The Alekwu Festival among the Idoma of Central Nigeria: Implication for Curriculum Planners in the Nigerian Educational System

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Abstract

Every African society has a believe system that regulates the daily activities of such a society. Almost all Africans believe that there is an unseen supernatural world apart from the natural world we live in. this other world is believed to be inhabited by beings that are the source of our knowledge of good and evil. The world watches and judges us, and if we offend them, they may have to be appeased with prayers and sacrifices. It is from this perspective that Alekwu Festival which is anchored on the Idoma belief system is discussed and analyzed in this paper. This is in recognition of the fact that Alekwu festival has continued to exert strong influence on Idoma people’s way of life. Thereafter, the implication of this belief system and other similar ones to curriculum planners in Nigeria is discussed. It is concluded that if effectively harnessed, the Alakwu festival and other similar festivals will form the basis for the infusion of ethics and its study in our Nigerian schools.
Introduction

This essay is divided into two major parts; the first part is on the Alekwu festival while the second is its implication for the curriculum planners of our educational systems. The first part of the essay is largely pulled out of an essay by the celebrant, Alachi, J.A. titled; Alekwu Festival among the Idoma of Central Nigeria in Anyigbe Journal of Theatre, Film, Theatre and Communication Arts vol. I No. I. The work is hereby fully acknowledged in that regard. The second part deals with arising critical issues that are pertinent to educational planners, especially those in the area of curriculum development.

In any given community all over the world, the cultural heritage of a people is enlivened and reaffirmed within the arena of festival celebration. Today, African culture marks the Africans in the America and the Caribbean and makes a distinctive contribution to human culture in “Modern” society (Kimani, 95). Festival has emerged as one of the most visible social indices of African philosophy and religion, which provides cosmo-human understanding within the matrix of communal endeavours.

Reaffirming this view, Isidore Ian asserts thus:

*Human beings who think about things – mystics, poets, and the like seek always to transcend the material plane...festival...enables “momento leno,” that eternal moment of transcendence when the human beings reconciles his accidental materiality with spirituality.* (3)

In this context, this paper shall examine, within the Africa mileu, Alekwu festival among the Idoma of central Nigeria. Emphasis shall be laid on the origins, meaning and connection with ancestors, manifestation and essence of the festival. Thereafter, the implication of the Alekwu festival for curriculum planners in Nigeria shall be considered.

Origin

In Alachi’s view, R.G. Armstrong and E.O. Erim contributed in no small measure to exposing many aspects of the early history of the Idoma peoples. This early history is documented in *Erim’s Idoma Nationality*. From the works of both scholars and several other commentators, we can safely say that before 1500 speakers of a language that was widely known as Doma occupied a large area in the Upper Benue/Gongola River Basin. Territorially, the region was known as Apa or Kwararafa. Politically, Kwararafa was a confederacy of quasi-independent
states, kingdoms, chiefdoms, and chieflets under the hegemony of the Abakpawariga. Consequent on the collapse of Abakpawariga power by the late 15th century, a vicious power struggle ensued which saw the dispersal of many of the diverse groups that were parts of the confederacy. In the process of this dispersal, the various groups that speak the Doma language and practiced ancestral worship (Alekwu) fled to the Middle Benue and Upper Cross River Basin. During the cause of their migrations and settlements, an ethnic identity was moulded and that crystallized to what we refer to as Idoma today. The impetus to this identity had very strong Jukun, Igala and Ebira elements.

It is a common knowledge that when there is an exodus of people from one geographical location to another as a result of war and other social turbulence; they move along with their cultural heritage to their new destination. In this course, their migrations southwards, the Idoma became dispersed in several directions. Idoma speaking peoples can be found in five states in Nigeria. Their present location in the southern part of Benue State of central Nigeria makes them share boundaries with Enugu, Kogi, Nassarawa and Cross River States (Alachi, 73, Ochefu, Y. and A. Idrees, 22).

Like many Nigerian peoples, the Idoma were and still are predominantly an agricultural people. Their major staple crop is yam. Other crops such as guinea-corn, maize, soya beans, beniseed, cowpeas and Bambara nuts are widely cultivated. In pre-colonial Idoma society, the primary unit of society, political and economic organization was the compound unit – Odudole. This consisted of a man, his wife or wives, children and a number of relatives. At the microscopic level, the compound unit provided the labor for production and determined the character of distribution and property relations. At the head of the compound unit was the family head – Adakole, who was usually the oldest male member of the compound. His authority within the context of traditional law was unquestionable. The family head controlled access to the means of production; distribution returns on labor and rewarded deserving members of the compound unit from time to time. He also functioned as the spiritual head mediating between the family and their ancestors. He was obliged to appease the ancestors regularly in order to be able to invoke them when the need arises. It is in this context that ancestral worship is a critical aspect of Idoma worldview.

The Idoma people revere their ancestors; their traditional philosophy and religion is rooted in ritualistic ancestral worship, which is informed by the union of spiritual, metaphysical and material forces governing the Idoma universe. Within
this continuum, Aje (Earth) cult provides the basis for understanding the mind and world view as regards Alekwu festival. Aje are the dead ancestors who re-emerged as Alekwu in the physical world. Alekwu simply means ancestral mask/masquerade and it’s an embodiment of the dead ancestor’s spirit.

**Manifestation and Essence of Alekwu**

The celebration of ethereal beings in metaphysical realm within the matrix of Alekwu ritualistic worship culminates in what is known as Ijah (Performance) Alekwu. Within the various Idoma clans, various sub-clans and in some cases lineages or families were designated as custodians of the ancestors. For example, amongst the Otukpo clans, Upu, Otukpo-Icho, Oduda-Aje Edikwu, Otada, Otukpo-Onobi Akpegede, Asah, Otobi-Akangu, Obaganya, Eboh-Logbah sub-clans are the custodians of Ijah Alekwu. And this also applies to the various clans that constitute the Ugboju axion. But the distinguishing factor here is that while the Ugboju people classify or name Alekwu in respect of the clan such Alekwu emanated, the Otukpo people classify Alekwu into five categories thus: (i) Achukwu (ii) Onyokpo (iii) Ogbolo (iv) Imalayin (v) Afia. These ancestral masks/masquerades are attached with special responsibilities. The Achukwu ancestral mask/masquerade perform funeral rites for elderly men. Achukwu serves as ancestral guide for the deceased elder to Alekwu during burial in Ogo-Alekwu (a special grave for ancestral burial). An elderly man that is buried in such Alekwu tradition will come back or re-emerge as Afia after the period of 3 to 5 years. This practice goes for the Oko family in Orokam. On the other hand, onyonkpo, Ogbolo and Imalayin are responsible for the burial of youths. These funeral functions are sacred and their details are only known to the custodians of Alekwu in ugboju, Oko Orokam and Otukpo. The Idoma society as a whole appreciates the sacred function of Alekwu-hence, they are equally regarded as the root of the society because they guard, regulate and provide for the people. Stressing this point Alachi (2001) maintains that:

...seen as natural phenomenon, Alekwu is as old as mankind and consequently, it has become a part of the people’s cultural heritage. It is portrayed in all facets of their lives and in most cases it dominates the thinking of the people to such an extent that it has shaped their sociocultural activities. Alekwu which is held sacred is part and parcel of the people’s way of life, which has created for itself mood of worship. The sacred is the mysterious potency which lives within the sensory world and stage of supernatural realm in which gods and demons live. This potency
which exists in all things must be reckoned with as superhuman forces in all the concerns of daily life... (32)

In this light, the institution eba(oracle) is seen among the idoma as a consultative forum in excavating the catacomb of the past to inform the present problems of society in view of finding solutions; and to find an anchor into the future. Thus, eba is regarded as a divine link between the worlds of the ancestral spirit (alekwu) and the world of the living (ache) where according to kimani:

*Home is not merely the dwelling place of our physical self. It is also the location of those other invisible, but not intangible selves. Our dominant ideal of home inevitably embraces a nurturing place, a space of spiritual, psychological, social, and physical comfort, security satisfaction, and ultimately confidence, because we know that we will be understood... it is the dwelling place of some of our deepest affections; the place of familiarity and of family that reminds us of the ancestors... as well as those other enduring and unseen, though not unfelt ways in which they continue to touch and shape the present, especially our lives. (2)*

This point brings into sharp focus the fundamental resume of the essence of Alekwu performers among the Idoma.

(i) The entrance to the ancestral spirit world (Alekwu) has been opened for the dead.
(ii) Alekwu lead spirit of the dead from the physical realm to the metaphysical.
(iii) Alekwu is an embodiment of both physical and the spirit world thus Alekwu serves as a bridge between both worlds.
(iv) Alekwu visit the people and cleanses the land of their troubles and woes and gives them new hope

**The Performance**

The performance of Alekwu festival in many parts of Idoma land takes place annually in the month of March. It is, however, celebrated twice in other parts with the public performance taking place between November and December. It is done on rotational basis in respect of each clan that owns Alekwu. The eldest man in each clan is the custodian of Alekwu; he is regarded as divine manifestation of his ancestral lineage and is thus, revered in high esteem with the world of the living until he joins his ancestors in eternal realm. While such an elder of a particular clan is alive, he handles all council matters concerning Alekwu, along with his council
of elders within the community. The celebration of Alekwu festival is normally
done in the eldest man’s (Ada-Alekwu) compound, if it is his turn to host the
Alekwu festival. However, in clans like the Ugboju where political and spiritual
authority is collapsed in one, the Ada-Alekwu is also the obande (clan-head) of the
community. He, thus in theory takes charge of all Alekwu matters although in
practice, a committee of elders oversee this function on his behalf.

The Alekwu festival or “IJah-Alekwu” normally lasts for between three to
seven days. Before the commencement of the festival, elders of the clans within the
various communities usually meet with the Ada-Alekwu to discuss and fix a date
for the commencement of the festival. Once the date is fixed, Aje (mother earth)
must be placated on commencement of the festival. Shamshudeen Amali succinctly
captures it thus:

*In the philosophy, religion, and metaphysics of the Idoma, the Aje-Earth cult
is very essential. The belief and practices associated with Aje-Earth are
essential to the understanding of the Idoma mind and view of the universe.
The Aje-Earth, it is believed is senior even to God. A prayer to Aje-Earth, at
ceremonies (festival) goes: ‘‘they took the sacrifice to the east: the east said,
send it to the west. They took the sacrifice to the west, west said, send it to
God. They took it to God and God said; send the sacrifice to the earth for
the earth is “senior”.’’*(9)

The recognition of Aje (mother-Earth) as “senior” brings the fact that the
earth is the fundamental cradle of life besides other elements such as the sun being
a prerequisite for the crops to yield fruits in anticipation of a bumper harvest. Just
as mentioned earlier, once this ritual is preformed, it is expected that the raining
season will commence to water the earth, ready for cropping.

After Aje-Earth has been appeased, the community (according to clans) is
engaged in activities such as:

...community road clearing, individual road clearing. Many fathers and
mothers in-law look forward to this day as their sons in-law would turn up
to clear ‘physically’ during the day and in the night, would present to his in-
laws...(gifts of any kind such as food stuff, drinks, clothes, money etc.). the
act reaffirms the trust the in-laws have in each other. In this case, Alekwu is
the sole witness and it is expected that all grievances nurtured by each party
would surface and amicable settlement effected. (Alachi, 33-34)
The grand finale brings the community and visitors to the chief’s palace where the commemoration takes place. As the performance opens with the chief and his council seated, a seven short cannon heralds the entrance of the ancestral masquerades of each sub-clan. This is followed by the chief’s rendition of the gerontology and history of the people. So serious is this aspect of the ceremony that should any mistake be made, the consequence is that the chief could be dethroned. Subsequently, after narrating the people’s history, the chief among the Alekwus sings and dances rhythmically, showering blessings on his people. The people in turn shows their respect and loyalty to their chief by presenting him gifts of yam and dried meat. All villages within the clan are expected to make this presentation. The chief in turn is expected to use these gifts to fete the community and their visitors. Once this presentations have been made, various masquerades and dance group take turns in performing to the delight of the onlookers. Indeed this aspect of the festival enables each village to show-case its dexterity in a particular dance form.

Thereafter, the chief retire to his palace from the arena in a procession of his senior officials, family members and well-wishers. The royal drums and flute plays tunes that exalts the virtues of the chief and the clan.

Generally, the performance of Ijah Alekwu are done annually, and when ritual rites of Alekwu are performed, it is expected to rain. In other words, it ushered raining season. Its essence is to renew the people’s faith in their ancestors, and also to reinforce the essential factors behind the physical search for the meaning of life and death within the Idoma pantheon.

When an Idoma man dies, it is believed that he is on transit to the spirit world from where his spirit continues to influence the life of the community after it has passed away from the transmordial world. It is in respect of this worldview that the Ijah Alekwu festival is characterized by a marked desire to appease or placate the spirit of the ancestors. Just as Alachi puts it:

*The Alekwu day is supposed to be the most peaceful one in the life of the people. All members of the community make conscious efforts to be friendly with one another. They live in a state of peace. The general Alekwu is worshiped in the village square and all elders from the different families participate in sharing one meal. This is symbolic of the unity, which exists between the various families for the people believe that enemies do not share meals with their foes.*
Implications for Curriculum Planners

The discussion above shows that social and ethical issues abound in their quantum that can be used for social and ethical education if properly harnessed and packaged by curriculum planners. Such issues include: team work, loyalty, community participation, in respect for traditional institutions, citizens being each other’s keepers, total rejection of theft and adultery, and the belief in the supremacy of the Almighty God.

These and other virtues are latent in the celebration of Alekwu festival and if thorough research is conducted in these areas and findings used as materials for curriculum development, a significant ethical misdemeanor confronting both youths and elders in Nigeria will be overcome.

Beyond the identification of these issues lies a more complicated issue of interphase between academic discipline. For this objective to be realized, curriculum planners in the faculty of education need to collaborate with their counterparts, particularly those in the faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Issues such as theft, adultery, being each other’s keeper, beliefs in the supremacy of God etc are issues that can be packaged into social studies and religious studies curriculum while team work sincerity and patriotism are issues that can easily fit into general studies programmes.

Approaches and strategies of implementation are areas where the Theatre Arts Department and Curriculum Studies Department can come together and factor into their programme, creative and participatory methods of realizing the inculcation of the mentioned objectives.

This brings into a broader perspective the issue of interphase in programme and curriculum planning. It is not enough for planners in education departments to brainstorm and factor into the curriculum issues that would have been better treated by experts from the mother departments. This explains why this paper highlights the issue of interphase between programmes from planning to the execution level.
Conclusion

Within the given cosmic ambiance of the Idoma pantheon, life is an ever cyclical movement. Man journeys through his life in three stages. Childhood which begins in the east where the sun rises; adulthood which seems to be centered in the cosmic universe and old age which ends where the sun sets for the man in the west, after which reemaerges in the east, in its ever cyclic motion, of rebirth. This explains the religious, cosmic and metaphysical view of man which the Idomas clearly articulate: “Onyilo Kwu, Onyilo Waa” meaning “man dies and man forever comes back” (Amah). Alekwu constitutes the dead ancestors in Idoma society. When they are uprooted, the society becomes instinct. They guard, regulate and provide for the society visa-a-vis the antecedence of globalization, which is not just an “out there” phenomenon with the advent of the world communication systems; but to strategic social change in the everyday life “in there” within the ambit of Idoma worldview, as seen through the lens of Ijah Alekwu of the Idoma people. If and when all these are taken in to consideration by curriculum planners and a wholistic approach is used in programming through an interphase between the curriculum planners, our students and the society will be the better for it.

Works cited
