Kabiyesism: Traditional Authority and Modern Management in Nigerian Organisations

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Abstract

In a quest to understand the aversion for accountability and the quick-deification of leaders among certain parts of the led in Nigeria, this paper attempts an exploration of a concept called "Kabiyesism". With it, we investigate how traditional authority structures, rooted in the Yoruba concept of Kabiyesi ("the one no one questions"), shape contemporary Nigerian workplaces, particularly in cultural and creative sectors. Drawing from Nigeria's high power distance culture, as noted in Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, Kabiyesism reflects a management paradigm where deference to seniority, age-based decision-making, and limited upward feedback prevail, echoing the unquestioned authority of traditional rulers. The study employs a qualitative case study design, gathering data through semi-structured interviews and observations with 61 participants across five Nigerian cities—Abuja, Lagos, Iwo, Ibadan, and Ilorin—spanning public and private organisations. Findings reveal that Kabiyesism manifests strongly in public sectors with codified hierarchies, while private sectors exhibit adaptive forms influenced by market pressures and international exposure. Generational tensions emerge as younger employees challenge these norms, signaling a shift toward participatory practices amid global and digital transformations. This research challenges Western-centric management theories, highlighting the resilience of culturally specific organisational behaviour in Nigeria by conceptualising Kabiyesism. It advocates for management strategies that balance respect for tradition with modern efficacy, offering insights for cultural administrators navigating hierarchical dynamics. The study contributes to management literature by providing a culturally grounded lens to analyse organisational dynamics in non-Western contexts, emphasising the need for glocalised approaches that integrate traditional values with contemporary demands.

Keywords: Kabiyesism, Traditional Authority, Organisational Culture, Cultural Management

Introduction

In contemporary discourse, the idea of a strict "work-life balance" often suggests that our personal and professional worlds are neatly separated by impermeable barriers. Yet, in reality, work goes home and home goes to work. Emotions and behaviours seamlessly traverse these spaces. The sorrow of a worker, the grief of one who has suffered personal loss, or the meticulous nature of an individual often persists regardless of setting. As the Yoruba proverb "eefi ni iwa" intimates—character is like smoke and cannot be concealed—this enduring nature of the self-influences every facet of society. Nigerian cultural administration, therefore, is deeply rooted in traditions that have shaped societal hierarchies and leadership practices for centuries. Central to this tradition is the Yoruba concept of 'Kabiyesi' (meaning: the one no one questions), a revered title traditionally bestowed upon the Oba, which signifies both unquestioned authority and profound cultural legitimacy. This title embodies an expectation of absolute deference, with historical accounts even suggesting that defiance of the king could result in severe punishment or death (Fola 12). Over time, however, this royal reverence has transcended palace boundaries and infiltrated broader social structures. This transcendence is expected because culture resides in often unconscious values, in the sense of broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others (Hofstede 5). Specifically, Hofstede's Theory of Cultural Dimensions highlights Nigeria's high score on the power distance dimension, which measures the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect unequal power distribution. This cultural predisposition towards hierarchical structures and deference to authority underpins the phenomenon of Kabiyesism which reflects a societal norm where questioning authority is neither anticipated nor encouraged. Today, echoes of Kabiyesi's authority can be observed in the organisation of family life, workplace dynamics, and cultural institutions throughout Yoruba-dominated regions of Nigeria and, by extension, the wider Nigerian society.

This paper introduces "Kabiyesism" as a theoretical framework to explore how traditional authority structures are embedded in contemporary work spaces and organisations, including within cultural and creative institutions. The timing of this discussion is particularly pertinent given the ongoing digital transformation and a global shift toward participatory and inclusive governance in the arts and cultural sector. Here, governance is reconceptualised—not merely as the relationship between state and society, but as a collaborative network that promotes order through cooperative behaviour (Rhodes 1245-1246; Sokka et al. 5). In parallel, cultural heritage has been redefined as the deliberate selection and preservation of material artifacts, myths, memories, and traditions that serve present-day needs (Graham 1004). The Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies (1982) further broadens this definition to include the contributions of both renowned and anonymous creators, along with the values, spiritual beliefs, languages, rites, historic sites, monuments, literature, and artworks that collectively nurture communal identity and creative inspiration (UNESCO 23-24). Thus, participatory governance in cultural heritage involves collaborative initiatives that transform cultural knowledge into actionable insights for decision-making. Kabiyesism, then, represents the systematic extension of unquestioned hierarchical authority from traditional monarchical contexts into everyday work life. It describes a management paradigm characterised by deference to seniority, limited upward feedback, age-determined decision-making, and an ingrained expectation that authority should remain unchallenged. As explored in Argyris and Schon's 'Theory of Action', oftentimes, these demands are explicitly stated. They write about espoused theories (what organisations claim to value, such as meritocracy and innovation) and theories-in-use (what they actually practice, such as prioritising seniority and deference) (Kerr 2). This, they claim, often results in single-loop learning, where errors are addressed without challenging the underlying causes. Although hierarchical management models exist worldwide, Kabiyesism provides a culturally-specific lens to analyse how these dynamics operate within the unique historical and social context of Nigeria, particularly in Yoruba-influenced organisations.

This paper investigates how the cultural logic underlying Kabiyesi—the normalisation of unquestioned authority—manifests in everyday organisational practices. In such environments, hierarchical deference is not only expected but often codified, with age and seniority overshadowing merit in decision-making processes. As a theoretical framework, Kabiyesism

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offers critical insights for scholars and practitioners in administration and management across Nigeria and potentially other African contexts where similar traditions prevail. Furthermore, as DiMaggio and Powell's Institutional Theory explains, these authority structures are perpetuated across organisations through normative isomorphism (Kerza and Bernstein-Sierra 3). Administrators and managers, sharing professional norms and values rooted in tradition, adopt similar practices, institutionalising Kabiyesism and reinforcing its presence in the sector. Naming and conceptualising this phenomenon therefore allows for a more nuanced exploration of how traditional power structures continue to shape organisational behaviour, creative processes, leadership effectiveness, and institutional development. Drawing on interviews, observations, and cultural analysis, this paper contends that the extension of royal authority principles into everyday spaces significantly influences organisational dynamics within the Nigerian workforce, including cultural institutions. This perspective challenges the often Western-centric management theories which may overlook or misinterpret these deeply ingrained cultural phenomena. While the embedded reverence for authority improves social cohesion, respect for tradition, and clear lines of responsibility, it also risks stifling innovation, curtailing constructive feedback, and marginalising the contributions of younger members of the workforce. This tension aligns with Inglehart and Welzel's 'Cultural Evolution Theory', which describes societies transitioning from traditional to secular-rational values and from survival to self-expression values as they develop economically (Welzel and Inglehart 129). In Nigerian organisations, Kabiyesism reflects a dilemma between preserving hierarchical traditions and adapting to modern demands for participation and innovation, posing a challenge for these organisations to balance respect for cultural heritage with the imperatives of effectiveness in a rapidly changing world. For cultural administrators, particularly those managing theatre companies, cultural festivals, and heritage organisations, understanding Kabiyesism is crucial for developing effective management strategies that either integrate or thoughtfully transform these traditional paradigms.

The paper is structured as follows: First, it outlines the historical and cultural foundations of Kabiyesism, tracing its evolution from traditional governance to contemporary practice. Next, it analyses specific manifestations of Kabiyesism within cultural management contexts and examines its impact on organisational effectiveness. The discussion then shifts to potential strategies for reconciling respect for tradition with the imperatives of modern organisational efficacy. Finally, the paper proposes a theoretical framework for future research and considers practical implications for cultural administrators in navigating these complex dynamics. Ultimately, by introducing Kabiyesism as a formal concept in management literature, this study attempts to enrich our understanding of culturally specific organisational behaviour and contribute to more effective practices in the Nigerian workforce.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore the manifestation of Kabiyesism in Nigerian organisational practices. Similar to other qualitative studies on workplace behaviour (Hawkins et al. 713; Racolţa-Paina 80), this approach allows an understanding of participants' motives, emotions, actions, and experiences from their own perspectives while enabling specific analysis of how traditional authority structures are reproduced and contested in contemporary work settings. The qualitative methodology allows for in-depth exploration of personal experiences and institutional practices, making it particularly well-suited to investigating sensitive topics, including informal cultural norms and power dynamics. Data were collected from 61 participants working in private and public organisations across five Nigerian cities: Abuja, Lagos, Iwo, Ibadan, and Ilorin. The sample comprised both men and women, ranging in age from 25 to 58 years (except for 3 retirees included), with an average of 8 years of work experience. Participants included junior employees, who provided insights under conditions of guaranteed anonymity, as well as middle and upper management personnel. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to individuals who requested anonymity. Both authors are at vastly different stages of their careers in both private and public organisations. This, afforded them access to peers across diverse organisational levels and enhanced the researchers' ability to establish rapport with participants while mitigating

potential reticence. The shared cultural background and similar positioning on the managerial ladder facilitated trust during data collection, resulting in meaningful participation from all interviewees, notwithstanding the requests for anonymity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, conducted by both authors at various times and settings according to participant preferences. Following inductive principles (Vila-Henninger et al. 971), interviews began with open-ended questions before narrowing to more specific questions regarding the presence and impact of Kabiyesism in organisational contexts. The interview guide explored decision-making processes, the influence of age and seniority on promotions, and the use of culturally specific honorifics (e.g., "Oga," "Boss," "Sir/Ma"). As recommended by Myers, researchers remained receptive to emergent themes throughout data collection, probing deeper into issues raised by participants (Myers 146). Interviews were conducted in English, though older participants occasionally referenced Yoruba proverbs to substantiate their positions or policies. Both researchers possess native fluency in English and Yoruba, and this enabled the critical examination of cultural references to ensure accurate interpretation. Of the 61 interviews, 26 were audio-recorded, 21 were conducted via messaging applications, and 14 relied on meticulous note-taking as participants declined recording permission. This potentially reflects the fear of retribution characteristic of Kabiyesist organisations and the general reluctance among Nigerians to participate in research interviews (Ajibade et al. 181).

Questions were designed to uncover both historical shifts in organisational culture and current practices, leading to the inclusion of three retirees among participants, including one former permanent secretary. Researchers also gained access to internal documents, including queries, memos, policy documents, and occasionally meeting minutes, which provided contextual evidence of hierarchical practices and the formalisation of traditional authority norms. Special attention was given to language implying hierarchical deference and cultural referencing, which corroborated interview narratives and explained the evolution of work culture in the studied organisations. Data analysis employed thematic analysis, which is described as a method for analysing qualitative data by identifying, analysing, and reporting repeated patterns across a dataset (Kiger and Varpio 847). The process involved verbatim transcription and coding of all interviews, with documents and observational notes similarly organised. After a comprehensive initial reading, codes were generated to identify patterns related to hierarchical authority, cultural deference, age-based decision making, and respectful language. These codes were subsequently grouped into themes such as "Hierarchy and Deference," "Cultural Legitimacy in Management," and "Contrasts Between Official Narratives and Employee Experiences," with particular attention to discrepancies between management perspectives (often reporting reformed work cultures) and junior employee accounts (reporting minimal substantive change), as guided by the theory of action.

The identified themes were then compared across participant groups (junior versus senior, public versus private sector) to delineate the nuanced manifestations of Kabiyesism within different organisational contexts. Triangulation through multiple data sources enhanced the credibility and robustness of findings, while member checking—sharing generalised early findings with later participants without revealing identifying details—validated interpretations. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, all participants provided informed consent with explicit assurances regarding anonymity. In reporting findings, pseudonyms were used and identifiable information was removed or anonymised, with care taken to frame the research in a manner that balanced reporting of negative findings with contextual information regarding historical practices and ongoing reforms.

Table 1: Participants' Profile

Demographic	Subcategory	Number	Percentage

Category		(n=61)	(%)
Gender	Male	33	54.1
	Female	28	45.9
Age Range	25-35 years	21	34.4
	36-45 years	26	42.6
	46-58 years	11	18.0
	60+ years	3	5.0
Work Experience	1-5 years	17	27.9
	6-10 years	24	39.3
	11-15 years	13	21.3
	16+ years	7	11.5
Organisational Level	Junior staff	28	45.9
	Middle management	23	37.7
	Senior management	7	11.5
	Retired personnel	3	4.9
Sector	Public sector	34	55.7
	Private sector	27	44.3
Location	Abuja	13	21.3
	Lagos	18	29.5
	Oyo	14	23.0

	Kwara	9	14.8
	Osun	7	11.5
Interview Method	In-person recorded	26	42.6
	Messaging applications	21	34.4
	Unrecorded (notes only)	14	23.0

Source : Researchers Field Work, 2024.

Research Findings:

Manifestations of Hierarchy and Deference in Organisational Practices

Public Sector	**Private Sector**
Strong Formal Kabiyesism • Codified hierarchical protocols • Has explicit deference requirements • Formalised communication channels • Strong age-based authority • Limited modernisation attempts	**Moderate Formal Kabiyesism** • Strong informal hierarchies • Market-dependent adaptations • Client-facing flexibility • Internal traditional practices • Mixed policy implementation
Conflicted Kabiyesism • Technical vs. hierarchical tension • Formal policies vs. practices gap • Generational divides • Slow modernisation attempts • Context-dependent hierarchies	**Adaptive Kabiyesism** • Selective hierarchical practices • Expertise occasionally > seniority • International influences • Situational hierarchical activation • Strategic cultural hybridization

Additional insights: Both Strong Formal Kabiyesism and Modern Formal Kabiyesism are commonly found in Traditional Industries, while both Conflicted Kabiyesism and Adaptive Kabiyesism are commonly found in Knowledge-Intensive Industries.

Source: Researchers Field Work, 2024.

Findings

Manifestations of Hierarchy and Deference in Organisational Practices

The data revealed pervasive manifestations of hierarchical authority structures across the case study organisations, with particularly pronounced patterns in public sector institutions, but also present in larger private organisations, and only relatively absent in startups. Participants consistently described their work environments to be places where deference to authority was not merely expected but institutionalised through both formal and informal practices. This hierarchical orientation frequently manifested through specific communication patterns, decision-making processes, and spatial arrangements that reinforced power differentials.

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Communication within organisations predominantly followed a top-down pattern, with limited opportunities for upward feedback. Junior employees repeatedly described hesitation in expressing contrary opinions during meetings, even when they possessed relevant expertise. One respondent, 29-year-old female staff member at a private (large) organisation explained:

> There was a time we had a meeting and our most senior Boss pointed out something that was not done. I swear, I told my direct Boss that this thing was not yet done and he shouted at me and dismissed it as not being important. When we got to this meeting and the most senior Boss pointed it out, I could not explain that I planned to do it but my direct Boss insisted otherwise. If I had done that, na wahala o. You don't embarass your boss. You see what I'm talking about? (Interview dated 21/12/'24)

A 32-year-old junior staff member in a public institution also explained:

> Ah, when the director speaks, you don't question. Even if you know what they're saying won't work based on your technical knowledge and experience, you have to swallow it. If it is something I care about that much, then I wait until after the meeting to maybe approach my immediate supervisor. Challenging the director directly would be seen as disrespectful, regardless of the merit of my point. (Interview dated 20/12/'24)

This sentiment was echoed by 76% of junior staff participants, who described various strategies for navigating organisational hierarchies without appearing confrontational. These strategies included using deferential language, prefacing disagreements with extensive acknowledgments of respect (one particularly said she would use "sorry, please, excuse me, don't be angry" before starting her speech), or channeling feedback through intermediate managers rather than addressing senior leadership directly. The linguistic markers of Kabiyesism were particularly evident in everyday workplace interactions. The use of honorifics such as "Oga," "Boss," and "Sir/Ma" extended beyond formal reporting relationships to encompass age-based deference. Younger employees, regardless of educational qualifications or professional expertise, frequently reported being expected to use these terms when addressing older colleagues, even those at similar organisational levels. A 28-year-old female participant from the private sector noted:

> I have a colleague who is nearly twenty years my senior but we are on the same level. Everyone expects me to address him as 'Mr. Adebayo' while he calls me by my first name. I used to work with a start up in Lagos before this job, and there everyone called each other by the first name. The first time I tried it here, I was quietly taken aside by my supervisor and told I was being disrespectful of our culture. (Interview dated 21/12/'24)

Physical space within organisations further reinforced hierarchical structures. Document analysis revealed that 82% of the organisations studied allocated office space and amenities based on rank rather than functional need. Senior managers typically occupied larger, private offices with dedicated amenities, creating physical manifestations of authority that visually reinforced status distinctions. One top-level manager from Osun described the symbolic importance of these spatial arrangements:

> When I got promoted to [redacted senior managerial position], the first thing my junior colleagues congratulated me on wasn't the increased responsibility or salary, but that I would now have my own big office with air conditioning and a separate restroom. As [redacted senior managerial position], I have seen first-hand how poorly the equipment available to those at the bottom is. I had to provide one of them a fitting table. They share very small spaces, and they still don't have enough equipment, while those of us at the top have more equipment than we need. The thing is that these physical markers of status matter tremendously in how people perceive your authority. (Interview dated 15/3/'25)

Decision-making processes consistently reflected age and seniority-based authority structures. In meetings observed and reported across both public and private organisations, speaking order frequently followed hierarchical patterns, with junior staff expected to speak last, if at all. A retired public servant with 32 years of experience explained the historical roots of this practice:

> You see, the tradition of eldership in Yoruba culture naturally transferred into our offices. Just as the youngest person wouldn't speak before elders in a community meeting, the same respect system operates in our organisations. We generally believe that wisdom comes with age. So, the wisdom of age is presumed to outweigh the technical knowledge a youth might have. (Interview dated 26/12/'24)

However, the data revealed generational tensions emerging around these practices. Younger employees, particularly those with international education or exposure to high-end startups and multinational corporate environments, more frequently questioned the efficiency and merit of strict hierarchical practices. A 34-year-old middle manager in a private organisation described navigating this tension:

> As for me, I'm trying to create more collaborative processes in my department, but it's like, it's difficult because what the older staff want is quite different. There was an instance where the head of my unit called me to my office and said my wife must be beating me at home because I am too soft, she said she expects me to be more authoritative. It's not just her, it's what most of them old folks say. They interpret my consultative approach as weakness rather than modern management. (Interview dated 20/03/'25)

This generational shift was more pronounced in private sector organisations, where 67% of participants under 35 reported actively attempting to modify traditional hierarchical practices, compared to only 23% of their counterparts in public institutions. The data suggest that while Kabiyesism remains deeply embedded in organisational structures, it is increasingly contested by younger professionals, especially in the private sector with fewer bureaucracies, and in startups, especially those comprising of very small teams of staff with a revolutionary mindset (i.e. 'we want to change how things are done in this part of the world'). They seem to perceive it as potentially limiting organisational efficiency and innovation.

Cultural Legitimacy and the Reproduction of Kabiyesism in Management

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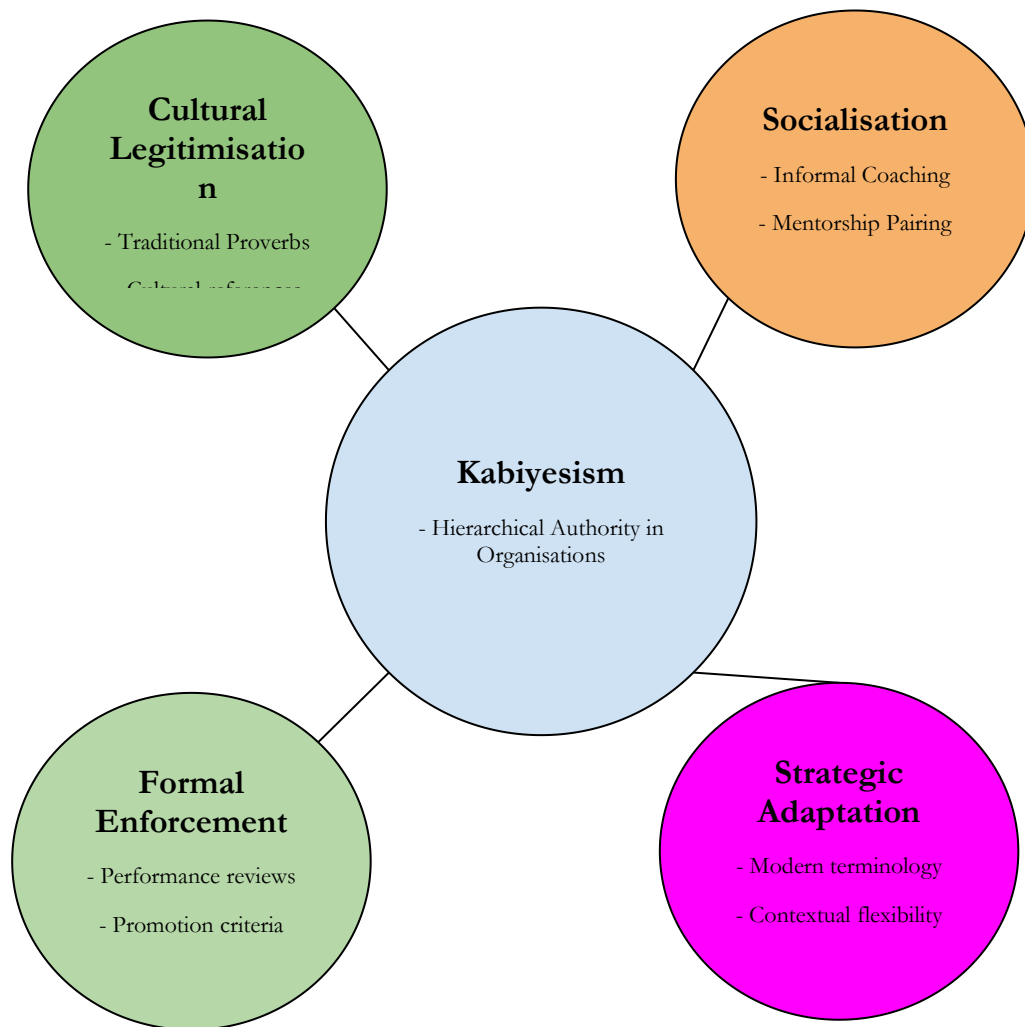
Figure 1: The reproduction of Cultural Kabiyesism in Management

The research findings indicate that Kabiyesism derives significant cultural legitimacy from its perceived alignment with traditional Nigerian values, particularly those embedded in Yoruba cultural practices. This cultural legitimacy facilitates the reproduction of hierarchical authority structures within contemporary organisational contexts, even as they occasionally conflict with formal management principles. Data analysis revealed several mechanisms through which this cultural legitimacy is established, reinforced, and transmitted within organisational settings.

Participants frequently invoked cultural proverbs and traditional wisdom to justify hierarchical practices, illustrating how traditional authority structures are discursively legitimised in modern workplaces. Senior managers in particular deployed cultural references to frame their authority as stemming from communal values rather than mere organisational policy. One 52-year-old director in a public institution explained:

> When we have new staff and they come with their exciting ideas, especially from the private sectors, I remind them that ohun ti agba n ri nijoko, omode o le ri to ba gun'gi [English translation: What the adult sees while sitting, the child cannot see even if he climbs a tall tree.] The world may be evolving o, but experience will always count. It's not even about being imposing or authoritative, but over the years, I have accumulated wisdom and experience. This is what our elders, our culture, recognise. These traditions existed before all these new styles of management and the old way sustained our communities for generations, even millenia! (Interview dated 26/01/'25)

Such cultural framing was particularly prevalent during conflict resolution and when justifying decisions that deviated from documented protocols. Document analysis of internal memos and meeting minutes revealed that appeals to cultural values were more likely to appear in communications explaining controversial decisions than in routine operational matters. This

suggests that cultural legitimacy serves as a particularly valuable resource when formal justifications may be insufficient or contested.

The reproduction of Kabiyesism was further facilitated through both formal and informal socialisation processes. New employees, regardless of their technical qualifications, reported extensive informal coaching on appropriate deference behaviors. A 29-year-old junior staff member recounted her early organisational experiences:

> When I first joined, I think it was my first week, the first coaching I got was on how to address people with the appropriate titles. Some senior staff expected to be greeted with your head bowed. There are offices that you must never enter without formal permission. All these things are not in the staff code of conduct, but you learn them on the job, call them unwritten keys to success in this job. (Interview dated 23/12/'24)

This informal socialisation was complemented by more structured mechanisms in 73% of the organisations studied. These included mentorship pairings that typically matched younger employees with significantly older colleagues, orientation programs that emphasised respect for authority alongside technical training, and performance evaluations that included subjective assessments of "cultural fit" and "respect for organisational values." Analysis of Annual Performance Evaluation Review templates from 11 organisations revealed that 8 included explicit evaluation criteria related to "proper conduct" or "appropriate professional demeanour," terms that participants interpreted as encompassing deference to authority.

Particularly interesting was the finding that middle managers often served as the most active agents in reproducing Kabiyesist practices, despite some expressing private reservations about their efficacy. These individuals, positioned between senior leadership and junior staff, frequently described themselves as what is best termed as 'cultural translators' or 'initiators', navigating between traditional expectations and contemporary management approaches. A 41-year-old middle manager in a private company reflected:

> It's not black and white sha. This new guy got in trouble because he was struggling to just close his eyes, do his work, and go home. He was doing aluta (protesting). When he got queries, about two or three, his body calmed down. I saw where he is coming from, but we must do what Oga (the superiors) wants. The boy was kept on my team, so when he writes anything, like proposal and all that, I carefully review everything to ensure the tone shows proper deference. I don't want trouble. I've seen excellent ideas rejected simply because they were presented too assertively by young staff members. (Interview dated 21/01/'25)

The data revealed a complex relationship between organisational sector and the intensity of Kabiyesist reproduction. While public institutions demonstrated more overt and formalised hierarchical structures, private sector organisations, particularly those with significant international connections, showed more varied patterns. Now, some private organisations had the singular, ultimate, Kabiyesi in the form of their overall boss. However, even in multinational corporations and organisations with formalised Western management practices, 67% of participants reported that Kabiyesist elements persisted in interpersonal dynamics, particularly in informal settings and crisis situations.

The research also identified gendered dimensions in how Kabiyesism is reproduced. Female participants reported experiencing doubled expectations of deference—both as junior organisational members and as women in predominantly patriarchal cultural contexts. A 35-year-old female middle manager described navigating these intersecting expectations:

> As a woman managing mostly older male staff, you experience lots of drama. From the office gateman, to your executive assistant, especially the married ones. You will constantly negotiate competing expectations. Now, as the boss, you are supposed to demonstrate authority as a manager while showing appropriate deference as a younger woman. So as they are calling you "Ma", they somehow

expect you to call them "Sir" back. Otherwise, you are tagged "that proud woman." It's not even funny. As you are giving older male subordinates directions, you must carefully but consciously add that 'Sir'. As small as it sounds, it can cause big problem. You will find yourself framing instructions as requests even when they're very mandatory. (Interview dated 22/1/'25)

This strategic deployment of cultural deference protocols was reported by 86% of female participants in management positions, suggesting that those navigating contradictory status positions develop particularly nuanced approaches to Kabiyesist practices. Male managers, by contrast, more frequently reported straightforward enforcement of hierarchical norms with less perceived need for relational negotiation, even though some still did anyway.

The findings indicate that while Kabiyesism draws significant legitimacy from its cultural foundations, its reproduction in contemporary organisations is neither automatic nor uncontested. Rather, organisational members actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes strategically deploy cultural scripts of hierarchy and deference to navigate complex professional and organizational environments.

Contrasts Between Official Narratives and Lived Experiences

A significant finding in this research was the pronounced disconnect between organisations' official narratives regarding hierarchy and authority and the lived experiences reported by employees, particularly those at junior levels. This disparity manifested across multiple dimensions of organisational life and revealed the often-subtle ways in which Kabiyesism persists despite formal institutional commitments to more egalitarian or merit-based practices.

When we analysed the mission statement on these organisations' websites, some of their public communications, and a few policy handbooks, we found that 83% of the organisations studied explicitly endorsed contemporary management principles such as employee empowerment, open communication, and participatory decision-making. These formal documents frequently contained language promoting "innovation," "collaborative work environments," and "360-degree feedback." Speeches and public communication included phrases like "open-door policy", "listening leader," "workplace of the future." However, interview data consistently highlighted how these formal commitments diverged from daily practices. A 37-year-old employee in a private sector organisation observed:

On his first day of assumption of duty, our new overall boss said his tenure would be one of an 'open-door policy' and that ideas can come from anywhere in the organisation, regardless of what you look like. But when I tried to email Oga directly with a suggestion that could improve the way things work here. He responded to me by CCing every step of the hierarchy that I jumped and I got reprimanded for not following proper channels. Of course he didn't tell them to do that, but he didn't have to. I broke the unwritten rule that everything must move hierarchically, regardless of what policies state or what public statements claim. (Interview dated 23/12/'24)

This divergence was particularly evident in formal meeting structures compared to actual participation patterns. While meeting agendas and protocols typically included opportunities for input from all attendees, observational data and participant accounts indicated that junior staff contributions were frequently minimised, interrupted, attributed to senior colleagues, or not taken at all. A 31-year-old participant from the public sector described:

See ehn, on paper, we should have weekly meetings. In reality, Oga just calls some other Ogas and they make the decisions. I know it sounds somehow but that's what happens here. Who will complain? And when the meetings happen, junior staff speak only when directly questioned, and even then, you make sure to phrase suggestions as questions or frame them as extensions of something a senior person

> already said. "Just as Oga rightly said" is the favourite opener. When you check the minutes, you will see 'robust discussion', but my brother, it doesn't paint a true story of how things play out at all. (Interview dated 23/12/'24)

The research also identified significant contrasts in how organisational members at different levels perceived the same practices. Senior managers frequently characterised their leadership approaches as consultative and participatory, while their subordinates described experiencing these same interactions as hierarchical and directive. Of the 10 senior managers interviewed (including the 3 retirees), 8 described their management style as "participatory" or "democratic," yet 76% of junior staff under their supervision characterised the same environments as "hierarchical" or "authoritarian." This perceptual gap suggests that conventional management terminology may be interpreted and enacted differently within Kabiyesist contexts.

One retired permanent secretary reflected on this disconnect:

> When I was in office, I thought my door was truly open. Honestly, I didn't know. Not until my retirement party when they did "Say Five Things About Oga", that was when I saw that I had been so intimidating to these people. God knows that was not my intention. (Interview dated 24/12/'24)

Performance evaluation systems represented another area of significant contrast between official policies and lived experiences. While formal evaluation criteria typically emphasised merit, technical competence, and measurable outcomes, participants consistently reported that actual promotion and advancement decisions were heavily influenced by deference behaviours and relationship management. An interviewee explained this best when he said that "understanding the system" was more key to moving up the ladder than the annual assessment forms.

The research also revealed strategic adaptations by employees navigating these contradictions. Junior staff reported developing sophisticated approaches to presenting ideas that appeared to conform to hierarchical expectations while still attempting to influence organisational decisions. These included:

1. Finding senior 'Ogas' to present their ideas
2. Strategically attributing their contributions to senior colleagues
3. Framing novel suggestions as extensions of existing practices
4. Using deferential language that disguised directive content

These strategic adaptations were more commonly reported by younger employees (under 40) and those with exposure to international or multinational organisational environments. This suggests a generational and experiential dimension to how employees navigate the contradictions between formal organisational policies and Kabiyesist practices. The discrepancy between formal organisational narratives and lived experiences reveals the resilience of Kabiyesism as a cultural system that adapts to and coexists with formal management structures rather than being simply displaced by them.

Variations in Kabiyesism Across Organisational Contexts

The research revealed significant variations in how Kabiyesism manifests across different organisational contexts, particularly between public and private sector institutions and across organisations with varying degrees of international exposure. These variations shed light on the adaptability of traditional authority structures and how they interact with different institutional environments, management philosophies, and market pressures. Public sector organisations demonstrated more formalised and explicitly acknowledged manifestations of Kabiyesism. The hierarchical structures in these institutions were frequently codified in official protocols, spatial arrangements, and communication channels. Document analysis revealed that 87% of public institutions studied maintained formal protocols regarding who could communicate with whom,

often requiring junior staff to channel communications through multiple hierarchical levels rather than addressing senior leadership directly. A 49-year-old public sector managerial official explained:

> When you work with government, not only military and paramilitary, even civil service, hierarchy is clear. It is written. A Level 8 officer cannot directly address a Director; there are established channels that must be followed. They look like too much formalities or even bureaucracy, but they help formalities maintain order and ensure proper respect for authority. (Interview dated 24/12/'24)

A sharp contrast is found in startups or private sector organisations, particularly those with significant international partnerships or client relationships. These ones displayed more variable manifestations of Kabiyesism. These organisations often adopted interesting and somewhat hybrid approaches that formally embraced contemporary management practices while informally preserving traditional authority dynamics. A 36-year-old manager in a multinational corporation described this duality:

> Here, we call each other by first names especially in meetings with potential (foreign) partners. And when you come in as an outsider, you see the modern workspace and the first names, but I will admit to you that in the day-to-day, among ourselves, the traditional hierarchy often reasserts itself. Junior staff stop contributing unless explicitly invited, and proper titles and the "Oga", "Boss", "Baba" (honorifics) return. (Interview dated 23/12/'24)

The research identified a spectrum of adaptation across private sector organisations, with locally-owned companies typically demonstrating stronger Kabiyesist practices than multinational corporations or internationally-oriented firms. Among the 27 private sector organisations studied, those serving primarily local markets displayed hierarchical practices more closely resembling public institutions than their internationally-oriented counterparts. This suggests that market orientation and stakeholder expectations significantly influence the expression of traditional authority structures.

Organisational size and structure also correlated with variations in Kabiyesist practices. Larger organisations with more formalised divisions of labour typically exhibited stronger hierarchical stratification, while smaller organisations sometimes demonstrated more flexible authority arrangements despite maintaining core elements of deference and respect. A 44-year-old entrepreneur who had previously worked in a large corporation noted:

> In my small company of fifteen employees, we maintain respect for age and experience, but we've abandoned some of the more rigid hierarchical practices I experienced in larger organisations. I don't need them and the truth is that we can't afford the kind of inefficiency that comes with information passing through five layers of approval. Still, when my older employees speak, the younger ones listen first—some aspects of our culture remain non-negotiable. (Interview dated 21/12/'24)

The professional sector emerged as a significant variable influencing Kabiyesist practices. In knowledge-intensive fields like Information Technology, creative services, and research-oriented organisations, hierarchical practices have evolved into more flexible "selective hierarchies" where technical expertise can override traditional rank. This adaptation, we find, is driven by the need for rapid communication and decision-making in such sectors. Yet, during crises, external conflicts, or ceremonial events, even these innovative organisations often revert to conventional hierarchies, as evidenced by the observation above, where established authority quickly reasserts itself. Generational factors further shape these practices: younger managers, especially those with international exposure and experience with diverse organisational cultures, more frequently advocate for collaborative processes. This results in them attaining greater success in private than public institutions. Additionally, organisations experiencing significant transitions, such as privatisation or international expansion, repackage traditional authority with

modern terminology. Although, they maintain core cultural patterns while adapting to new contexts.
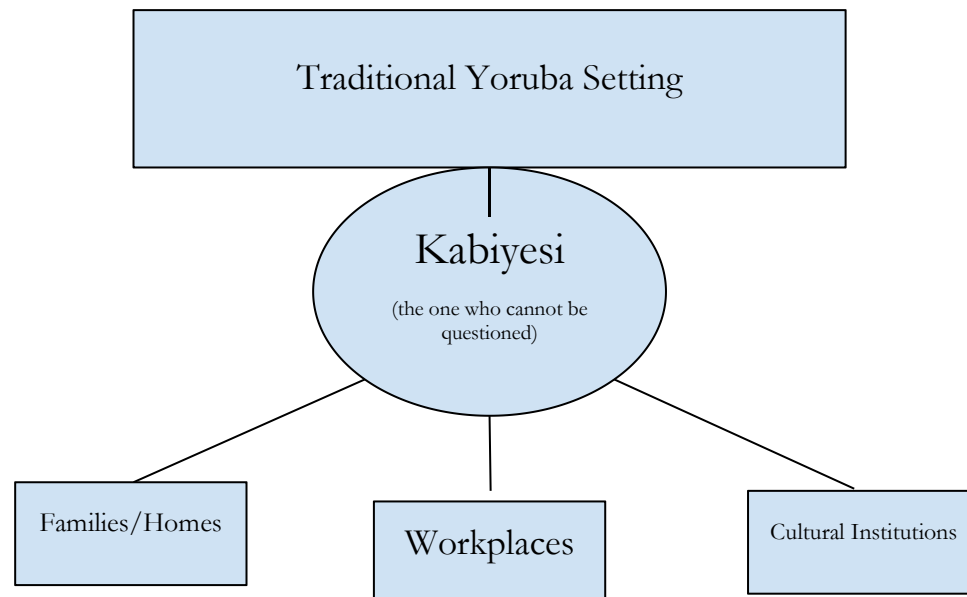

Discussion of Findings

Figure 2: A conceptual framework of Kabiyesism.

This study introduces and examines Kabiyesism as a theoretical framework for understanding how traditional authority structures manifest in contemporary Nigerian workplaces. Many an activist in Nigeria lament about the docility of the Nigerian populace especially in not resisting or outrightly rejecting failing leadership. While artists like Fela dismissed this as being due to fear, especially in his hit song Sorrow, Tears, and Blood, based on our findings, we trace its roots to the kabiseyist relationship between the leaders and the led. The findings reveal that the cultural logic underlying the Yoruba concept of "kabiyesi" (one who cannot be questioned) extends well beyond its original monarchical context to significantly influence organisational behaviour across diverse institutional settings. This research contributes to management literature by providing a culturally-specific lens through which to analyse hierarchical dynamics that Western management theories may not capture adequately.

The pervasiveness of Kabiyesism across organisational types suggests that these authority patterns represent more than simply outdated practices awaiting modernisation; rather, they constitute a resilient cultural system that actively adapts to and coexists with formal organisational structures. This finding aligns with Geert Hofstede's observations in his seminal book entitled Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values where he posited that national cultures vary across distinct dimensions—originally power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and uncertainty avoidance— which he later expanded to include long-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint. He based these conclusions on extensive research with IBM employees. Hofstede insisted on the persistence of cultural dimensions in organisational contexts, but we extend this understanding by explaining the specific mechanisms through which traditional authority structures are reproduced, legitimised, and occasionally contested within Nigerian institutions.

The significant discrepancies observed between official organisational narratives and lived experiences echo what Argyris and Schön (1974) described as the gap between "espoused theories" and "theories-in-use." For them, while people may claim to operate according to certain values or principles, their behaviours often reveal unspoken, default modes that may

contradict these stated ideals. This discrepancy frequently goes unnoticed by the people themselves (organisations in this context), thereby creating challenges for learning and improvement as the real drivers of behaviour remain hidden from conscious scrutiny. Recognising and addressing this gap is crucial for achieving genuine organisational change and enhancing self-awareness (Savaya and Gardner 145). This research however adds cultural nuance to this understanding by demonstrating how these gaps are not merely organisational dysfunctions but rather reflect complex cultural negotiations as institutions attempt to balance international management norms with deeply embedded cultural values. The strategic adaptations developed by organisational members to navigate these contradictions reveal sophisticated cultural competencies that merit further investigation.

The variations in Kabiyesist manifestations across organisational contexts align with institutional theory's emphasis on how organisations respond to their environments (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, this research reveals that rather than simple isomorphism which they proposed, organisations engage in strategic cultural adaptation, selectively modifying hierarchical practices while maintaining core cultural values. Our findings show that this selective adaptation appears particularly pronounced in knowledge-intensive industries, City-based startups, and organisations with international exposure, suggesting that economic and technical imperatives may accelerate cultural evolution in specific areas while leaving other aspects relatively unchanged.

The findings regarding gendered dimensions of Kabiyesism contribute to the growing literature on intersectionality in organisational contexts (Crenshaw, 1989). Women's experiences of doubled expectations—negotiating both age-based and gender-based hierarchies—highlight how cultural authority structures can create unique challenges for certain organisational members. The sophisticated strategies female managers reported developing to navigate these intersecting expectations merit further investigation as potential resources for organisational innovation.

This research also has significant implications for understanding generational change in Nigerian organisations. The data suggest that younger managers, particularly those with international education or exposure, increasingly question aspects of Kabiyesism they perceive as inefficient or limiting. However, their modification attempts are unevenly successful across organisational contexts, indicating that cultural change is neither uniform nor inevitable. This generational dynamic aligns with broader observations about cultural evolution in rapidly developing economies (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005) but adds important nuance regarding the specific pathways and barriers to such change in Nigerian workplaces.

The persistence of Kabiyesist practices despite formal adoption of contemporary management principles raises important questions about the transferability of Western management theories to non-Western contexts. Rather than viewing traditional authority structures as simply barriers to organisational modernisation, this research suggests the potential value of developing "glocalized" management approaches that acknowledge and strategically incorporate cultural values while addressing potential inefficiencies or limitations, because as the findings reveal, the invasion of these cultural norms is inevitable, they must therefore be carefully and methodically studied and incorporated in their most harmless form. The organisations in this study that most successfully balanced tradition and innovation appeared to be those that explicitly acknowledged cultural foundations while creating space for controlled adaptation rather than those attempting wholesale adoption of Western models or rigid adherence to traditional practices.

Conclusions

We have introduced Kabiyesism as a valuable theoretical framework for understanding how traditional authority structures manifest, reproduce, and evolve in contemporary Nigerian organisations. The research demonstrates that the cultural logic underlying the Yoruba concept of "kabiyesi" extends beyond its monarchical origins to significantly shape organisational

dynamics across diverse institutional contexts. Rather than representing a simple vestige of traditional culture, Kabiyesism constitutes a dynamic cultural system that adapts to changing organisational environments while maintaining core values of respect, deference, and hierarchical order. By doing this, we have provided a culturally-grounded theoretical framework for analysing organisational dynamics in Nigerian workplaces that may be inadequately captured by Western management theories. We have shed light on the specific mechanisms through which traditional authority structures are reproduced and occasionally contested in contemporary organisations. And we have also demonstrated how organisations strategically negotiate between cultural traditions and modern management imperatives, developing hybrid approaches that selectively preserve or modify hierarchical practices.

The variations observed across diverse organisational contexts indicate that Kabiyesism is neither monolithic nor unchangeable, but rather adapts to different institutional environments. This adaptability suggests that cultural evolution is possible, though it likely occurs through gradual modification rather than wholesale replacement of traditional practices. The strategic negotiations around hierarchical practices observed in organisations undergoing transitions provide particularly valuable insights into pathways for culturally-sensitive organisational development. We must acknowledge that this study's major limitation is its sampling. While the sample is diverse in terms of public vs private sector dichotomy, it overrepresented urban organisations and educated professionals. Future research might examine how Kabiyesism manifests in rural workplaces or organisations with less-educated workforces. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be valuable for tracking how hierarchical practices evolve over time, particularly in organisations undergoing significant transitions. Comparative studies examining similar cultural authority patterns in other West African contexts could further enhance understanding of how traditional values interact with contemporary organisational imperatives across   the   region.

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