The Niger Delta, which is inhabited by ethnic nationalities such as the Itsekiri, Urhobo, Isoko, and others, is a culturally diverse region. Their traditional worldview emphasises the interconnectedness of human, natural, and spiritual realms. Sacred songs, rituals festivals, ancestral worship, and communal ceremonies act both as religious practices and as a repository of indigenous knowledge and collective identity (Finnegan 498; Alagoa 118; Okpewho 37). These practises aid the preservation of communal values and ensure continuity between present and past generations. As a cultural encoder of the people's history and worldview, sacred tradition provides the framework through which communities interpret their experiences and sustain their sense of belonging. African drama draws from these indigenous cultural resources, ritual practises and ancestral consciousness, which have remained important elements of the dramaturgy of many pioneering playwrights. Sacred traditions have been frequently used by African playwrights not just as aesthetic devices but also as vehicles for exploring questions of identity, morality, leadership, memory, and social continuity. Scholars agree that African drama emerged from ritual performances in which theatre fulfilled religious, communal, and philosophical functions that go beyond entertainment. (Soyinka 36-40; Echeruo 18-24; Clark 53-55; Schechner 66).

Nigerian playwrights such as Zulu Sofola have demonstrated a serious commitment to the dramatic representation of indigenous cultural values. Critics observe that her dramatic vision is deeply enmeshed in African traditional thoughts and cultural practices (Adedeji 104; Gibbs 182; Owomoyela 91) and is concerned with questions of ritual authority, communal responsibility, traditional morality, and the consequences of violating established cultural norms. Her drama, critics have observed, continually affirms the values and philosophical basis of African traditional society while interrogating the tensions that arise when individuals challenge societal expectations. King Emene exemplifies this dramatic pattern through the exploration of kingship, tradition, and ancestral authority and communal order.

Contemporary Nigerian playwrights similarly employ indigenous songs rituals and oral performance traditions, for the preservation of communal identity and cultural heritage (Akoh 74, Ojaide 39), using songs, performance, and collective remembrance, the play *Storms of Ogori* dramatizes the relevance of ancestral knowledge and sacred tradition within a rapidly changing social environment. The text underscores the importance of cultural memory as a means through which communities preserve their histories, values, and identities across several generations.

The relevance of ancestral spirits and sacred traditions in this place goes beyond their ritual or religious aspects. They function as preservers of communal experience, memories of the past, while simultaneously shaping present cultural consciousness.

Both playwrights transform indigenous beliefs and practises into spheres of cultural remembrance and identity formation through their dramatic presentations. Their plays, therefore, become an avenue for the preservation of endangered traditions which are interpreted and transmitted to later generations.

This paper, which examines the representations of spirits and ancestral traditions in the plays *King Emene* and *Storms of Ogori*, contends that the use of ancestral consciousness, ritual practises and sacred cultural forms is not for aesthetic purposes but as a preservation of cultural memory and indigenous values. It reinforces communal identity and aids cultural continuity in the face of social transformation. Although previous studies have examined ritual, kingship, indigenous performances, and cultural identity in the two plays, little comparative attention has been given to the relationship between sacred traditions, ancestral consciousness, and cultural memory as interconnected strategies of cultural survival. This study addresses that gap by examining how both playwrights transform sacred traditions into living archives of communal identity (Erl 8; Assmann 36)

1.1. Concept of Ancestral Spirits

Ancestral spirits, which feature prominently in many African belief systems, refer to deceased members of the community who have attained the spiritual status that qualifies them to maintain a continued relationship with the living. African societies, unlike their Western counterparts, who see death as a final separation between the living and the dead, believe in a continuum where the dead remain as active participants in the affairs of humans. Ancestors are regarded as mediators between the living and the supernatural realm. They serve as guardians of morality, custodians of tradition, and ensure societal survival and well-being (Mbiti 81-83, Idowu 179; Magesa 46). In African cosmology, the ancestors not only remain as invisible members of the community but have an influence that extends beyond death and continue to influence the moral and spiritual life of the society (Mbiti 82).

Through rituals, libations, prayers, festivals, and other traditional ceremonies, ancestral presence is acknowledged and reinforced. Such practises help community to sustain the sense of continuity between the past and present while preserving indigenous cultural values (Olupona 24, Gyekye 71; Mbiti 106). As Olupona observes, ancestral traditions help communities preserve moral ethics and transmit knowledge of indigenous culture across generations (112). The

representation of ancestral spirits in African traditional drama supersedes the metaphysical. Ancestral figures are used by playwrights to interrogate questions of identity, legitimacy, leadership, justice, and social responsibility. Invoking ancestors in dramatic works demonstrates an interaction between the living and the dead, thus enabling the exploration of the relevance of indigenous traditional values in a changing world (Magesa 47). As such, ancestral spirits can be understood as the spiritual embodiment of the departed whose ongoing influence guides, regulates, and sustains the moral order of the society.

1.2. Conceptualising Sacred Traditions

Sacred traditions comprise the beliefs, rituals, symbols, customs, and performative practices through which communities express and sustain their relationship with the spiritual world. Rooted in communal acceptance, historical continuity, and religious significance, they differ from ordinary social customs by embodying spiritual meanings that connect people with their ancestors, deities, and collective heritage. Scholars view sacred traditions as vital to preserving cultural identity and transmitting communal values through symbolic practices and ceremonial activities that maintain continuity with the past (Assmann 36). They encompass ritual songs, myths, legends, and ceremonies that reinforce historical consciousness and social cohesion.

In many African societies, sacred traditions shape both individual and communal life through rites associated with birth, initiation, kingship, marriage, and death. These rituals mark important life transitions, affirm shared values, and provide cultural frameworks for interpreting social realities, resolving crises, and preserving collective heritage. They also constitute the foundation of many African theatrical traditions, where music, dance, masks, costumes, and symbolic actions merge to create dramatic expression. In this study, sacred traditions refer to the ritual practices, ceremonial performances, indigenous belief systems, and symbolic cultural forms that embody the spiritual and historical consciousness of a people. Their significance extends beyond religious observance to the preservation of cultural heritage and the sustenance of communal identity.

1.3. Cultural Memory

Cultural memory, on the other hand, refers to the process through which societies preserve, propagate, and interpret shared experiences. They emphasise the collective conceptions of life and explore how communities maintain continuity with their past through symbolic representations, narratives, rituals, and cultural practices. It therefore serves as a repository of the people's history, values, beliefs, and identity.

Cultural memory, according to Jan Assmann, is a shared history and knowledge that society preserves across generations. Communities actively engage in the reconstruction of their history and identity by participating in these events. Through repetition, these performances entrench collective experience while remaining flexible enough to adapt to changing historical times. Theatrically speaking, cultural memory helps explain how plays preserve and interpret traditional knowledge systems through the staging of rituals, myths, and ancestral traditions. They act as powerful tools that resist adulteration of their history and reaffirm communal identity. It provides a lens to understand how specific plays transform sacred traditions into a lasting expression of cultural survival and self-definition.

2. Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on Jan Assmann's cultural theory and Soyinka's Fourth stage theory that provide a framework for examining how ancestral spirits and sacred tradition serve as custodians of communal memory and mediators between the physical and spiritual realm.

2.1. Cultural Memory

The theory of cultural memory explains how societies preserve and transmit their collective experience, values, and identities. The theory is sustained through symbolic forms such as rituals, ceremonies, myths, songs, festivals, and other cultural practises that connect a community to its historical past (Assmann 37-40). The relevance of this theory lies in the fact that dramatic texts often function as an avenue for remembrance where cultural experiences are preserved and reinterpreted by representing rituals, sacred traditions, and ancestral consciousness. Thus, drama becomes a medium for sustaining communal identity. The theory, therefore, provides a framework for understanding how playwrights preserve cultural values through dramatic representation.

2.2. Soyinka's Fourth Stage Theory

This theory originates from Soyinka's conception of African cosmology as comprising the realms of the living, the dead, and the unborn. Soyinka describes the fourth stage as the existing transitional space between these realms, which is a

metaphysical space where the spiritual and human realities intersect (140-41). Ritual performances not only enable movement across this gulf but also facilitate communication between the living and the dead. The theory highlights the relevance of ritual sacrifice and ancestral presence in African dramatic traditions and explains how dramatic performances recreate interactions between the visible and invisible world. This transforms the stage into a platform for spiritual meditation. Ancestral spirits are therefore understood as supernatural figures and active forces that not only shape communal consciousness but also define social order.

Soyinka's theory is relevant because it highlights the spiritual dimensions of many Niger Delta plays. The play uses rituals, sacred performances, and ancestral presence to establish connections between the past and the present, the living and the dead. The fourth stage theory, therefore, provides the basis for interpreting the metaphysical significance of these dramatic representations. From the foregoing, one can say that both theories explain how sacred tradition aids the preservation of communal identity and historical consciousness. The Fourth stage clarifies the spiritual process through which ancestral presence is dramatized. Both theories facilitate the analysis of the relationship between memory ritual and cultural continuity in the selected texts.

3. Literature Review

Scholarly works on African drama have consistently highlighted the importance of ritual mythology and indigenous belief systems in the formation of dramatic meaning. Scholars like Soyinka, Clark, and Echeruo have established the link between African traditional performance, arguing that ritual forms offer both the aesthetic foundation and philosophical orientation of many African dramatic expressions. This has occasioned the extension of this discourse by subsequent critics who examined how playwrights employ indigenous cultural resources to deal with questions of identity, history, and social transformation.

Studies on Zulu Sofola's works by critics mainly focused on her commitments to African cultural values and traditional institutions. It has been observed that her place for ground communal ethics, ritual authority, and the consequences of violating established cultural norms. Critique of *King Emene* emphasises kingship, traditional leadership, social responsibility, and the conflict between individual desires and communal expectations, which have contributed immensely to understanding Sofola's vision of culture and her affirmation of indigenous philosophical systems. However, scant attention has been paid to how spiritual consciousness and sacred traditions serve as mechanisms of cultural memory within the play.

In the same vein, extant scholarship on Binebai's dramatic works has examined his preoccupation with Niger Delta history, identity, performance tradition, and cultural heritage. Critics often note his resilience on indigenous performance elements such as songs, oral traditions, and communal participation that function as strategies for preserving cultural values in contemporary society. The play *Storms of Ogori* is notable for celebrating communal history and the use of performative traditions as a means for cultural expression. Nevertheless, extant criticisms focus on the play's cultural and performative dimensions without adequately exploring how sacred traditions operate as a storehouse of collective memory and ancestral consciousness.

African theatre has increasingly highlighted the relationship between performance and memory. Researchers in this area argue that rituals, festivals, songs, and dramatic enactments serve as cultural archives through which the community preserves historical experiences and transmits indigenous cultural knowledge. These studies have demonstrated that performance traditions also serve as sites of remembrance where communal identities are continuously reconstructed and reaffirmed.

While these studies offer meaningful insights into ritual performance, indigenous culture, and African dramaturgy, very limited comparative attention is paid to the intersection of ancestral spirits, sacred tradition, and cultural memory in both *King Emene* and *Storms of Ogori*. Extant literary investigations of these issues are done separately rather than as an interconnected element of dramatic representation, which this study addresses by investigating how both plays use ancestral consciousness and sacred traditions as cultural resources for the preservation of communal memory for reinforcing collective identity and ensuring societal continuity.

3.1. Analysis of *King Emene*

In *King Emene* (1974), the combination of rituals, spirits, sacred traditions, and communal survival functions not as a protective shield but as a severe, unyielding cosmic moral law. The play, which is set in the traditional Igbo Kingdom of Oligbo, utilises the cyclical world view of African cosmology to show that communal survival gets threatened when political leadership desecrates sacred tradition and ignores spiritual warnings. The play utilizes the week of peace,

which is a sacred period of purification, to establish and frame the plot. In Oligbo tradition, the week of peace is essential to move the community into a prosperous new year. The King who serves as a spiritual intermediary must be absolutely pure to carry the people's burdens and prayers into the sacred shrine. Sofola introduces this tension at the beginning of the play; the entire kingdom experiences deep anxiety over ensuring that the land is cleansed before the king enters into seclusion. The reverence accorded to this spiritual activity is highlighted by the king's mother, who tries to manipulate the divine realm through agonising morning libations.

Water of life, shower us with blessings, water of peace, give our hearts rests keep evil far from us (1)

Sofola introduces an immediate threat to the community's survival by revealing a cosmic imbalance. The Oracle delivers a terrifying message that the royal palace is spiritually defiled, but King Emene, the stubborn young king, was ignorant that his mother, Nneobi, committed a sacrilegious act by poisoning Chibueze, the rightful heir to the throne, so that he would become king. This single moral violation involving a blood guilt which is an abomination (nso ala) renders the palace spiritually defiled and endangers the entire community. Consequently, the deities and ancestors reject all ritual supplication until the crime is publicly confessed, paid for, and cleansing rituals are performed. The main conflict emerges with the stubborn and hubristic refusal of King Emene to adhere to the demands of this sacred tradition. Blinded by his political ego and the quest to assert his authority, coupled with bad advice from sycophants like Jigide, who advises him to "use an iron hand on the people" (p 28), King Emene saw the warnings of the elders and the priests as a treasonous conspiracy against his sovereignty. When the Olinzele council, comprising the traditional council of chiefs and the elders back him to delay the peace week and purify his household, he chose to assert his monarchical and spiritual authority by saying, "What I will do I will do" (p 25). To enforce his kingly authority, the king commits a series of devastating sacrileges that threaten to undermine the traditional checks and balances of the kingdom. He targets the Omu, who is the representative of the goddess of the land, because of her insistence on divine atonement as decreed by the Oracle. Emene desecrates her sacred office by stripping her of her authority and exiling her from the kingdom. He moved on to replace her with a puppet priestess, Nwani. The punishment of the Omu, who serves as the link between the protective maternal deities of the kingdom, throws Oligbo into a state of pandemonium and chronic panic. The catastrophic climax of the play illustrates the supremacy of the spirit world over human arrogance. By defying the council, banishing the Omu, coupled with the desecration of the land, King Emene drew the retaliatory wrath of the gods for the ultimate transgression of walking into the sacred shrine to enact the peace week ritual. The king rushed out of the shrine, screaming in terror, stating that he was confronted by a monstrous metaphysical serpent. Faced with the terrifying divine verdict, Nneobi realised the futility of her attempt to bypass justice and publicly confessed to the murder of Chibueze, the rightful heir. Overwhelmed by the tragic tone of events, King Emene runs into the inner chambers of the palace and commits suicide. Sofola emphasises through this tragic resolution that in the African worldview, the preservation of the community overrides or supersedes the survival of any individual monarchy. King Emene's tragic death becomes a necessary though involuntary act of expiation that pacifies the gods and purges the land of the blood guilt that threatened to destroy the Kingdom. The play represents sacred traditions and rituals, not just as a social and political convention, but as a non-negotiable spiritual law necessary for the preservation, renewal, and moral survival of the society.

3.2. Analysis of *Storms of Ogori*

Ben Binebai's *Storms of Ogori* merges spirits, rituals, traditions, and communal survival into a single plot line. The traditional beliefs of the community act as a protective shield against total annihilation. This integration was achieved by positioning a traditional sacred and well-celebrated wrestling festival as the basis for communal survival. This festival, which takes place in Odi town square, is not merely a sporting event but a sacred custom used to maintain cosmic balance, honour heroic ancestors, and ensure cultural survival through the marriage of the champion. The chairman of the community, Amabenemo, introduces the gathering as a powerful celebration of ancestral wisdom.

Elders of Odi, this is a great day in our land, a day we are made to witness power, style, technique, and display of wisdom (p 7)

The performance is laced with indigenous ritualised language, evident in Sonoma's statement. "The crocodile will fly out of the deep waters with wings" (9). This shows how oral idioms link human action directly to environmental and aquatic ancestral spirits. This sacred communal festival is violently disrupted when a monstrous three-horned Ogori attacks the arena, killing the bride Embeleakpo just as she was to be presented to the wrestling champion Owiepele and injuring people. The attack halts the ceremony and throws the community into deep crisis and mourning. To process the collective trauma, the community goes into ritual mourning by singing a traditional dirge. Through this sudden disruption, Binebai shows how a threat to cultural survival forces the community to retreat to sacred songs in order to draw spiritual strength from their ancestors.

The community elders' response shows that defeating the Ogori requires more than physical strength. It will also require a deep spiritual understanding of the threat. Opukiri explains that the Ogori “*has planted long-lasting horror in our minds*” (10). This shows that the monster is perceived as causing not only physical danger but also fear and psychological distress. Sonoma reinforces this idea by describing the Ogori as “a powerful beast of the forest. It is a physically and spiritually well-built monster that can suck a whole community” (p 11). The playwright's portrayal of Ogori as both a physical and spiritual being suggests that ordinary human efforts cannot defeat it. Instead, success will require both spiritual and physical intervention. This realisation moves the story into the forest in movement two, where the fleeing youths hide and unexpectedly discover a place of spiritual revelation. The forest goes beyond being a safe place to escape danger to become a sacred ground where deeper truths are revealed. There, the youths meet a small boy sitting beside a large tree trunk. Despite looking like a child, he acts as a guardian of ancient wisdom who broadly condemns the hunters for their fears, calling them deadwood, broomsticks, and utter cowards (18). In an attempt to attack him, the ordinary world suddenly transforms into a spiritual experience. The stage directions stated that “the boy runs behind the tree trunk, and a strange figure clad in a red robe with a white band of cloth tied around his forehead appears. The forest at this point gets lit with red lights until the Agadagba and his acolyte appear to them” (19). This dramatic transformation shows that the forest is not merely a physical place but a sacred ground where spiritual forces reveal themselves. The child later transforms into Agadagba, the chief deity of the Odi Kingdom, accompanied by his spiritual acolytes Vimor and Adafiri. This clear manifestation of the spirit world is a turning point for the survival of the community. By challenging the impulse of the youths to flee, the play establishes that cultural survival is an active, courageous responsibility. “Don't run away, running away from responsibility is acceptance of defeat and death” (19). The deity elucidated that his presence is a direct response to the internal agony and broken traditions of the people,

“I have come to you from my home because I hear the wailing of the land, here I am to turn your tears of sorrow to tears of joy. I have come to turn your cowardice to bravery” (21-22).

Through this sequence of communal celebrations, tragic interruptions, ancestral reprimand, and divine manifestations, the play *Storms of Ogori* demonstrates that sacred traditions are not dead. Instead, spirit and ritual form an active living framework through which the people of the Niger Delta process historical crisis, retrieve their collective abilities, and protect their communities from total physical and cultural annihilation.

4. Discussion

The findings show that *King Emene* and *Storms of Ogori* present sacred traditions as more than religious practices or dramatic elements. Both plays portray rituals, ancestral spirits, and indigenous performances as important cultural institutions that preserve communal memory, protect cultural identity, and ensure the survival of society. Although both playwrights draw from African cosmology, they use sacred traditions differently to explain how communities respond to spiritual and social crises.

In *King Emene*, Zulu Sofola presents sacred tradition as the moral foundation of society. The play demonstrates that rituals and ancestral laws are sacred and cannot be ignored by political leaders. King Emene's rejection of the oracle, the elders, and the sacred institutions results in the spiritual and moral collapse of the kingdom. His death restores harmony, showing that communal survival is more important than individual authority. Unlike previous studies that mainly focus on kingship and leadership, this study argues that the play also uses sacred traditions to preserve cultural memory by reminding each generation of its moral responsibilities.

In *Storms of Ogori*, Ben Binebai presents sacred tradition as a source of hope, courage, and renewal. The wrestling festival, ritual songs, and the appearance of Agadagba demonstrate that ancestral forces continue to guide and strengthen the community during times of crisis. While *King Emene* presents sacred tradition as a force of judgement, *Storms of Ogori* portrays it as a force of restoration. Together, both plays show that sacred traditions preserve not only the past but also the future of the community.

The findings strongly support Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory Theory, which argues that societies preserve their identity through rituals, festivals, songs, and other symbolic practices. In both plays, these cultural practices transmit indigenous knowledge, communal values, and historical experiences from one generation to another. However, this study extends Assmann's theory by showing that in African drama, cultural memory is sustained not only through symbolic practices but also through active belief in ancestral spirits and the spiritual world.

The findings also confirm Soyinka's Fourth Stage Theory. The interactions between humans and spiritual beings in both plays illustrate the meeting point between the living and the ancestors. In *King Emene*, this is seen through the oracle,

the sacred shrine, and divine judgement, while in *Storms of Ogori*, it is reflected in the manifestation of Agadagba and other spiritual beings. This study further argues that the Fourth Stage is not only a metaphysical space but also a cultural space where communal memory and indigenous values are preserved.

The major contribution of this study lies in its comparative analysis of the two plays. Previous studies examined *King Emene* and *Storms of Ogori* separately, focusing on leadership, ritual, performance, or culture. This study demonstrates that both plays use sacred traditions as living cultural systems that preserve communal memory, reinforce collective identity, and ensure cultural continuity. It therefore establishes that sacred traditions in African drama are not merely religious symbols but powerful cultural resources for preserving indigenous heritage in the face of modern social change.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that *King Emene* and *Storms of Ogori* represent sacred traditions as important cultural institutions that preserve communal memory, reinforce indigenous values, and ensure cultural survival. Rather than functioning merely as religious practices or dramatic devices, rituals, ancestral spirits, festivals, and indigenous performances serve as living links between the past and the present, sustaining the identity and continuity of the community.

The findings support Assmann's Cultural Memory Theory by demonstrating that cultural practices preserve collective identity across generations, while Soyinka's Fourth Stage Theory explains the interaction between the human and spiritual worlds that shapes communal life in both plays. The study further argues that these spiritual encounters are also important mechanisms for preserving cultural memory.

By comparatively examining *King Emene* and *Storms of Ogori*, this study contributes to existing scholarship by showing that sacred traditions function as dynamic cultural resources rather than static religious symbols. It concludes that African drama remains an important cultural archive through which indigenous knowledge, ancestral values, and communal identity are preserved in the face of social and cultural change.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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