

The Alekwu Cultural Matrix and the Dilemma of Change in Idoma Religion

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Abstract

This study examines the Alekwu cultural matrix and the dilemma of change in the Idoma religion. The Idoma people, an ethnic group residing in Benue State, Nigeria; have a rich cultural heritage deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs and practices. The focal point of this study is the Alekwu, a prominent religious ritual within the Idoma tradition. The research aims to investigate the challenges faced by the Idoma people as they navigate the process of cultural change, particularly in relation to the Alekwu ritual. The Idoma society is experiencing significant social, economic, and political transformations, which have led to the emergence of new ideologies and influences that challenge traditional religious practices. The study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing interviews, observations, and document analysis to gather data. The research sample consists of community members, religious leaders, and experts with knowledge and experience in the Idoma religion. This research contributes to the broader discourse on the complexities of cultural transformation and its impact on traditional belief systems in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: Alekwu, Idoma, Culture, Religion

Introduction

The Alekwu tradition, which stems from the Idoma people have deeply rooted respect for their ancestors, which embodies a complex cultural matrix. The Alekwu deity is believed to be a vigilant custodian of core societal values and norms, punishing transgressors of these unwritten laws and rewarding compliant followers (Ochonu 56). This enshrined belief system is deeply entwined in the socio-cultural fabric of the Idoma community, significantly influencing their everyday life and behaviour. However, over the past few decades, this traditional belief is experiencing increasing confrontation with the currents of change—chiefly arising from Western-religious missionary influences in Nigeria. Among the dilemma facing the Idoma society is reconciling the rising tide of Christianity and Islam with their ancient Alekwu tradition (Osagie 32). These profound faith shifts are challenging the Idoma people's inherent religious syncretism, leading to dramatic changes in the Alekwu tradition, sometimes resulting in cultural erosion. On one hand, some argue against changing these traditional beliefs,

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maintaining that they are an integral part of the Idoma identity and form the stable foundation upon which the community's core values are built. These proponents view the Alekwu tradition as an anchor that connects the community to its ancestral roots, serving as a moral compass shaping behaviour and maintaining social cohesion (Akawe & Ochala 19).

To find a sensible resolution to this dilemma, the Idoma community requires an analytical examination of the centrality of the Alekwu cultural matrix in their faith and identity, balanced against the need for cultural adaptation. This balancing act is a situation that is causing discord within the community—a dilemma that many other ethnic groups within Nigeria and indeed, around Africa is similarly grappling with (Ochonu 41). The objective of this study therefore is to investigate the challenges faced by the Idoma people as they navigate the process of cultural change, particularly in relation to the Alekwu ritual. The study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing interviews, observations, and document analysis to gather data. The research sample consists of community members, religious leaders, and experts with knowledge and experience in the Idoma religion.

The Idoma People

The Idoma people, a robust ethnic group residing mainly in the lower western areas of Benue State, Nigeria, reflects an assortment of cultural diversities featuring an admixture of socio-cultural elements both hereditary and borrowed (Ade 12). These people, predominantly known for their cultural diversity and passion for agriculture, have shaped Nigeria's history. Accurately gauging the historical dimensions and socio-cultural backdrop of the Idoma people requires meticulous attention to detail and a deep understanding of the socio-political evolution of Nigeria. Historically, the Idoma people are known to have migrated en masse from the Congo Basin and Cameroon's highlands to their current location (Egwemi 10). Predominantly, historians agree that this transition occurred between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, cohering with the broader waves of migration patterns across West Africa. Extending our understanding of their migration, it is interesting to note that linguistic patterns indicate that Idoma indeed interacted with significant migration groups including Igala, Ibibio, and Igbo among others (Meek 87). Audaciously steeped in traditions, the Idoma people epitomise a culture rich in folklore, dance, and music. The annual 'Eja Alekwu' serves as a vivid tableau of their heritage; manifesting the tribute paid to ancestors, reminiscent of traversing generations, their faith in the providence, and indeed the spirit of community comradeship (Nnamani 45).

Religion and Culture in Traditional Idoma Society

Idoma Worldview

The analysis of Idoma worldview shows that the Idoma people express a strong belief in a supreme being (God), who is depicted as Owoicho Omanchala. Owoicho in this understanding is believed to be omniscient, and transcendent in nature. For the Idoma people, Owoicho is conceived as indescribable. He is believed to live in heaven and to be in control of all things. All acknowledge the existence of this being, though he is invisible. Okey Igboaka quoting Apochi, and Elaigwu; reveals that his transcendent aspect is so stressed by the Idoma people that God becomes abstract and removed from man's everyday 'life. This explains why Idoma people in their religious worship have no images, nor pictures of Owoicho (God), neither are there any indication of direct worship of Owoicho by the people. In the light of this, Owoicho therefore requires to be approached through intermediaries such as the deities and the ancestors. Other groups of intermediaries include: Ejmbi (Guardian spirit); Owo (the one personal god); Egli-Enyanwu (sun goddess). In Idoma cosmology there is no direct worship of Owoicho by the Idoma religious concept. This belief deviates from the direct 'sacrifice to Chukwu (God in Igbo religion), as described by various authors (Metuh 51-53).

This universe in Idoma worldview is recognized as consisting of the physical and spiritual world. In the spiritual realm, the supreme God (Owoicho) and the other deities and spirits "who act as his lieutenants reside. These lieutenants are all the deities and spirits who share in the governance of Owoicho (the almighty God) as his ministers. They influence man's actions in the physical world. As a result of their functions, which include, protection and assistance to man's needs, these deities are propitiated through prayers, libation and sacrifices. These actions in Idoma understanding are regarded as offerings to Owoicho" (Igboaka 77). On the physical sphere, the Idoma people believe that man who is a central focus in the physical world inhabits the earth. In service of man's purposes are other natural forces such as air, water, hills, mountains, rivers, and other ritual beings that inhabit these forces.

The Idoma traditional worldview expresses much regard and respect for the ancestral spirit (Alekwu). Even though their cultural religious life manifests the continuous and unbroken relationship between their living descendants and the deceased members of the community, they do not compromise the respect and honour due to their ancestors. This fact is clearly stated in the discussion of the Alekwu festival in Idoma as portrayed in the features of Alekwuafia and Akatakpa masquerade (84). It is observed that even though Owoicho (God) is recognized in Idoma worldview as the Supreme Being and Creator, yet the same worldview of the Idoma people also believes in multiple spiritual and mortal intermediaries. These intermediaries are regular features of Idoma belief and religious worship. This makes Alekwu constitute the kernel of the Idoma awareness of their past.

Structure of Idoma Worldview

In the Idoma worldview, at the apex of their hierarchy of beings is the Supreme Being. The constant traffic between the seen and unseen world ensures good relationship between the living and the spirit world. It also ensures that the injured order of a disrupted family or society must be restored through prayer or sacrifices. Below is the breakdown of the structure of Idoma worldview. The Idoma worldview is basically a religious worldview like any other African society where there is the belief in the existence of two worlds. In the Idoma worldview, Owoicho, God is transcendental, all excelling, and supreme. He is also looked upon as Owo no fieowodudu, omniscient. But since He is too physically removed from the world, there must be an intermediary. It is the Oche who is therefore invested with god-like qualities and made the ruler of the community (Igboaka 123).

God (Owoicho)

Owoicho is believed to be the first cause of all things and He is second to none in the hierarchy of beings in Idoma worldview. All things are under him, and he is the overall controller of both the visible and invisible world. The Idoma people have the awareness that Owoicho, God the Supreme Being is the Creator of the visible (universe) and the invisible (spiritual) worlds (Igboaka 128). He created everything therein in the universe including human beings, and we look up to Him for provision and sustenance. Conversely, according to the Idoma religious belief, Owoicho, God the Supreme Being depends on the visible world for manifestations. For instance, if an individual is said to be blessed by Him because of the individual's good deeds how do we know? It can only be known through such benevolence from Owoicho, God the Supreme Being as it regards bumper harvest, procreation, good health, longevity and a host of others which are all physical manifestations of the power of God's providence and sustenance (Igboaka 129).

Earth Goddess (Aje)

The Aje is ranked second in the Idoma hierarchy of being, she is regarded as the sister to God and mother of all things, for that reason, she is regarded as God's Senior. The Earth is the god of productivity; gives food and protection from wild animals, etc. The Aje (the earth) is the ancestor's abode. This land is associated generally and essentially with hunting and for the appeasement of the ancestors, for the taboos against the land, which attract sanction. Therefore, to this divinity is attached a common festival referred to as Eje-Aje festival. This festival is celebrated in most areas of Idoma in honour of the ancestral spirits of the land (the fertility divinity cult). The tradition concept common to the Idoma people on this celebration is that the offering and sacrifices, which are made to the ancestors during the Eje-Aje festival is an assurance for the community that the land is made sacred and therefore has received the blessing of the ancestors (Apenda 12-13).

Spirit Forces (Aalelekwu or Acholokpa)

The positions of these forces are not exactly known, but they are very powerful. These spirit forces include Anjenu Atamokpa (water spirits); Onydga (Yam gods); Ulokle Oke'ocheyi (gods of protection); Ukpo (gods of knowledge); and Ene (god of Justice). The spirits or gods above are known as God's messengers. Some of the spirits or gods could be very friendly but could be very hostile and unfriendly if offended. The Ej'Alekwu festival portrays the belief in the spirit of the departed ancestors, which in effect depicts life after death. The deceased ancestors return to visit the members of the living community during the annual festival (Apenda 13).

The ceremony is dedicated to the ancestors for the protection of the community from famine. The festival attracts a lot of rituals (Oha) and sacrifices (Ofidaka). The reward is envisaged in good harvest and subsequent protection by ancestors, which followed the festival celebration. Mbiti was apt when he says that to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involve participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community (2). Corroborating this expression, Igboaka notes that members of the Idoma traditional community have the opportunity created by the Alekwu festival period for the practical demonstration of human sentiments (60). In their cosmic dimension, the Idoma traditional people encounter symbols of ordinary circumstances, seen as elements of the cosmic, but once they are seen in relation to human experience of the universe, they become symbols of reference.

Alekwu

Ancestors are referred to as the living-dead because of the physical cessation of life and the continuation of life in the spiritual realm. The ancestors perform profound roles in Idoma life and society; they are guardians of Idoma morality and are the owners of the soil with Aje as their president. They were living human beings but died to become ancestors. The power of the ancestors is ultimately derived from Owoicho. For these reasons, sacrifices are offered to the ancestors. Alekwu means the spirit of the dead, the ghost of the ancestors. The belief in ancestral spirit is consistent with the wide – spread conviction that humans have, at least, two parts, a physical body and some kind of non-physical body or soul. The spirit portion is generally believed to be freed from the body by death and continues to exist in some form. Ancestral spirits are often seen as retaining an active interest and membership in their family and society.

The ancestors who exist in the spirit form live and commiserate with their relatives in various ways. For instance, as archetype of morality, they provide their human peers with religious and social functions. So, it is believed that they govern and regulate human society which is always in need of reform. It is for this reason that during the time of celebration the ancestors themselves are present as deities who are worshipped and venerated (Anyebe 3). Like living people, they are believed to have emotions, feelings and appetite. They must, therefore, be treated well to ensure their continued goodwill and assistance to the living.

Men (Ache)

The Idoma regard man as a special creature of God. He ranks below God, spirit force, Aje and ancestors. He is higher than animals and other things in the world. One reason that man is seen as a special creature is because man and woman were the first human pair created and put in him Owo (Guardian or personal spirit, soul).

The Idoma Traditional Cultural Values

The Idoma people, predominantly residing in the lower western areas of Benue State, Nigeria, are a distinct ethnic group with deeply engrained cultural traditions and values (Enimola 5). These traditional values, which encompass many facets of daily life - from social behaviour to religion, have been the subject of much debate regarding their relevance in the modern era.

The first point to consider in this argument is the beneficial effect of the Idoma's traditional cultural values in shaping the moral compass of its people. The basic tenets of honesty, integrity, and respect for elders, cooperation, and good neighbourliness are instilled from an early age (Enimola 6). Nurturing such values contributes significantly to community cohesion and peaceful co-existence. These principles, which are the bedrock of Idoma society, are shaped by a system of stringent traditional laws that encourage good behaviour and discourage acts that disrupt the peace and harmony within the community (Tion 20).

Equally important, the Idoma traditional cultural values are steeped in religious beliefs that contribute to societal stability. The monotheistic religious practice of the people acknowledges a supreme deity, 'Owoicho', regarded as the ultimate giver and taker of life (Achunonu 7). This spiritual understanding fosters a sense of sacred respect for life and human dignity in the Idoma people, promoting a peaceful society. Contrastingly, critics might argue that the Idoma traditional cultural customs like female circumcision, inheritance by men, male children preference, are inhibitive and regressive in the face of modernity (Alobo 12). However, it is crucial to differentiate between harmful stereotyped traditions and the broader, valuable cultural principles instilled by the Idoma. Crucially, the utmost respect for elders held in the Idoma can serve to bridge the generation gap by fostering dialogue and mutual understanding, helping to preserve cultural heritage and create a greater sense of history and identity among young people (Ugwuoke 17).

In conclusion, the Idoma traditional cultural values play a fundamental role in shaping the moral fibre of the society, contributing to peaceful co-existence and societal stability. While acknowledging that some traditional practices may need to evolve in light of societal progress, the overall moral and spiritual values of the Idoma people continue to be of crucial relevance and importance to their enduring harmony and cohesiveness. Therefore, in understanding and appreciating the wealth of richness in

the Idoma culture, it becomes clear that their traditional values are not antiquated but continue to have significance and application in guiding the social and community life of the Idoma people today.

Social Change and Idoma Religion

Change is a continuous and present reality in every society, a sociological force that has many faces with existing phenomenon in context. Change can come about within a particular community because of outside factors impinging on a particular community, or as a result of contextual realities within a society. It is obvious that all societies change continuously. New traits are seen either through discovery and invention or through diffusion from other societies. Religion, however, is something eminently social. This is no wonder why Durkheim said, “Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities.” It is observed that religion functions as a social cohesion; it unites the believers by regularly bringing them together to enact various rituals, and by providing them with the shared values and beliefs that binds them into a community.

The Alekwu shrine provides social solidarity among the Idomas. Religion also provides meaning by giving reasonable answers to ultimate and eternal questions about existence and offers explanation to human predicament and gives purpose to a universe that otherwise seem meaningless (23.) God (Owoicho) gave each Idoma person an Owo (guardian spirit) such that after the death of a man, his owo goes back to Owoicho, and becomes an intermediary between man and Owoicho. During my personal interview with Agaba Abutu on the 15th July 2022, he said, “Owo guards my life, when my father was going to die he gave me Owo..... If you are in a fire, your Owo is with you there. It is also worth noting that religion can inspire or facilitate social change. This is because religious values provide moral standard against which existing social arrangements can be measured, or perhaps found wanting. The respondents gave similar responses when asked how religion has affected social change with respect to popular religion. However, this study argues that social transformation is a contradictory and uneven process and while some forms of cultural expressions may serve to reinforce the status quo and inhibit social transformation, they may also provide the basis for future or more partial form of social transformation.

The separation between religion and some aspects of Idoma culture is not therefore strictly demarcated and there is an interaction and slippage between the two. ‘Syncretism’ or the fusion of religious form is often a feature of both religion and established cultural practices. Yet syncretism has been more recognized as a feature of religion because the origins of beliefs and practices that have been adapted and reshaped are hidden within the official discourse and codifications of established cultures. Thus in Idoma society, as well as other African societies, pre-conquest religious practices and beliefs have been encased in Christianity and other religions. The conquest initiated

a process of syncretism between Christianity and indigenous or pre-conquest religion that can be witnessed most clearly in the practices and beliefs of Idoma people (Apeh 45).

Effects of Social Change on Idoma Cultural Values

The advent of social change has resulted in significant transformations within various cultural arenas worldwide, prompting an evolving paradigm shift in traditional norms. One culture that has witnessed such a transition is the Idoma community in Nigeria. Social change is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that embraces a wide range of processes, including technological advancements, political revolutions, economic transitions, and changes in societal values and norms this relentless force challenges traditional cultures, with both positive and negative impacts (Harper 16). The effects of social change on Idoma culture are evident within language, arguably the most prominent indicator of cultural identity. Increased globalisation and urbanisation have led to a dominance of English and Pidgin English in everyday usage, marginalizing traditional languages including the Idoma language (Igboanusi 16). While positive aspects of this change include improved communication with other ethnic communities and global networking, the downside is the potential loss of the Idoma linguistic identity.

Another facet that has witnessed substantial changes due to societal transformation is the marriage institution. Westernization and modernization have significantly influenced Idoma traditional marriage practices. The elaborate, lengthy processes have gradually been replaced with simplified, convenient courtship and marriage procedures. While this simplification has eased the burden of traditional marriage rites on families, it threatens the endurance of certain traditions intrinsic to the cultural heritage of the Idoma people (Nwogu, 20). Religion-inspired social changes have strongly affected the Idoma culture. The advent of Christianity and Islam has gradually diminished the traditional religious practices in some Idoma communities. The resulting religious plurality is beneficial as it promotes freedom of religion and tolerance. However, the consequence is a declining allegiance to traditional religious practices, further diluting the cultural uniqueness of the Idoma people (Olajide 37).

To conclude, social change undeniably affects traditional cultural values and practices, catalysing a paradigm shift from conventional norms. For the Idoma people of Nigeria, this change has fostered more inclusive, simplified, and globally aligned constructs, but at the expense of their cultural uniqueness and indigenous heritage. It is critical to strike a balance, therefore, between participating in inevitable social change while maintaining the distinct cultural features that amplify the richness of ethnic diversity. This is not to lament the past, but rather a call for a present and future where change is embraced without annihilating the distinctive cultural threads that make up the social fabric of our shared humanity.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper largely discusses the Idoma Cultural Values and the effect of social change with specific interest on the Idoma people of Benue, north central Nigeria. A brief historical background of the Idoma people was discussed with an overview and understanding of the Idoma people. Religion and culture in traditional Idoma society was discussed vis a vis the structure and worldview of the Idomas. Idoma traditional cultural values were vividly discussed where more light was shed on the Idoma tradition and culture. The dilemma of change and the effect of social change on Religion and cultural values were also elucidated, where effects of social change was felt at the various social and cultural life of the people such as Marriage, death and burial, rites of passage, feast and festival were discussed respectively.

In conclusion, there are so many problems emanating from alien cultures on most of the local traditions which eventually can subject the existing cultures to pollution, confusion, conflict, and subjugation. This will in turn make a group of people see a new or foreign culture as 'abomination' and 'adulteration' of their existing culture. As a result of civilization, we are bound to have a neo-culture via evolutionary trend of cultural heritage. In scrutinizing this, we need to examine the clarion call for civilization by underdeveloped and developing nations, and culture and civilization seem to be closely linked and are often confused, although they are essentially different. The most civilized societies are not necessarily the ones with the most complex cultures. Civilization is the technical ability or expertise to master the environment and social mobility to organize and control behaviour. This typically describes the situation in Idoma society today.

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