Social Significance of Idoma Ritualistic Drama of Death: Retrospective Examination of an Alekwu Ogogo Ceremony

By

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Abstract

The time for channeling energies into engagements in debunkments of Eurocentric positions and opinions that Africa had no literature is gone for good. The Alekwu Ogogo among the Ugboju people in Idoma land of Benue State is one of the ritualistic dramas of death. Drama of death here means drama that is occasioned by the death of someone in the community. In this case, the series of activities captured by this researcher as heralding this Alekwu Ogogo ceremony occasioned by the death of Adumou Onyilokwu are treated as stages in this ritualistic drama of death. Dramatic elements in the drama are discussed in the light of the social significance of the performance. Video coverage of the Epooka—judgment—scene was done. Audio recording of dialogues between Alekwus, and of Alekwus were made. The researcher depended heavily on information from five informants vested with the knowledge of the drama. It is true that Christianity is a threat to African culture such as this drama, even though like written literature, our oral literature is a vehicle for educating, informing and entertaining the people. This drama represents an aspect of the lives of the people, without which their society is less complete.
Introduction

Among all the Idoma Oral traditions, the Alekwu poetry chant is the most powerful. In the Alekwu poetry, we have the dramatic genres with all the elements; we also have the prosaic genre with all its elements, then the poetic genre with all the devices and techniques.

The Idoma people believe that life is cycle; in other words, there is connection between the living and the dead. Therefore, the land of the living is peopled by both the physical and the spiritual. Quorcoopome holds same belief as he states that “Death therefore is regarded as a transition from one state of existence to another. It is a passage from this earthly existence to another world. In view of this, great care is taken in burying the dead” [because he has not finished yet] (125). Just as, after death, there is transition to the land of the dead there is also transition from the land of the dead to the land of the living.

The Alekwu is an ancestor that led an exceptionally good life during his life time, contributing to the welfare and advancement of the community. Having lived on earth before joining the ancestral world, the Alekwu is regarded as having much divine power and therefore is a link between the living and God and those at the spiritual realm.

The transformation of an ancestor into an ancestral spirit that can physically exist among the living is marked with an ancestral spirit mask worn by skilled Alekwu poets who are possessed by the spirit as soon as the put on the Alekwu garment. According to Ola Rotimi:

> The mysteries and strange forces long indentified with masks in traditional thought become real at the moment of ceremonial performance…the God of spirit of the ancestors enters into the masked performer with the aid of the masking medium (qtd. In Amali, 20).

This rite of passage from the land of the dead to the land of the living is performed by the children of the ancestors who must make sure their fathers come out with his peers when there is need for such an outing.
The Alekwu masquerades come out during the Eje-Alekwu festival, they come out to perform the last rite (Alekwu ohoweklokwu) which literally means “Alekwu paving the way for the dead”. This is done so that the dead can, without stress, join the ancestors in their world. Alekwu also come out when new ancestors are being transformed into Alekwu to exist among the living. Because life is cyclic, an Alekwu which was transformed in a rite of passage from the ancestral land of the dead to the land of the living must also go back to the land of the dead when his time on earth is up. Those children of his that performed the transformation rite to make him exist in the land of the living are his lifelines. When the last of his children dies his life has come to an end. He has died as a spirit in the land of the living.

The series of drama that follow the occurrence of such a death of a living spirit and the significance of it is the object of this paper. This paper is written after a detailed coverage of the burial ceremony of Adumou Onyilokwu. His father, an ancestral living spirit—Alekwu—has to be buried with him because Adumou is the last of his siblings. This kind of burial ceremony is called “Alekwu Ogogo” which literally means “spirit entering grave” and the corpse is called “okwAlekwu” which literally means “corpse of Alekwu”.

For this ceremony, the grave is special—“Olukpa or Agboji”, the inquest is unusual—Judgment on the Alekwu, the dirge is sung in parts, many other events take place to mark the exit of an Alekwu.

**Definition of Terms**

**Alekwu**: The word Alekwu is a combination of two words – Alo meaning we and ekwu meaning Masquerade. According to Amadi “[when] inquest performances are over, the ancestral spirit mask [Alekwu] emerges to perform the last rite upon the dead’ (13). The Alekwu is a bridge between the living and the dead. He is an ancestor living among his people.

**Okw Alekwu**: Means corpse of Alekwu. In this case, Adumou is the “okwalekwu” because he is the last child of his father on earth.

**Alekwu Ogogo**: This is a ceremony marked by series of dramas commemorating the death and burial of the last child of an Alekwu. Adumou’s death and burial is an example.
**Agboji or Olukpa:** This is the unique tomb in which okwalekwu is buried.

*An olukpa or Agboji: dug five feet like a well, cut open in circle three feet wide by the side, an inner chamber of five feet breadth and nine feet length is created for the corpse to lie. The hole between the inner chamber and the outer chamber is separated by a pot after the corpse is laid inside.*

**Ritualistic Drama:** This is a drama that is a rite that must be carried out. The dramas we shall be discussing here are not just dramas for entertainment but ritualistic for which if not performed, consequences abound.

**Drama of Death:** There are many ritualistic dramas of which drama of death is one. There is the inquest, marriage ceremony, child naming ceremony, festivals, to mention but few. Drama of death is that which is occasioned by death.

**Social Significance:** This is what this ritualistic drama of death means to the society.
Typical Descriptions of the various Dramatic Elements and the various Stages of the Ritualistic drama of Death of an Alekwu Ogogo ceremony

The First Stage

The Scene of Announcement of Occurrence of Death

This scene is less restricted. Here, the participants are the Alekwus, their guides, the Adelekwu (Chief Priest) of the various villages the Alekwus visit to announce the death of the last child of an Alekwu, the entire members of the communities visited by the Alekwus. This particular scene may have one, two or three Alekwus sent to different villages. The idea here is to mobilize all the Alekwus in communities that have the Alekwu spirit mask tradition through their Chief Priest to grace the occasion of the departure of one of their kinds. The Alekwu that will be buried does not play a role in this part of announcing his own child’s demise and his expiration on earth.

People will come close to the Alekwus and ask them what has happened or what brings them out in the night. It is a sorrowful scene marked by high language which is poetic. The Alekwus use this opportunity to bless those that come around them.

According to one of my informants, Edo Adonyapa “just the way human beings announce the death of their own, Alekwus announce the death of their own to the Adalekwu (Chief Priest) to further announce to the Alekwus in his care”. He goes further to say that Idoma land is peopled by human beings and the spirits of the ancestors hovering around. This he believes is depicted by the Alekwus announcing the death of Adumou who in this case is an “okwalekwu”—corpse of Alekwu. At this scene the Alekwus may begin singing and ask the human beings around to join in singing. The Alekwus usually ask human beings of their wives, children, work, the community, etc.

The time of this scene is usually at night when the spirits are hovering around and mingling with their people. Describing this night time, Edris Makward and Leslie Lacy captured it figuratively: “…the African is the hour of mystery, the favourite moment for the spirits and all the inhabitants of the spiritual world” (qtd. in Amali, 21). This is also why the night time is the time for
storytelling in Africa as Makward and Leslie believe at this time “…the story teller knows that the imagination of his listeners is then ready to follow his lead…” (21).

**Social Significance of Stage One**

This stage shows that human beings in Idoma community are in complete union with the spirit world. Life is cyclic and it shows therefore that death is just a transition and not just a permanent end of the dead. The same Alekwus who are announcing the demise of Adumou were dead before and are now living among the living. Onyilokwu, for instance, an Alekwu and Adumou’s father has to go with Adumou because his time on earth as a living spirit (Alekwu) has expired as a result of the death of his last child on earth.

This teaches the living a lesson of life. The Alekwus (spirits) are rallying round and mourning the departure of one of them. Human beings are expected to see reasons to care for one another by showing love, sympathy and empathy. Idoma dirge discourages “relationship of the eye” and encourages “relationship of sharing”. The same dirge warns against “cut-throat relationship”.

The Alekwus we see in this stage engage human beings in discussion such as “how are the women of your house?, how are your children?, how is your work?, and so on. The Alekwus remind human beings of the ancient mantra; “be thy neighbours’ keeper”. They have two faithful human followers each, which demonstrate their absolute loyalties to them. The one in front is called “obiaflote” while the one behind is “oluba”; an Alekwu needs these two humans. According to Ojila Ukah and Oga Ode, my informants, this speaks of team work, unison between the spiritual world and the physical world, respect for elders and humility. At this same time that Alekwus are sent to various communities to announce Adumou’s death, Alekwu Onyilokwu moves from one relative of his to another greeting them from house to house. This is how relationship should be. Human beings are being urged to relate with one another.

It is pertinent to note here that Alekwus also entertain. They do this through the Alekwu poetry chant. In the Alekwu poetry chants folktales are rendered beautifully to the listeners and songs sung also. These tales, proverbs, myths and legends and songs have moral lessons for the living
that are around. An Alekwu also blesses the living, delivers them from curses, sanctifies them and prays for them just like priests and imams do in Christianity and Islam.

**The Second Stage**

This stage is not restricted. It has no specific scene rather it is series of dramatic engagements between the Alekwus that have grazed the funeral of Adumou. These scenes may take place either in the Alekwu sacred theatre, “Odoko” or anywhere in the community. The time of these engagements is not restricted just like the arena for performance. It may be night, morning, afternoon, but before the next stage which is restricted in terms of time and arena.

This stage is usually marked by serious conflicts between the Alekwus who because of their background, state of mind and level of skill want to outdo one another. Their guides—Obiaflete and Oluba—who help them in identifying people around and keeping their money are equally locked in the conflicts. Alekwus are known to ignore comments from other Alekwus’ guides in the name of “Alekwu does not understand language of human beings”. In one of these engagements during Adumuo’s funeral, an Alekwu from Otukpo and another from Ugboju were locked in a tensed conflict of interest and war of words.

Before I continue, let me state here that the Ugboju Alekwus and Otukpo Alekwus don’t agree a lot. This is because the Otukpo Alekwus always see themselves as superiors, which the Ugboju Alekwus always contest. Historically, the Ugboju Institution of Alekwu was commissioned by Otukpo. This explains the conflict between Alekwu Adugana and Alekwu Owunebe.

At this scene, Alekwu Adugana an Otukpo Alekwu is chatting with human beings. He begins a tale:

Fly and Spider want to go to Ojana. Fly vowed to get there faster. Spider said, “this world is far, and it is difficult. There is nothing”.

Fly said, “No, this world is near. Nothing can stop me. I am going to Ojana”.

As Fly flew and wanted to pass, Spider stretched one of his web and caught Fly. Fly spent three days on the road and began to cry. Spider then came down from Heaven and asked Fly, “Why are you crying?” Fly then revealed that they would be burying his uncle the next day in Ojana. Spider then laughed and told Fly “ I told you this world is far and difficult, but you said it is near and easy.” Spider
went away. The next day, they buried Fly’s uncle in Ojana in Fly’s absence. At this time, Fly was still held by Spider web on the road.

Alekwu Owunebe, an Ugboju Alekwu came in saying that it is Ugboju that is bereaved and no place else, so any voice should be Ugboju voice not Otiya’s voice. Otiya is also used in place of Otukpo. The Otukpo people are known to speak Idoma with a musical and seductive tone, which can sweep listeners off their feet. This is Alekwu Owuenebe’s worry. And again, Alekwu Owuenebe is from Ondo in Ugboju, the land founded by Onyilobagwu Edigwu who was a fierce fighter: The Ondo people are known for not resisting fight when they see one.

The conflict of this scene depended largely on the backgrounds of the Alekwus –Otukpo and Ugboju. One of my informants Oga Ode told me that you cannot enjoy an Alekwu performance when only one Alekwu is performing. This scene confirms that fact. And this is why it is drama because actors are a key element of drama. According to another informant, Ojila Ukah: “The more the Alekwus, the more the conflict which brings the interest in Alekwu performance. Though some Alekwus prefer story telling which educates, entertains and informs their audience”

As the conflict raged on between Adugana and Owunebe, Owunebe told Adugana that “those who are outsiders should remain outside, so that insiders can remain inside”. This statement annoyed Adugana so much that he asked: “How can two she goats be in a room eating guinea corn then one will begin to push the other one out?” According to Adugana what annoyed him the most was that his own mother was from Igaruwa—where the drama was taking place. He called a member of the audience, Adiji and asked him if he was lying. Adiji replied that spirits don’t lie. Such audience participation is very common in Alekwu performance. In an Alekwu performance like this Stage Two an Alekwu may invite anyone to play a role just like he did Adiji, or anyone may invite himself by passing a comment or hailing the Alekwu and so on.

In the end of the conflict, Adugana emerges victorious after display of skill and artistry. He ended the scene with a tale of how Ram and Abakpa went to Obochi Adede to seek for power. After giving them power, Obochi Adede told Ram how to use his power to kill Abakpa. He asked the audience “who killed Abakpa?” The audience shouted and applauded him.
Social Significance of this Stage

The various scenes in this stage of the drama are full of folk tales, proverbs, songs, parables, myths, legends and riddles. The tales are full of moral lessons meant for the audience. These folk tales inform, entertain and educate the audience about the various aspects of Idoma life. According to Okot Pbitek:

Amid the political confusing, coups and bloodshed, there are festivals of African music, dance, poetry and art exhibitions. African sculpture and paintings are found in every home in the cities and towns (15).

People travelled from far to witness this ritualistic drama. For some it had been long they witnessed it, for others it was their first. For this researcher, it was his first. The performances heal the audience and by extension, the society since oral literature belongs to the society. According to Nkem Okoh, “…Oral literature is always bound up with the life of a group or society” (223).

There is always a very intense desire in the audience to aspire to be as wise, skillful and knowledgeable as the performers. The Alekwus are known to speak many languages fluently especially Idoma, Igbira, Igala and the Old Idoma language known as Akpoto. The Alekwus’ ability to speak these languages excites their audience even though some may not comprehend what is being said. The Alekwus’ interests are in their audience while the audience has their interests in the Alekwus. This bond is what Nkem Okoh says above. Again we see the bond between the spiritual world of the Alekwus and the physical world of the audience emphasized.

The Third Stage—the judgment (EPOOKA)

This stage is highly restricted in terms of time, arena and performers. Only a few Alekwus known for their skills are usually selected to take part in this extremely special scene. Women can view this part unlike the “Okele”- the last stage. In some places like Otukpo and Umogidi, this particular scene is merged with the “Okele” unlike Igaruwa-Ugboju where this researcher carried out this study. In this kind of ritual that was necessitated by Adumou Onyilokwu’s death, the community’s concentration is usually not on the human being that has died but the Alekwu that will be buried with the human being that has died. Everything that is done is done because the person that died is an “Okwalekwu” meaning “corpse of Alekwu”.

9
The “Epooka” meaning judgment which this stage is about is carried out in place of “elopekwooka” meaning “a talk about the matter of death or inquest”. In other words, no inquest is held for an “okwalekwu”. The “epooka”—judgment—is held instead of inquest because the Alekwu is a spirit and therefore cannot die like human beings do, and therefore inquest cannot be held. Therefore, the Alekwu has to be found guilty by his fellow Alekwus, and he has to accept guilty before he is buried with his child that is departing this world of the living.

In this case heralding Adumou Onyilokwu’s death and Onyiliokwu’s trial by fellow Alekwus, Alekwu Ugbo, Alekwu Abakpa, Alekwu Owunebe and Alekwu Adugana are pitched against Alekwu Onyiliokwu who must be found guilty. Alekwu Ugbo is however lenient to Alekwu Onyiliokwu because they are brothers.

Conflict set in as Alekwu Abakpa begins to sing a dirge “Goodbye Goodbye, your going and not coming back is a shame”. This angered Alekwu Onyilokwu as he retorts “why are you singing that song?” the audience laughed so loud at this conflict. The other Alekwus joined in singing the dirge. With his skill and wisdom he was able to stop the singing.

In this scene, there is usually an “Obekwu” meaning “expert masquerade”, which is a very skillful Alekwu leading the prosecution. In this case Alekwu Abakpa led. Alekwu Onyiliokwu was so skillful that a member of the audience had to shout “find him guilty let’s leave here”. This
was because it was getting dark. The Obekwu had to scream at Alekwu Onyilokwu to call his last son to come so that would see him. “That your son called Adumou, bring him oooo”.

This trick by Alekwu Abakpa saved the day. Adumou was lying in state so there was no way Alekwu Onyilokwu could call him to come. Alekwu Onyilokwu gave up his defence and told his brother Ugbo to look after his grandchildren.

Dramatic Elements of this Stage and the social significance

**Audience:** Elders and people from far and near forming a round circle under a big tree.

**Actors:** The Alekwus, their guides (Obiafletes & Olubas) and members of the audience that made comments occasionally.

**Arena:** The Opu or village square.

**Action:** The poetic engagements between the Alekwus and some members of the audience during the trial of Alekwu Onyilokwu.

This dramatic display teaches a lesson to the audience that the ritual is a serious matter. An Alekwu costs a fortune to make and must be found guilty and ripe to depart. For the Idoma people the cause of the death of a member of the community must be investigated during the inquest so that further occurrence may be prevented. The same way, the exit of an Alekwu must
be thoroughly made legal in the presence of the entire community. This is the communal judicial system at work. It is to make sure nothing is taken for granted so that those coming behind will learn.

The Alekwu speaks in proverbs, tales, imagery, anecdotes, folk songs, myths, legend and parables. All these help to build the worldview of an Idoma person. An encounter with Alekwu creates an unforgettable aura, a spiritual bond to one’s roots.

The last stage of this drama is the “Okele”, which is highly restricted because the Alekwus will become naked—unmasked. This stage will not be discussed in detail because of its sacredness. The “Okele” will be chanted seven times round the Alekwu that had been found guilty. It is at this point that an Alekwu paves the way for the corpse lying in state. This is the denouement of this ritualistic drama after which the corpse wrapped in burial cloth is slipped into the special grave called Olukpa or Agboji.

**Conclusion**

The era of engaging in debunkments of Eurocentric position on African literature is gone. This is drama with all the elements and theatricality and can be scripted into a written play. The Idoma man’s mind is arrested as the drama unfolds, especially those that practice this Ancestral Transformation Tradition. As the drama unfolds the Idoma worldview is built in the minds of the community members. As the drama is peopled by human and spirit dramatis personae, the place of the ancestors and spirits and the roles they play in the lives of the people are emphasized.
Work Cited


“The Legend of Hiram Abif-A Ritualistic Drama”


Video Coverage

The Judgement Scene at the Opu (village Square) By Oche Ukah on the 03/09/2011 during the funeral of Adumou Onyilokwu in Igaruwa, Ugboju.
Audio Interviews With:

Edo Adonyapa
Ojila E. Ukah
Oga Ode
Sunday Abu
Oska Abilama