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THE PERFORMER

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The Esoteric and Cultural Relevance of Alekwu Afia Masquerade and the Eje-Alekwu Festival among the Otukpo

By

Lemuel Ekedegwa Odeh*

Abstract

This paper examines the Alekwu Afia masquerade and the role the masquerade played in the life now and beyond and how this has also helped in synthesising a critical segment of Idoma society, the Otukpo people. The Otukpo people place the entire belief in the Alekwu Afia deity and believe that death is inevitable. In addition, death is not natural and there must be a causation of death. This may come in the form of old age, sickness or accident. Consequently, this study adopts a historic-structural, analytical and systematic approaches in carrying out research on esoteric and cultural relevance of Alekwu Afia. Findings have revealed that Alekwu Afia, aside from determining the life and after life of the average Otukpo man, it has also possessed a drama of life with clear aesthetic elements soothing the soul of man.

Introduction

Otukpo is a single clan district which comprises seven sub-clan districts of Otukpo Local Government area of Benue State Nigeria. The district of Otukpo is situated almost at the central part of Idoma land. Otukpo borders Ugboju district to the North, to the East, it borders Ito district of Oju Local government area of Benue state. To the West, it borders Oglewu district while to the South-West it borders Akpa district of Otukpo Local Government Area.

According to Agbo (1991, p. 1), Otukpo clan is among the earliest kindred to settle in the present Idomaland. The clan is made up of seven sub-clans Ai-Odaji (Sons of Odaji), Ai-Ogwuche (Sons of Ogwuche), Ai-Oono (Sons of Oono), Ai-Okopi (Sons of Okopi), Ai-Ode (Sons of Ode),

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Ai-Agbooko (Sons of Agbooko) and Ai-Ogabo (Sons of Ogabo). The elders of these sub-clans are unanimous in the stories of their forebears that they originated from 'Apa' in the present Taraba State. Apa was a part of the old Jukun (kwararafa) empire. This was during the 14th century, when the kwararafa kingdom was still experiencing relative political stability. By the 15th century this stability was shattered due to the endless unrest orchestrated by the constant raids and wars the people were subjected to from the north. It was these incessant raids and wars that scattered the ancestors of Idoma, Igala and Igbirra from their settlement, East of Okari (Wukari).

The Otukpo people believed that their migration started as a result of the 'Ef'onya' or the 'horse war' or better still the Fulani Jihad. Erim (1997) propounded that the Otukpo kindred group moved away for Kwararafa expansion, that the movement was in two major phases, the first phase of the movement which was for Apa expansion, between 1595-1625 A.D, the second phase of the movement which was for Tiv expansion, between 1685-1805. Erim asserted that years between 1835 and 1865 saw their settlement in their present homestead. The people of Otukpo believed that after they left Apa, they took shelter in numerous temporary homes enroute their present settlement. Some of the places they passed and settled briefly before finally settling at their present location were Okongo, Obana, Ifagwu, Odu, Ijuwo, Abiche, Otiya Okwutachi and Ogbaya before they finally came to Upu. At Upu according to Ikwue, they met the Oglewu people (another Idoma clan) and bought the land for a traditional price under the charge of an Otukpo illustrious son, Onyilo. Though the Oglewu and the Otukpo people had been at war for some time, their disputes were settled with the purchase of the land and later Owufe, the only female child of Ona Oko was given out in marriage to an Oglewu man from Alaglanu. The captain of the war on the Oglewu side who accepted the price for the peace settlement when Upu was bought was called Onche Onage.

The Otukpo people trace their origin to Ochaki'lapa who is regarded as mythical being, a spiritual father or a real historical figure. Although all this still remains a matter of historical speculation due to the fact that there are no written records to substantiate this belief, all that exist is the information handed down through Oral tradition from generation to generation. However, an interview carried out with Ijauka Ochete, one of the most renowned Otukpo traditional historians, conducted by Armstrong (1970, p. 43) revealed that Ochaki'lapa was a

king that reigned in Apa in the old Kwararafa kingdom, where the Otukpos believed to have migrated from. He also stated that most of the attributes he (Ochaki'lapa) acquired were due to divine nature of his office. Thus, he possessed the right to decree on anything he thought was right and he could even pronounce death on anyone without fear or favour and opposition. All these combined attributes made people put him in high esteem and to see him as supreme.

In this regard, the genealogical account of Otukpo which is often exhaustively narrated by 'Alekwu-Afia' or the ancestral masked spirits during the Alekwu festival, Ochaki'lapa was said to have had descendants. The Otukpo people therefore trace their origin to Ochaki'lapa, after him the Alekwu Afia or masked spirits of the dead ancestral would then invoke upon 'Aje' or 'Earth' and 'Owo' or the 'Creator'.

Historical genealogy narrators in Otukpo, be it 'Alekwu Afia' or historians, often present the history of Otukpo in chronological order. Of utmost importance to the narrators of Otukpo genealogy is patrilineal descent and affiliation, this is because inheritance is by patrilineal descent. Thus, the people of Otukpo believe that Ochaki'lapa was the earliest ancestral being, he was followed by Akwunte. Akwunte was followed by Ohaowo, followed by Ogabo. Ogabo was then followed by Ogwu who was the father of Oko, a focal figure of the modern history of Otukpo people.

It should be noted that among the Otukpo people, there are other kindred groups of different patrilineal descent, but these groups have been assimilated into the major kindred groups. A true son or daughter of Otukpo should be able to trace his or her lineage to one of these Sons of Oko. According to Mr. Idoko Amedu, the grandchildren of Oko were great hunters like Oko and the other ancient fathers. He went further to say that Ode made a great success of his hunting skills by killing animals such as Elephant (Adagba), Leopard (Eje) and rare birds like Uloko. He traditionally presented the heads and feather of these animals to his elder brother Ogwuche. In Ogwuche's quest to be conferred a Chief, he journeyed with his brother Ode to Ugboju Ai-Omaga, in Agatu, where their mother was from, in order to pay tribute to her maternal chieftain. Their maternal chief inquired if the people of Otukpo had ever had a Chief in their history. Ogwuche and Ode remembered that their fathers had told them of the title of 'Odu' conferred on Akwunte years ago. According to an interview conducted Ogah said they were advised to go to Odu in Doma, Lafia division to get the title back.

Ode embarked on this journey and he brought back great honour, symbolized by a long red cap, sacred ritual sand and the wearing of royal beads on wrist. He also brought back the respected title of 'Odu' which he presented to his brother Ogwuche, after which he was then conferred the 'Oche-Otukpo-Odu.' The people of Otukpo settled down in this community, despite their wandering and escape from the raiding Abakpa (Fulani) they managed to preserve a substantial amount of the culture they had imbibed from their forefathers. Thus, they maintained their Iron culture, nomadic hunting life which they perfected and institutionalised in the art of 'Ote aje', an annual communal hunting parade, their woodcraft, their ritual and ancestral worship, their farming, weaving and masquerading.

Theoretical Framework

Eje-Alekwu as a traditional festival in Otukpo is an aspect of their cultural life. The festival involves the brewing of Burukutu (local beer) from guinea corn and millet and the display of masquerades. The masquerades (Alekwu Afia) would move from one place to the other telling stories of the individual's family ancestors and delivering messages from the gods to such families. The masquerades would sometimes dance before spectators to the rhythm of drums. Various gifts ranging from money to meat and food are showered on these masquerades (Alekwu Afia). These masquerades also make some sounds which could indicate anger, happiness or sometimes the sound could mean messages from the gods.

The major focus of the festival is on the ancestral worship, the people of Otukpo keep in contact with these ancestors through liberations and ritual ceremonies. The function of the festival mainly is to keep the memory of the living dead verdant and to engage in communication and fellowship with them.

As Parrinder (1974) rightly puts it, there is a difference in the tone between communication with God and communication with ancestors which usually takes place during the Eje-Alekwu festival. It is true that a pioneer Africanist, who applied his vigorous intellectual resources to the study of Idoma, Armstrong (The Odejo of Idoma land), did a study of the Alekwu in detail. His study of Alekwu was readily applauded by some prominent Idoma indigenes. Amongst the Idoma of Benue state, the Late Professor was perplexed by the high development of kingship institution and secret societies such as Alekwu. But he had indoctrinated himself into

believing that the Idoma's were intransigent, barbaric and of the lowest intelligence. He therefore thought the origins of the Idoma institution must be of Hausa origin. His fellow American, Sidney (1988) has picked up and dusted this belief with gusto. He devotes a whole booklet into proving that the Idoma Alekwu institution was indeed Hausa in origin.

The works of Armstrong (1970) and Sidney (1988) suffer from serious disabilities; firstly, they were American not Africans. Experienced scholars have insisted that the work of African scholars, for the future of the study of African culture obviously lies in their hands; this is because it has been realized, that western scholars have never been genuinely interested in African culture per se. Their works have all been part and parcel of some conspiracy or debate in the western world. This means that African scholars must bear the unenviable burden of expounding African culture. As far as this paper is concerned, there is no evidence to prove the authenticity or otherwise the works of these two American scholars.

In fact, Erim (1997, p. 60) reflects on the Idoma man's belief in Ekwuafia festival and generally Alekwu:

In Idoma belief, the Idoma members of the kindred group are paradoxically alive. In other words, death in the corporal sense does not remove the dead from the kindred members as such. Rather, certain classes of the ancestors are considered vital and living members of the community.

This implies that the reason for such a belief on the part of Idoma people on Alekwu is that the spirit does not die.

According to Emielu (2006) The African social communal music is characterised by repertory of religious songs, work songs, satirical songs, insult or ridicule songs, he further observed that music plays a dominant role in community life in Africa which cuts across all facets of communal life including ritual ceremonies and festivals, a variety of group and activities.

Emielu (2006) citing Akpabot (1985/1995) classified 14 songs text in African music. They are, historical, social control, insults, obscenity, praise, children, funeral, work, war, humorous, communication, women, philosophical and ritual songs.

The Alekwu Afia esoteric concept would be derived from the ritual songs view of Emielu as aptly cited in Akpabot. The main reason for this is the fact that during performance the Alekwu Afia undergoes a lot of ritual dance that has an esoteric underpin. Some of these rituals songs

according to Opita a custodian of the Otukpo are usually geared towards societal ills for example these songs below;

Odamocheya.....Odamocheya odan-ocheya anu we ikwu ko, chea

Translated thus; what one does, that is the cause of one's death. Literally speaking, the evil that men do live after them.

Ema Oyaleyi owe mane?, Ema mum kpenwu owe Mani. Ema oyagekwu anu wema ma

Translated thus; Relationship that is not deep rooted, but remains shallow is no relationship. Relationship that you snub me is not a true relationship. Relationship that lasts till death do you part is more beneficial and enduring.⁹ From Opita above, one clearly sees the direction of Alekwu-Afia ritual songs in correcting societal ills.

The Historical Origin of the Festival

Most of the elders and the Alekwu actors unanimously maintain that the Alekwu cult was handed down to them by their forefathers. However according to Anyebe (1997) The Alekwu cult is as old as the existence of the Idoma on earth. Alekwu Afia is believed to be the creation of an Idoma ancestral father Anube, a genius, mystical and an artist. In his living outpost (Iponu), out of the hearing and sight of people, he tutored his fellow elders the mysticism and creation of Alekwu Afia revealed to him by the supernatural (gods). Having learnt about the secrecy and mysticism of Alekwu Afia, the elders decreed that any woman who becomes privy to the secrets of the Alekwu Afia cult would be sentenced to death by been buried alive, the traditional Idoma way of execution.

Unknown to the elders, Oyine, the first and favourite daughter of Anube had eavesdropped by the fence of the outpost (Iponu) while her father was tutoring the elders the mysticism and artistry of Alekwu Afia. Thus, Oyine knew every secret about the Alekwu Afia. Oyine's doom was sealed when she neglected to keep the secret to herself. When Alekwu Afia made her maiden appearance, Oyine revealed to her fellow women the secrets of Alekwu Afia. The elders on discovering that Oyine had revealed their secrets proceeded to execute Oyine and her fellow women whom she revealed the secrets to. In the case of Oyine, having committed the most grievous offence, she was buried up to her shoulder and for three days she pleaded her curse in tears.

When she died, musicians and artist celebrated her agony; "Oyine daughter of Anube, the champion endurer, Oyine who devoid of limbs proclaims her curse through the trunks. Oyine is still celebrated by

Alekwu Afia as a heroine. To obviate this awful situation a decree went abroad that all masquerade must henceforth originate from Opu the amphitheater. And when a masquerade makes his way home into a compound, a woman sings and dances to woo it home. Alache Ichicha, daughter of Oyine was the first woman to perform this ritual hence, the phrase "Anya ma ekwu eima ekwu" – women begets masquerade, but are not privy to its secret.

Alekwu Afia itself is a symbol of peace, plenty and continuity among the Idoma people in general and the Otukpo people in particular. The mystery of the development of Alekwu Afia is modeled on the development of guinea corn from the seed stage to the harvest. This perhaps is why guinea corn plays a major role in Alekwu rituals.

Where and when Anube developed this mysterious art no one can say for certainty because of the fluid nature of Oral tradition and the lack of written records at that time. Alekwu chanters and the elders remember that in modern Idoma land, Alekwu Afia was first practiced in 'Okpoga Ole Otuta' – Okpoga the home of mystery, the place where Apa soil was replanted as a permanent home after centuries of pseudomadic adventure in search of a new fatherland. From Okpoga, Alekwu Afia spread to other parts of modern Idoma land; Agila, Igwumale, Okpiko, Oglewu, Ogboju, Ochobo and particularly Otukpo and eventually to other lands.

The Idoma word 'Alekwu' or 'Alekwu Afia' eludes a clear cut translation or even definition, however, Alekwu is the totality of the Idoma life that guides and guards the Idoma from cradle to the grave, no matter his situation in life. No Idoma is properly buried until the burial ceremony is performed by Alekwu or other Ekwu (Masquerade) where the people practice no Alekwu Afia cult.

Characteristics of the Festival

In the course of communicating with the living-dead, the Alekwu Afia uses three languages; Igala and Igbirra languages before translating into Idoma language. Infact, inability to communicate in the former two languages disqualifies one from practicing the art. Initiation into the cult is voluntary but based on maturity and the ability to keep its secrets from the public. The mode of instruction is through indoctrination, this may last for months or years, depending on how fast the initiate is able to learn. Initiates are tutored in Ikpodoko (shrine) also they learn more as they follow the masquerade from one place to another during the festival. The Alekwu cult surrounds itself with fear and mystery; members meet in

secret and greet each other with signs only known to them. They swear their loyalty to the cult and bound themselves to severe pains of punishment.

Otukpo, like her neighbours (Oglewu, Ugboju, Ochobo and Okpiko) engages in annual festival of Alekwu once in a year, at the end of the month of March to celebrate the close of harvest season. Communion with Alekwu annually is necessary as a progress report; since the last festival has death taken toll, has death been warded off. The Alekwu is of outmost significance in the day to day life of the Idoma no matter where they maybe. No cultured Idoma eats without first offering the food to Alekwu. This means that the lives we live continue in a circle of the departed, those alive and those yet unborn, and alignment of this three produces harmony in an Idoma community. A study of Alekwu cult is infact, a study of the Idoma philosophy of better living. The Idoma race has much to offer the world in the art of social harmony through the Alekwu Afia philosophy.

Eje-Alekwu centers on Alekwu Afia, the festival is done in two stages; Aje-Opa, earth cult ritual and Alekwu Oyathoha, celebrating the festival together. The earth ritual is done from the day the Adah-Alekwu (Chief Priest of Alekwu) announces the date for the Eje-Alekwu festival. The Aje-Opa (earth ritual) is performed by a male sojourner in his maternal place (Oyi-Onyakole). These rites he carries out include a cock, palm oil, bean seed and water to appease the earth.

The cock is slaughtered and its blood is poured into two or three holes dug on a spot marked for the ritual. The flesh is cooked and shared out to the elders present. The male sojourner in charge of this ritual is not allowed to sleep with or come in contact with any woman until he finishes the rituals. The belief is that women are unclean during their monthly cycle, thus coming in contact with them at this period runs the ritual that ushers in the festival. A special bush or grass (Achi-Aje) is reserved for the earth ritual; it is set on fire immediately the earth ritual is over. Animals killed in the process of burning the bush are taken to the Priest and prepared and shared among the participants present. Rodents holes are dug with only sticks and not iron implements during the bush burning exercise, sticks are used so that not all the rodents would be killed to preserve the rest for future use, anything other than this (use of sticks) attracts a fine from the offender, this is because using iron implements is one of the rules guiding against the earth ritual.

The elders believe that Aje (earth) is the most elderly of all the planets and thus the earth ritual is carried out in recognition of its supremacy. After this earth ritual the elders would then go back and announce the impending festival to their families, here issues concerning the festival are discussed. Warning against fighting during the festival is issued; violation of this warning attracts fines.

After the meeting between the elders and the Adah-Alekwu, the hunting expedition would then commence. The Ogobou-Ote (head hunter) is then mandated to announce the date of the hunting through the community town crier. The length of the hunting depends on the interval between the hunting expedition and date of the festival itself. On the day of the hunting, the young men would turn up with their weapons; these include guns, bows, arrows, and cutlass. They assemble at a popular junction before setting off here; the headhunter narrates the rule and regulations guiding the expeditions. Noise making, unnecessary alarm and quarrel are disallowed. Observe well before shooting at an animal, this is to avoid shooting a fellow man inadvertently. However, if by mistake a person is shot or killed in the course of hunting, reprisal is not permitted; such an incident is termed as accidental discharge. Women too are not left out in this search for meat, theirs include fish. Children between the ages 8-18 years have the task of clearing the foot paths and widening it, to be used by the Alekwu Afia during the festival.

During the festival each member of the clan whose parent died sacrifices chickens or goat to the ancestors. The Alekwu Afia uses velvet material, it is sewn in a long flowing gown, the material used are in colours of black, white, green, red and yellow combined to represent the rainbow, though black is the most dominant color. This may mean that the cult recognizes the rainbow as deity, but it is not substantiated in this research. The flowing gown nature of the costume enables the masquerade move about without obstruction. The masquerade, is always accompanied by two people one in front, the other behind it carrying the excess gown in both hands and coils the rest around his neck, the masquerade rests its neck on the shoulder of the man in front.

The masquerade (Alekwu Afia) uses guttural voices, which are different from that of human voice, thus their identities are hidden from the public. The change in voice instills fear into the people. An 'Akpa' (a local speaking instrument carved out of bamboo) is used to effect this voice change. In English, this sound produced is called ventriloquism. During the process of moving from one place to another, some people

slaughter goats and pour the blood on the ground for the masquerade to walk on, such an act is an appeal to the ancestors for protection, signs of gratitude and affluence on the part of the wealthy.

Masquerades are representatives of named ancestors. Every costume has meaning with regards to the ancestors that are represented. The costumes are of different designs but the same styles and colours. It is only through close observation can their differences be known once the placement of each color is known you can easily identify the spirit each masquerade is representing. The heads of the masquerade are shaped in corn-like form and longer than an ordinary cap, it has a small pillar with a piece of cloth cut thin on it, this corn-like head has small bells fixed on it. Once it is shaken, the noise can be heard from a far distance, this warns the people especially women and children of the presence of the masquerades. The dominant colours of the costume is black, the costume covers every part of the masquerade body as no part of his body is expected to be seen outside. The annual Alekwu festival takes place once a year, at the end of the dry season to usher in the raining season and bountiful harvest.

Organisation of the Festival

The Eje-Alekwu festival is a communal celebration which together allows indigenes who live in other places to attend the festival. The festival is a period set aside to give the ancestral spirits of the clan wine, to appease and bring them to feast together. The preparation of the burukutu (local liquor) takes seven days; this allows pasteurisation of the guinea corn to occur. Every family brews its own burukutu (liquor) which is usually made ready on the last day of the festival. The liquor is made ready on this day because it is used as the final rites before the ancestral spirits (Alekwu) comes out of the shrine (Ikpodoko).

The ceremony lasts for three days. On the eve of the festival, an elderly person, in fact the eldest man in each village of the clan who can hardly see is given a thread to pass it through the eye of the needle. This exercise occurs when the sun is over head, if he passes it through, gunshots are fired and ululations from the women are heard but if he fails, the festival for that year will be put off, such cases have never occurred once this exercise is over, then the masquerades (the ancestral spirits) file out of the shrine.

On the first day of the festival, an Agidigbe (locally made drum without animal skin but with two hallowed holes with water) is sounded

from Ipagbla (Chief Priest palace) to usher in the festival. The drum is played all throughout the festive period. Once the drum sounded, no burial/funeral ceremony is permitted to take place until the festival is over. Anybody who dies at this time is buried with rites; his relatives can neither cry nor mourn his death. The ancestral spirits have been invoked and thus is not ready to welcome any new spirits into their midst. Anyone who goes against this rule faces not only the wrath of the elders, but also the wrath of the Alekwu. At dawn, all the activities revolving around the shrine are secretive to women and children; this protects the mysticism of the Alekwu cult. Sacrifices are made to the ancestral spirits; roasted meat is shared among the male folks.

According to Okplefu, this sacrifice has certain symbolic features which link the human with the ancestors, so that the ancestors are subjected to human control. Thus, the ritual manipulation of the sacrificial victim helps men mediate their relation, the works, also serves to control this transaction by influencing the ancestors through prayer and songs to act on man's behalf.

Before the festival begins, the participant must sacrosanct the time, place and victims (animals) of the sacrifice and all those who will participate in it. The officiating priest does not wear shoes when performing this ritual in the shrine (Ikpodoko). As the sacrifice is offered to the ancestors, the priest uses the opportunity to appeal and appease them, asking for more blessings and protection of the family, the village and the clan against their enemies, as asserted by Ikwue. The sharing of the victims (animals – rams, goat and cock) confirms the spiritual bond between the worshippers and the spirits to whom the portion is given.

The ritual sacrifices have three structures, consecration, invocation and communion. It unites and reinforces the participants, sacrifices is itself prayer in physical form. Rituals are still carried out in the shrine on the second day. A vigil is held by the spirits in form of masquerade that have already been reincarnated. After this vigil Alekwu Afia is allowed to come out. It is called Obe-ekwu (Chief Masquerade) first among equals. As an expert masquerade, it invokes the spirits of the ancestors in such a way that a bird called Owuna is lured down and caught alive. This requires a lot of sacrifices, once the bird is caught, women shout loudly, dance and sing and ululate. Women are forbidden from beholding the masquerade from the waist downwards, violation of this renders a woman childless for life except cleansing rituals are carried out.

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The third day is the last day of the festival, which witnesses a large turnout of crowd in the clan's heads palace or gathers at Orpu (village square) as the case maybe. The clan head and council of elder will then move out amidst gunshots, drums, flutes and women ululation (Oga). The chief of the clan (Oche) takes the center stage and addresses the crowd; his messages are relayed to the audience by someone with a clear voice (ochowo). Such messages are centered on unity and history of the clan, the past chief's though no more alive are named down to the present one and eulogized. This according to Idoko Amedu is also to avoid any mistake in the course of this narration because any repetition is a sign of bad omen, if he makes mistakes up to three times. In a case like that, the oracle is consulted immediately to find out the reason behind it.

Back in the chief's palace, matters concerning the corporate existence of the clan are discussed. It is only the indigenes of the clan who are made up of home based elder that participate in the discussion. It should be noted that a heavy down pour usually accompanies the end of the festival especially at night. This marks a memorable and successful festival for the year. Whereby there is no rainfall something is believed to be wrong and the oracle is then consulted, any pronouncement by the oracle is used to prevent future occurrences.

At the end of the festival, women who might have sighted the masquerade from the waist down (Ebi-Okpo) would come out to confess, if they will be barren for life. Once confession has taken place, necessary fines are paid and purification rites are performed on them by the Chief Priest. The exercise renders them free from any evil associated with the offence committed.

Water is sprinkled on them to allow them move and interact freely with their fellow women or else any woman who touches them will have to undergo the same cleansing rites. This exercise marks the end of the year's festival.

Significance of the Alekwu Festival

As Sallah is to the Muslims, Christmas is to the Christians so is the Eje-Alekwu festival to Otukpo clan. Lot of preparations are made towards the festival. Unity is foremost among the clan, people come from far and near to celebrate and attend the festival, it creates a forum for peaceful interaction between the young and the old. The celebration transcends from the level of the masquerade moving from one place to another into further celebration at night by the youths. The level of fraternization

depicts the social status of each and every participant; meetings are in age groups, peer groups and social status groups.

The festival involves the transformation of the physical body of a man to the spiritual body of the ancestors to attain the height of Alekwu and brewing of liquor. The festival is used to highlight the norms and values of the clan, it enables the young ones to know their past, present and its bearing on the future. In fact, the festival gives the clan a sense of direction in life. The masquerade gives blessing to and receives gifts from their children as they move around the clan settlements. Communion are held, thus, strengthening love, peace and unity among the people.

The festival is used to launch development of projects in the clan, this encourages friendly interactions as violent crimes are jointly tackled and communal land disputes becomes minimized amongst various sub-clans. Long standing disputes between families, friend's etc. are finally settled during the festival. The festive mood relaxes the nerves of the people. The words of the ancestral spirits (Alekwu) and elders are final in the settlement of all cases, the elders settle these cases by allowing each party state his case, investigations are carried out and witness are called. The final decision taken is devoid of partiality. The guilty party is strongly warned, the innocent is pleaded with to forgive and forget about the incident. The festival is basically a time for enjoyment and relaxation, promotion of peace and unity, a time when traditional faithful pray and make offerings for protection, defense from their enemies and for the appeasement of their dead ancestors.

Conclusion

The Alekwu Afia festival is practiced in Otukpo community for the society to reproduce itself continually, socialising, modifying and defending social values that are unique. The festival has experienced changes that are as a result of the dynamic nature of the society. This dynamic nature hinges upon the conflicting values in the society. The dominating western values as well as the culture contact with the Igbo, subordinating the Alekwu Afia to the extent that it has become routine. Again, institutions like the church, the police and the courts pose a threat in addition to the penetrating western values that result from colonial intrusion, and leaving it to be practiced at all spheres. Therefore, in spite of these various effects on the festival, it is still practiced with its 'new' functions, coupled with its metaphysical essence and enmeshed within a "lined" relationship of domination.

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