

Issues Associated with Burial Rites among the Idoma of North Central Nigeria

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Abstract

The Idoma burial rites are deeply rooted in cultural practice that stem from the intersection of tradition, belief system, and modern influence. The study aims to unpack the dynamic of these issues of conflicts and their implications on social cohesion and individual identity. It also shed light on the diverging perspectives and customs that often clash, leading to conflict and tension within the community. This work employed a qualitative research method, utilizing an in-depth oral interview, which include focus group discussions to collate useful data from sample population of Idoma in North Central, Nigeria. The Idoma language was adopted in the interview, to ensure accurate understanding and expression of participants' views; by analyzing the various factors at play in conflicts over burial rites among the Idoma. This work provides comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in the face of divergent cultural practices.

Keywords: Idoma, *Alekwu*, Owoicho, Ancestor, Burial.

Introduction

Nigerians like every other African countries with their limited exposure and resources, were happy with their kith and kin in their villages, small towns and urban habitats before many foreign cultures infiltrated the traditional cultures. Which gave room for all kind of conflicts in almost all African settlements; ranging from community, clans, families and conflicts of interest as the case may be. Among the traditional practice of Idoma, burial rites is one of the most important cultural rites the Idoma cherish. It is considered as one of the most important aspect of the Idoma which can never compromise. On this light, it is considered a taboo not to bury any one according to the Idoma tradition and culture. This practice is very similar in most African societies, where it is believe that the land of the living is made up of the spirit and the physical. It is for this reason that Mbiti (1999) stated that the African Society is hovered by spiritual forces, which is made up of both the benevolence and malignant spirits Mbiti (1999).

Traditional practices regarding burial rites differ from one Idoma community to another, meaning that burial rites differ from one group of Idoma to another even though they all belief in *Alekwu* which is the ancestral spirit. The *Alekwu* is a bridge between the living and the dead. He is an ancestor living among his people. *Alekwuis* considered to be the rallying points of the Idoma. From birth through puberty; marriage, maturity, and old age, Idoma lineage members

pass through various rites and rituals binding them spiritually and culturally to others in their communities. For the fact that death is inevitable, the Idoma's believe in an active life after death, and have developed elaborate rituals to ease the pain of physical separation and to guide the dead to smoothly transcend into the spiritual world of the ancestors. However, conflicts can arise within the community when differing opinions on how the burial rites should be performed clash. These conflicts often stem from variations in religious beliefs, social status, or generational gaps. Some may adhere strictly to traditional practices passed down through generations, while others may advocate for modernized or Christianized burial ceremonies. The conflicts in burial rites can lead to tensions and divisions within families or communities, as each faction insists on their preferred way of honouring the deceased. Finding a resolution to these conflicts requires open communication, mutual respect for differing perspectives, and a willingness to compromise in order to maintain harmony and unity among the Idoma.

Brief History of Idoma

The Idoma primarily inhabit the lower western areas of Benue State, Nigeria, and kindred groups can be found in Cross Rivers State, Enugu State, Kogi State and Nasarawa State in Nigeria. The Idoma are known to be 'warriors' and 'hunters' of class, but hospitable and peace-loving. The greater part of Idoma land remained largely unknown to the West until the 1920s, leaving much of the colourful traditional culture of the Idoma intact. The population of the Idoma is estimated to be about 3.5 million. The Idoma have a traditional ruler called the *och'Idoma* who is the head of the Idoma Area Traditional Council. Idoma religion focuses on honoring lineage ancestors.

Funeral ceremonies among the Idoma are often quite dramatic, with greater attention afforded to members of the community who have reached a combination of advanced age and prestige. Extensive funerals are held for both women and men in preparation for sending them on their final journey away from the village to the spirit world across the river. A memorial service, or second burial, is held for the deceased sometime after the original burial in order to ensure that the dead pass on to the ancestral world in proper style. With the advent of Christianity, Islam, and other foreign religions, the traditional belief systems of most ethnic groups in the country has been influenced by western practices. However, a majority of the Idoma still believe strongly in the *alekwu*, which is seen as the ancestral spirits- a link between the living and the dead. They host an annual '*ajealekwu*' festival where traditional religious practitioner's commune and make sacrifices in the worship of their ancestors across the land. The Idoma have a strong attachment to the *alekwu*-spirit of the ancestors which is believed to stand as an invisible watchdog of the family and communities while checkmating vices like adultery, theft and murder (Agbo, 2003).

Idoma Worldview

The Idoma worldview strongly belief in one supreme God, who is known as '*Owoicho*'. *Owoicho* in this understanding is believed to be omniscient, as well as transcendent in nature. For them, *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. Igboaka (2007) quote Apochi & Elaigwu that His transcendent aspect is so stressed by the Idoma that God becomes abstract and removed from man's everyday life. This explains why Idoma 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: *ejembi* (guardian spirit); *owo* (one's personal god); and *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 according to the findings of Metuh (1985). The Idoma worldview is recognized as consisting of the physical and spiritual worlds. 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* (God) as his ministers. They influence man's actions in the physical world. As a result of their functions which include protection and assistance for man's needs, these deities are propitiated through prayers, libation and sacrifices. These actions in Idoma understanding are regarded as offerings to *Owoicho* (Igboaka 2007). On the physical sphere, the Idoma 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*). Despite the fact that their cultural religious life manifests the continuous and unbroken relationship between their living descendants and the deceased members of the community, yet 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 *alekwu-afia* and *akatakpa* masquerade (Igboaka 2007). 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 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.

Traditional Idoma Burial Rites

According to Felix (1999), burials in Idoma land are often carried out with several activities and these activities are mostly carried out by different traditional and social events and these activities are mostly carried out at the announcement of the deceased death. At the death of an individual depending on the age though, culture requires that the oldest man in the clan is the first to be informed and he in turn will inform the remaining elders. The elders will convene and propose two to three burial dates to the deceased family for them to choose from. This is usually done to avoid clashes in burial dates. Traditional burial rites hold deep cultural significance and are considered a crucial aspect of honoring the deceased and ensuring a peaceful transition to the afterlife.

Among the Otukpo, at mid-morning on the day of the burial, the corpse is bathed *Odumu* cult. Women, children and strangers are not allowed to witness this process of washing of the body. After bathing, the corpse is taken to Itakpa, a seat out, where women children and strangers are allowed in. After the dance performances, the *alekwu* cult then comes in and performs some rituals on the body (<https://www.idomaland.org/author/owie-billo> 2020). This ritual is carried out to make the passage from the land of the living to the land of the dead seamless for the deceased. According to Ochefu (1996), the traditional Idoma burial rites involve the burial of the deceased in a grave, often with the body positioned in a fetal position, symbolizing the cycle of life and

death. The grave is usually marked with a wooden or stone monument, and the deceased is buried with personal belongings and food offerings to ensure a comfortable journey to the afterlife.

After the actual burial is concluded elaborate funeral ceremonies are conducted to celebrate the life of the departed. The burial rites typically involve a series of rituals performed by designated elders and spiritual leaders, including prayers, libations, and sacrifices to appease the ancestors and guide the soul of the deceased to the ancestral realm. Family members and friends come together to mourn the loss, share stories and memories of the departed, and offer support to one another during this period of grief. The Idoma believe that a proper burial is essential for the soul to rest in peace and for the family to find closure, making these traditional rites a crucial part of their cultural identity and spiritual beliefs. The Idoma believe that if traditional burial rites are not done as it ought to, or not properly done as prescribe by tradition, the consequences will be the wrought of *alekwu*. *Alekwu* which is considered the spirit of the Ancestors is the most fearful and dreaded spirit which no Idoma origin wants to dare. The significance of these burial rites goes beyond the individual and extends to the entire community. Ancestors hold a revered position in Idoma culture, and it is believed that they continue to influence the lives of their descendants even after death. By conducting elaborate burial rites, the Idoma seek the blessings and protection of their ancestors while also showing respect for the deceased and their family. Failure to perform these rituals properly is often considered taboo and can lead to social ostracization within the community.

Religious Change in Idoma Society

Idoma has religious beliefs and practices which were prevalent even before the arrival of Christianity in Idoma society. According to Taylor (1976) Idoma theology is the primal indigenous articulation of God. It is that theology that has been traditionally handed down from generation to generation by the Idoma forebears to the present generation of Idoma. This primal theology is not a thing of the past, but a theology that the Idoma today have as their own by living it and practicing it in their traditional society. *Owoicho* is the Idoma word for the supreme God. The conveyance of the Idoma theology from one generation to another was through oral transmission, culture, and concrete historical experiences in their primal articulation of *Owoicho*, creation, the world, divinities, and life after death, reincarnation, worship and sacrifice. The term "primal" is used in relation to the Idoma theology which corresponds with Taylor (1976) suggestion that the term primal could be regarded as something basic or fundamental that is observed in societies or religion.

God for the Idoma is an existential reality and not just a philosophical abstract concept. On this ground Makumba (2007) submits that God dies the moment he becomes a concept. *Owoicho* is not a concept, but a reality that they knew, thought of, and spoke. The word 'concept' or 'conceptions' is a philosophical term, which is inadequate to describe the religious consciousness of the Idoma. As a term, it applies to a general idea derived from senses. The natural process by which such an idea is obtained is called abstraction. Prior to their contact with Christianity, the Idoma had a local indigenous name for God. They called God (*Owoicho*). The Idoma traditionally believe there is a real *Owoicho* who is self-revealed. It is not for them to prove his existence, but rather demonstrate their comprehension of the revealed *Owoicho* and their ritual response to Him. One of the respondents revealed how the Idoma express it in their proverbs:

“no one teaches a child who God is”. This implies that the knowledge of God is inherent and primal to the Idoma, so much so that even a child can understand who God is; the existence of God is imminent and self-evident.

Among the Idoma, there is a very clear distinction between *Owoicho* the Supreme God and other beings like *alekwu* or *anjenu*. No conclusion could better correct McVeigh (1974) erroneous view than the correct observation of Mungo Park. In his observation on the Yoruba concept of God, which is also applicable to the Idoma, McVeigh (1974) state he have conversed with all ranks and conditions upon their faith, and can pronounce without the smallest shadow of doubt, that the belief in one God...is entire and universal among them. Although the Idoma believe in one supreme God who is the source of being that maintains and controls the universe, they also believe in other divinities. This is not only common to the Idoma, but as Idowu observes, West Africa may be said to be the home of the divinities (McVeigh, 1974).

The early missionaries to Idoma land did not bother to understand any other religious system but their own which had to be accepted by the Idoma. This has presented the Idoma Christian today with the double problem of not wholly understanding Christianity or his primal religion. The church will help the Idoma better, if they understand the former, and speaks with authority about the latter. On this, Obiabo(1999)maintains that here is an underlying problem, which greatly complicated relationship between foreign missionaries and African Christians, and it lies in the question: are traditional divinities an illusion, or are they real, but evil? To the nineteenth century missionaries, the spirits of traditional religion were very often real demons. To Africanists, this is a good example of White racism.

Most missionaries that came to Africa as a whole, Idoma inclusive, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries took the general western view or that of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910, which sadly concluded and described the primal African religious experience as *animism* that contained no preparation for Christianity (Obiabo1999). However, seventy years after the Edinburgh Conference, some African theologians referred to Africa as African Christian. By the 1980s, African Christians were struggling with how to relate the pre-Christian primal religious experience to the new message that Christianity is bombarding them with.

Even some missionaries were worried about what to do with African past religious experience. Should it be exterminated or got rid of or not? They wondered if the new Christian faith made sense to the Africans without their primal religious experience. Adrian, for example, suggests something of a dialogue between the African Christian and the perennial religious spiritualities of Africa. He feels that the areas of traditional Christian doctrine which are not reflected in the African past disappear or are marginalized (Adrian1976). Andrew (1978) argues that such a shift came about because Africans who were trained in theology with a western syllabus were turning away from the unsympathetic western missionary interpretation of the African primal religious past (Andrew 1978).

Nevertheless, it has become mandatory for the African Christians and the Idoma Christians in particular to put together the various Idoma contents which make up the Idoma total primal religious and cultural experiences into a coherent and meaningful partner that can be called and

described as Idoma Christianity. However a shift from the traditional Idoma way of doing things, knowing that a group of Idoma have embrace a change that will impact on the people through many generations to come and this is why change from the traditional Idoma cultural practice has become evident in the traditional burial rites of the Idoma of North Central Nigeria.

The Factors that Lead to Conflicts in Burial Rites

Burial rites play a significant role in the cultural practices of the Idoma of Nigeria. These rites are deeply rooted in the traditional beliefs and customs of the Idoma and are considered essential in ensuring a peaceful transition of the deceased to the afterlife. However, conflict often arise surrounding burial rites among the Idoma, as different individuals and communities may have varying beliefs and practices regarding how the deceased should be buried. According Oduma-Aboh (2015) one of the primary conflicts that arise surrounding burial rites among the Idoma is related to the location and manner of burial. In some cases, family members may disagree on whether the deceased should be buried in the family compound, in a communal burial ground, or in a different location altogether.

This can create tension and division within the family, as each member may have their own beliefs and preferences regarding the appropriate burial site for their loved one (Oduma-Aboh 2015). He further stressed that another common source of conflict surrounding burial rites among the Idoma is related to the timing of the burial. While some individuals may believe in burying the deceased as soon as possible after death, others may adhere to traditional practices that require a period of mourning and preparation before the burial can take place. This can lead to disagreements and disputes within the community, as different individuals may have conflicting beliefs and customs regarding the appropriate timing of the burial (Oduma-Aboh 2015).

Additionally, conflicts can arise surrounding the type of funeral rituals and ceremonies that should be performed as part of the burial rites. Some individuals may adhere strictly to traditional practices, while others may prefer to incorporate modern elements into the funeral ceremony. This can lead to disagreements and tensions within the community, as different individuals may have divergent opinions on the appropriate way to honour and remember the deceased. Furthermore, conflicts can arise surrounding the allocation of resources and responsibilities for organizing and conducting the funeral ceremony. In some cases, family members may disagree on who should bear the financial burden of the funeral expenses, or who should be responsible for making arrangements for the burial. This can create tension and discord within the family, as individuals may have conflicting expectations and demands regarding their roles and responsibilities in the funeral process.

Another source of conflict surrounding burial rites among the Idoma is related to intergenerational differences in beliefs and customs. Younger generations may have different attitudes towards death and burial than older generations, leading to conflicts and disagreements regarding the appropriate way to conduct burial rites. This can create tension and division within families and communities, as different generations may have conflicting beliefs and practices regarding how the deceased should be honoured and remembered. Moreover, conflicts can arise surrounding the involvement of traditional and religious leaders in the burial rites. Some individuals may place greater importance on the guidance and support of traditional leaders, while others may prefer the involvement of religious leaders or other community members. One

major factor which was put forward by Adeyemi (2001) is the influence of external religions, which have led to a decline in the practice of traditional burial rites. This can lead to disagreements and disputes within the community, as different individuals may have conflicting opinions on the appropriate role of traditional and religious leaders in the funeral process. Other things that trigger conflicts are can be like a spontaneous reaction during the ceremony, in 2017, for example, a group of young men in *Orokamu* attacked a group of mourners who were performing a traditional burial ceremony. The attackers claimed that the ceremony was too noisy and disruptive.

Lastly, Ochefu (1996) also argued that social change has also played significant role in conflict over burial rites, as the Idoma have become more urbanized; they have adopted new value systems and customs due to changes that occurred. This has led to a decline in the importance of traditional burial rites. He further states, as an axiom that any change benefits some members of society more than others. He added that in many cultures, stability is preferred to change and change is considered generally dangerous, unpredictable and harmful. Therefore, fear of change can be as traumatic as change itself both cause conflicts (Ochefu 1996).

In addition, Salifu(2014) posit that conflicts can arise surrounding the inclusion of cultural and symbolic elements in the funeral ceremony. Some individuals may place great importance on traditional rituals and practices that have been passed down through generations, while others may prefer to incorporate modern elements into the funeral ceremony. This can lead to disagreements and tensions within families and communities, as different individuals may have divergent opinions on the appropriate way to honour and remember the deceased. Furthermore, He stated that conflicts can arise surrounding the treatment of the deceased's remains and the disposal of burial materials.

Moreover, some individuals may prefer to adhere strictly to traditional practices regarding the handling of the deceased's body and the disposal of burial items, while others may have different beliefs and preferences regarding how these aspects of the funeral process should be conducted. This can create tension and discord within families and communities, as individuals may have conflicting opinions on the appropriate way to handle these sensitive issues (Salifu 2014). The conflicts surrounding burial rites among the Idoma have significant implications for the social fabric of the community. The decline of traditional burial rites has led to a loss of cultural heritage and a disconnection from the community's history and traditions (Adeyemi2001).

Conclusion

Overall, conflicts surrounding burial rites among the Idoma of Nigeria are multifaceted and complex, reflecting the diverse beliefs and customs that shape these cultural practices. These conflicts can create tensions and divisions within families and communities, as individuals may have differing opinions and preferences regarding how the deceased should be buried and honoured. In order to address these conflicts and promote harmony and unity within the community, it is important for individuals to engage in open and respectful dialogue, seeking to understand and accommodate the diverse beliefs and practices that shape burial rites among the Idoma. By recognizing and respecting the different perspectives and traditions that exist within the community, individuals can work together to navigate these conflicts and ensure a peaceful and respectful transition for the deceased. In conclusion, conflicts of burial rites among the

Idoma highlight the tension between tradition and modern influences in contemporary society. While disagreements may arise due to differing interpretations and changing beliefs, the importance of respecting cultural heritage and maintaining unity within the community cannot be overstated. By embracing dialogue, mediation, and reconciliation, the Idoma can navigate these conflicts and uphold their rich cultural legacy for generations to come.

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