



FESTIVAL AS MEANS OF COMMEMORATION OF THE ANCESTORS IN IDOMA LAND

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ABSTRACT

The Idoma people have been exposed to various festivals, like Eje–Alekwu, ancestral wine festivals, the earth wine festival, the funeral and chief installation. Ceremonies are considered serious occasions that demand sacrifices and rituals. These festivals which have the potential to shape their cultural identity and world view. The problem addressed in this study is that, the advent of Christianity and Islam in Idoma land truncated their religious and cultural tenets which rendered the contemporary Idoma to neglect their belief and cultural identity in festival within this community. The study aims to shed light on the cultural festival and religious practices of the Idoma people. The research employs qualitative analysis of the religious and cultural belief of the people. The research also incorporates a historical analysis of the Idoma people and their religious and cultural transformation. The study investigates the historical and socio–cultural background of Idoma people, exploring the religious beliefs and practices that contribute to their cultural identity. The study concludes that religion is significant in shaping the cultural identity of the Idoma people.

INTRODUCTION

Festival among the Idoma commands prominence and centrality in Idoma festivals, the “Eje–Alekwu” ancestral wine. This is because of its influence on Idoma cultural life in general. As an ancestral festival, this cult is peculiar in the Idoma cultural and religious practice. This exhibited in the wealth of cultural heritage which Idoma people express during the ceremonies associated with Eje-Alekwu cult.

Eje–Alekwu “ancestral wine festival” is a ritual that is basically the same among the Idoma speaking race in Nigeria, but there is a slight variations in the mode of the celebration of ancestral wine, “Eje-Alekwu” festival from district to district. All districts in Idoma are bound to mark their own ceremonies in respect of ancestral wine festival on the date convenient to the particular cultural area. The dates for celebrating the festival in each district in Idoma may be different, but the rituals are the same because Idoma came from one ancestral descent.



Festivals as means of Commemoration of the Ancestor

The importance of festival in the liturgy of Idoma land will be viewed with special reference to the concept of Alewku cult “ancestral cult.” Generally, in relation to other African traditional societies, the Idoma people love celebrations of various kinds (Igboaka 49). Important occasions such as ancestral spirit festival, the earth shrine festival, the funeral and installation of chief ceremonies among others, are the serious occasions that demand sacrifice and rituals accompany varieties of food and drinks.

Mbiti observed that African religion affirms life, and celebrates life; we saw the large number of rituals festivals and ceremonies, which are carried out in African religion. These all add up to the celebrations of life, people know that they are alive. They want to celebrate the joy of living. They do not sit down meditating upon life, instead they put it into action; they dance life, they sing life, they shout life, they make merriment of life for the individual land for the community. (201).

Ejeh-Alekwu Festival

The earth wine festival, the abode of ancestor; this land cult is associated essentially with hunting and for the appeasement of the ancestors, for the taboos against the land, which attract sanctions. This involves crimes of various sorts. For the Idoma people the Aje is land divinity that attracts celebration in all areas of Idoma in honour of the ancestral spirit of the land.

Elders are custodians of the land, since they are closest to ancestors. The earth ancestors and elders are part of the cult. Religious and social aspects of life are unanimous in traditional Idoma culture. It is natural that groups from patrilineal descent should control the earth cult. The senior elder (the owner of the land and keeper of the earth shrines) is in charge of the ancestral cult.

Propitiatory sacrifice is made to the ancestors for various intentions such as protection of the community, for hunting, good rainfall. Much attention is focused on the moral discipline of the community during the festival. The traditional concept common to the Idoma people on this celebration is that the offering and sacrifices, which are made to the ancestor during the festival is an assurance for the community that the land is made sacred. Such are the noble cultural values and treasures of the Idoma traditional practices found in the celebration of earth wine festival. (Okopi, interview)

Igboaka asserts that the key ancestral festival in Idoma land, dominates the cultural religious activities in the traditional life of Idoma people. The ancestral wine festival as understood in Idoma culture portrays the belief in the spirit of the departed ancestors, which in effect depicts life after death. Alekwu according to this order, refers to the deceased ancestors who have returned to visit the members of the living community during the annual festival of ancestral wine. (56).

Adakole says that, ancestral wine is observed at two different period of the year. The first ritual takes place in the months of May and June. This is known as “Rainy season ancestral festival.” It is a ceremony which falls normally on special market day when Alekwu-afia “ancestral mask” comes out and displays at the village square. This spot remains the meeting place where elder gather to perform the rituals of appeasing the ancestors before the ancestral mask appears. The festival attracts ritual and sacrifice, slaughtering of animal by most elderly man from each



clan, offering of food to the ancestors; at the end, ancestral mask emerges in a public square to give blessing. It is a belief that any failure by the living descendants to comply with this traditional norm attracts the disfavor of the ancestors. The implication may result to poor harvest.

The second ritual ceremony commences from August to December known as “Dry season ancestral festival.” At this festival each family elder offers sacrifices in honour of ancestors. Sacrifices are made to express appreciation to the ancestors for providing the needs of the community such as adequate rainfall, good health and successful harvest. This thanksgiving is accompanied with sacrifices in form of goat and cocks, together with some food items, kola nut and palm wine to the ancestor in each family.

The function of ancestral wine festival from the religious view is expressed in the common traditional religious belief in the Idoma ideal of life after death. The characteristic of the celebration manifests its meaning in the various ceremonies and rituals through which the offering and sacrifices are performed by the father of the living dead and elders, acting as officiating ancestral priests, in various ways in honour of ancestors. Prayers, offerings of food and libation that are performed, daily serve the religious purpose for appeasing the spirits of the ancestors in anticipation for the favours of the living community. These actions in effect shows the spirit of religious worship, which is in existence among the people’s traditional life. Worship enables the living share in their human relations with the divine.

Social and Religious Function

The social and religious function of ancestral cult impress on each other. This is because both functions are better considered in the same respect. The occasion carries a social and religious significance in the Idoma concept of life after death. This is because the celebration involves social commitment of every clan in the community. This event attracted many people from abroad, who return en-mass, some bringing along their friends from other places. Through such union with one another in the festival, friendship and brotherhood are consolidated and peaceful co-existence is enhanced. Ancestral wine festival celebration in all parts of Idoma is related to ancestral cult, the coming together of people of all ages act as a powerful instrument for cementing the bond of cordial relationship and social union. The social function of the ancestral cult in Idoma festival of ancestral wine reveals that the inter-community relationship realized in the interaction during the festival of ancestral wine expresses the practical demonstration of traditional African concept of human living. Through this annual festival, the idea of after life is clearly renewed.

Ancestral spirit plays an important role in maintaining and promoting the Idoma traditional institution and system of administration. In this point, the ancestor plays not only a religious and metaphysical role, but also a religious and political role. The ancestral genealogies of the different lineages, praising in song the heroism of earlier ancestors since the time of migration; this proclaims Idoma identity and the magnitude of the founding ancestors, ultimately; the ancestral wine festival acts as a political entity.

In respect with other traditional African institutions, the elders are taken to be the source of communal wisdom and invaluable regarded as the mouthpiece of the ancestors. In this perspective, they are conceded leadership role in the Idoma political life. The relationship with



regards to the festival within family, within clan and so on, is coordinated by their ancestral functions of ritual and sacrifices in private and public shrines during ancestral wine festival. This function is a source of their recognitions as the religious and political leaders in their single unit. This important role bestows respect to the elders, which has its practical effect in the stability of customs and tradition.

The ancestors are interested in the continuing coherence of the traditional institution, when the ancestors were here on earth; they were elders of their groups. Now that they are dead they do not cease to show interest in the general welfare of their descendants. In this way, ancestral system of organization recognizes the elders as the link, which coordinates the cultural event and unite the ancestors and the living descendants. The elders apart from acting as intermediaries in religious ritual, are also seen as the embodiment of the presence of the ancestors among the Idoma community, (Adole Ogwuche interview)

Economic Function

In economic aspects, the vital role of the ancestor as controllers of fertility cum productivity is expressed through propitiatory sacrifice offered during yam festivals in appeasing the spirits of the land. Land cult is associated with the ancestral cult. Sacrifices are made to the ancestors for adequate rainfall, good hunting, and abundant harvest, daily offering of food and libation by elders of the families are performed with the purpose of the appeasement of the ancestors. In their own expectation, ancestral spirit in turn play a role in the protection of the community, which attract active participation in the celebration of ancestral wine festival in Idoma. Idoma are agrarian in nature which absolutely depends on crops, economic trees and generally faming for economic survival. Hunting is another source of livelihood in Idoma economic life as it is a major activity in the celebration of ancestral wine festival.

Education Function

The educational aspects views communal participation in the ceremonies as connected with the ancestral cults and it intensifies the community awareness in the cultural heritage of the community that should be preserved. The need for cultural revival are preserved in ancestral wine festival as it exists in Idoma culture and intimates the youth on the knowledge of the traditional religion of their ancestors.

The fact that the celebration of ancestral wine festival is rich in ritual sacrifice, gives a lot of advantage to Christian in preserving the culture, which stresses on the solidarity of living descendants and the dead ancestors. This is necessary in the contemporary Idoma for understanding and dialogue with other faith.

Idoma Folklore

Ancestor in Idoma folklore as a source of oral tradition will evidently assist in the evaluation of these traditional beliefs in Idoma culture. One of such Folklore is the story of why the living dead do not bath.

There was a time a living dead had a daughter named Ijato. Both of them went to stream to bath. He asked the daughter to wait for him. Staying inside water, a Hausa man came and stole the



daughter, when he came out, the daughter had disappeared. He began to go about singing in search for the daughter.

He sang to many places; first he went to Igala he stayed there and understood the language. He went from place to place and understood the language of various peoples. This makes ancestor to know and understood many languages.

Folklore describes the ancestor as the intermediary. There was a big tree in a junction and one man has a beautiful daughter at home. The big tree in one part contains an iron weapon and an axe. Then the father promised that anyone who cut down the big tree would have the daughter in marriage. When the cow was passing, it could not cut the tree. Even human beings tried and failed. When an elephant was passing it was told to pull the tree down, the elephant refused but later said that it will pull the tree down with its head but no other implement. It prayed to Owoicho (God) and Aje (earth deity), an ancestral cult. The Elephant moved back and moved front and hit the tree. The tree started falling. The man and the wife were passing by asked who was pulling down the tree and the elephant started singing.

*Elephant is pulling down the tree
Why are you pulling down the tree?
Because I want to marry a wife,
Marry a wife for what?
To produce children
What do you do with children?
To inherit my property,
Which the earth deity (Ajeh) has given to me*

Sometimes this oral tradition was not appreciated by the western world. The early evangelizers expressed negative attitude which constituted fear and doubt in the mind of the contemporary African and Idoma in particular towards culture. The people are thereby alienated from their cultural heritage.

Idoma land communities observe different sorts of festivals ranging from ancestral wine festival to chief installation annually. In Oglewu and Okpiko communities in Ohimni Local Government, they observe Ojo festival. This festival is normally held around March. During this festival the communities come out en-mass to fix a date when it is a dry season. A portion or hectare of land or bush is reserved for the festival. That place has been set ablaze before the actual day of the festival. The Ojo festival is mainly for the Oglewu community. The whole Oglewu district will gather in March at Anwule the centre of their worship place, specifically, at the feet of the tree, where everybody will bring drinks from different communities. They will be a masquerade display and everyone will dance around the whole community. The king of the community will say the open prayer before the commencement of the festival. As they move in procession to the Ojo ground, the drummers will be at the front, the chief will be at the middle and those who act as guards will be at the back of the chief, then the rest of the villagers will follow. As they move close to the place, everybody will pull off their shoes because that portion of land has been set aside as a holy ground; other activities like crawling on the ground and greeting the Ojo with the title "Obande." Although this title of a king is ascribed to an object they believe to be holy (Idol), this object can only be displayed during the festival; it is a pot



under a tree, people have tried to see it but it appears invisible, the priest leads people to the venue, at the Ojo, and there is a stone there and no one slaughter animal there. The only thing people do is to hang the animal, and when it touches the stone, the animal will die immediately. Women in their period and people with charm are not allowed to witness the occasion. Anyone with bad intention can easily be punished by Ojo. There was a time when Idoma people had a physical combat with Muslim (Islamic) and it was Ojo that produced the arrows and bows. No water is allowed to be taken to Ojo ground, the priest will make incantations, and sacrifice animal like goat and fowl for water to sprinkle out of the stone, for people to drink. The priest also command rain to signify that their sacrifices have been accepted. (Adole, interview)

Eje–Alekwu is a festival among the Idoma people, during which everybody will appease their ancestors in every compound; there is a family shrine that is attached to the ancestors which is normally officiated by the first male child of every families during the Eje–Alekwu festival for cleansing and fulfillment of their promises to the ancestors. Some people prefer to buy goat, fowl and food depending on the promise made.

This festival serve many purpose in the lives of the entire Idoma, both at home and those in diaspora, who comes out en-mass to ask for rain, good harvest, unity, progress and tranquility in the community. In Ugboju, ancestral wine is three days event that happen annually which normally end with rains after the third day of the event, and then planting season for that year will commence in the month of March. The final ritual takes place at Ochu’ Gboju’s palace with a lot of celebration.

Another important festival in Idoma is known as Igede Agba. This festival is celebrated to mark the new yam season, and also to thank the ancestors of the land for a good farming season. People travel across the country to celebrate this wonderful event, the zenith of this event is to showcase different species of yam. During the celebration an award is given to the best farmer of the season. The criterion for the award of the best farmer is based on the farmer’s presentation of the largest yam. Sometimes the prize ranges from cash to kind. The award serves as motivation and encouragement to put more effort into the next farming season. Wrestlers compete for award which is organized to improve their cultural heritage and to add beauty to the event. The heavyweight wrestlers compete with themselves while the lightweight slugs it with each other. Important dignitaries also witness the occasion; the showcase of different masquerades come out to entertain the guests.

During the festival, the indigenes and non-indigenes are not allow to go to the farm, in order to show value and respect to the cultural heritage. People are informed that no one is permitted to cook any food apart from pounded yam, and they are to be gather at the village square for proper dissemination of food to those present at the occasion.

Another part of Idoma also witness the celebration called Awume festival day. The celebration is marked to remember the ancestors in the community. Every year people at home and in diaspora embrace the wonderful occasion. This event like others in Idoma, also attract people from different clan and community , each clan are expected to contribute a goat, this community has twelve clan which showcase their talents through the display of masquerade at the public square and other sport competition.

Marriage and Social Life of Idoma



Everyone in Idoma attaches much importance to marriage particularly for the purpose of regeneration. A young man of marriage age who has not married exposes his family to ridicule. An adult, who should have been a person of social importance, holds a low position socially if he remained unmarried. The public holds an opinion that he is not sure of giving adequate entertainment as long as he is not married. Such a person will never be entrusted with respectable social positions such as village head, or the village spokesman.

Marriage in Ugboju and the rest of Idoma is a union of the two families; that of the man and the woman. A young man has girl of his choice; the girl could be from the same or from outside the area. In the past, the possibility of taking a girl from outside the tribe was not common as the family background of such a girl with regards to health and honesty could not be known. Now that people have improved their social life, the idea of winning a girl outside the tribe is no stranger especially among the educated ones who meet their spouses in schools. On the other hand, the choice of a girl may happen through a small incident like meeting in a church, a market square or during local festival or through a recommendation by a friend and relative. In most cases, the necessity of knowing the girl personally could not be ruled out. The young man in quest of a wife usually visits the compound of the girl or feels shy, he sends for the girl through a person well known to the girl. At the initial stage, it is not easy as people around might mistakenly regard such approach as a demand for illicit affairs. The parents and relatives of the girl would however be re-assured if the young man's visit is made known to them right from the onset.

During the visit neither of the parties would be too free as each feels shy at this stage, gradually, due to constant visits on the part of the young man the problem receives partial remedy. This time conversation becomes free than ever before. At this stage food may not be satisfactorily taken if one of the parties happens to be there food is presented to the other one. The parents of the girl still doubt the sincerity of the young man until they pay the family a visit. On arrival the parents of the girl usually receive the visitors with all sorts of courtesies beginning with the offering of kola-nuts and even food and drinks. Even if the parents of the girl know why the visitors have come, they pretend not to know and still ask the visitors. At this stage, the parents of the young man ask if their daughter could be given out in marriage to their son if she had not been previously engaged by someone else. The parents often declare their good intentions towards the young man. Observation of the girl generally and the attitudes of the girl with regards to greeting and attitudes during their short staying would be taken seriously into account by the visitors. Before their departure small gifts of money would be given to the parents and also the girl for kola-nut, salt and soap respectively. The Acceptance of such gifts reveals the willingness of the parents for giving out their daughter in marriage.

Although, the parents of the girl have indicated their approval, the young man continues to pay constant visit to the girl while inquiries will be going on by both parties with regards to the family backgrounds of each in respect to health, honesty and general ways of life. After a few weeks or a month, the parents of the young man would demand a date when the first stage of the marriage ceremony would be performed.

In Idoma land, there are four main stages of marriage ceremony amongst the indigenes, the first stage is "Ehiki-Gbihi" giving gifts of money to the girl without the presence of either parents by the young man. While giving this money, the young man does it alone to know if she has an



actual love for him without being influenced by anybody and he often says ‘take this money if you would accept me as your future husband’. The acceptance of the money gives the young man assurance that his love is reciprocated. The girl usually carries such money to her mother who privately informs the father of what had happened. This is the first financial marriage ceremony.

The second ceremony is called “Ehi–nehi”, the big gift to the girl. Before this happened the mother of the young man or any woman from his mother’s side of the family will approach the mother of the girl to give her a date when visitors will come around for the occasion. Before the arrival of the visitors, preparation for the entertainments will be made. The father of the girl is also expected to be there where the gifts of money will be made. This usually takes place in the mother’s house. A middle woman will be chosen through whom all the money for this occasion will be spent and she must relate to the two parties. A sum of money will be payed to the girl’s family, the mother of the girl through her spokesman calls out relatives to whom shares of money are to be given depending on the family status and the part they play in the girl’s life.

The third stage is often combined with the fourth stage as many people haven’t got enough time these days. The two stags are called “Itaba Ogba nd Ijeka – Adoyi O’kpo.” That is payment for tobacco (cola – nut) and the main dowry to the father of the girl. The procedure is the same as the second stage except that middle man is involved here instead of a middle woman and without doing this, the marriage will not receive any official recognition. If this stage is delayed, any child born before this payment is made a compensation of money will be required by the father of the girl from the father of the newly born child for the full ownership of the child. Some family in Idoma land demands for high bride price for a girl that is well educated, followed by heavy entertainment.

There are two other things which are not included in the bride price. The first is that if the grandfather of the girl still lives, a big locally woven cloth “Opa” will be inside of the bride price. The second thing is that to keep up co-operation, occasional help on the in-law’s farm is needed. Nowadays, the tendency of most people is to give monetary gifts to in-laws rather than to farm for them. It must also be remembered that the secret behind a high charge of bride price in Idoma society is that most of the amount spent on a girl in marriage is again used for the purchase of necessary properties before the girls will be sent to the husband.

As soon as a girl is married, it is the prayer and the expectation of members of the two families who have been united by the marriage to notice pregnancy. When this happens, there is now an outward show of the success of the marriage.

When a girl takes in, especially for the first time any food of her choice is supplied on request and she is almost loved by all. Any offensive expression to the husband by words is not taken seriously. When she grows heavy in pregnancy, the custom demands that she is to be accompanied back to her mother for delivery. This is allowed because of her inexperience in child delivery and care on the day of her departure, money will be given to her and includes, wishes of good luck are expressed to her. Some meat and clothe is and along for the pregnancy. Some other money will be given to enable her purchase any simple food of her choice, and a little feast to celebrate and to inform the elders in the hamlet. The idea behind this is to make the expectant woman confess all immoral attitudes she had before and after her marriage. If this is not done, difficult labour may be the result on the day of this occasion known as “Eje Owo” or



wine for her god; old men play on their fortune-teller whether or not free delivery will take place. Usually they ask the fortune teller if after confession whether or not a problem will be expected, the answer may be yes or no and if yes, causes are found and remedy to it are sought in the form of sacrifice to ancestors.

During confession in her father's house; those who had illicit affairs with her or if by mistake, certain parts of a man's body were touched by her these are mentioned to her father who will not disclose the names to her husband but will pay a sum of money as a compensation to the husband which goes either to the husband's father or to his uncle. But if the woman apart from this period fails in morals, she confesses directly to the husband who takes compensation of money from the offending man. The woman has to purify herself by giving a cock to her husband who offers a sacrifice to his ancestral father to appease his anger or else she will be attacked by a sudden sickness. The ill effect may affect the health of her children which may result to their death (Odudu, interview).

CONCLUSION

Idoma world view described a great phenomenon in the hierarchically structured in the visible and invisible spheres, with immutable laws, customs and sanctions to guide human beings in the visible sphere. Alekewu cult and festivity that is attached to the veneration of the living dead reveal that the sense of rituals and sacrifices during the Eje-Alekwu festival celebration carries along with it a link of present and past, which includes the contemporary Idoma society and the departed ancestors. Through the traditional dances and the customs attached to these ceremonies, the social link and unity of the entire living descendants is shared in communal ritual with the ancestors who are honoured.

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