

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL VITALITY: AN EXAMINATION OF 'ALEKWU' IN CRIME CONTROL AMONG OROKAM PEOPLE OF BENUE STATE

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Abstract

Language is an indispensable tool for societal development; it gives human beings a sense of identity. It is also a vehicle through which cultural identity is transmitted; hence, language and culture are inseparable. Crime is a devaluation of societal norms and traditions. As people and cultures differ, so also are the divergences in criminality associated with the different cultures. Crime is an integral part of a society; it permeates every sector of a community. Orokam – an autonomous community in the present-day Ogbadibo Local Government Area of Benue State – is not an exception. Orokam community highly upholds 'Alekwu' spirit which is believed to be an ancestral deity used to checkmate crime among the people. Alekwu, being the assemblage of the spirits of the ancestors or progenitors in Orokam, is highly revered for it ensures that peace, justice and fairness reign in the community. However, Alekwu is dreadful for it controls criminal activities among the indigenous people of Orokam. Enough awareness about its functions has not been known to both natives and non-natives of Orokam. This paper identifies and examines the activities of Alekwu in crime control. It also examines when, where and how Alekwu operates, and who are the victims of Alekwu as well as why they are victims. The descriptive research method was employed in the analysis. This paper equally x-rays the pedagogic relevance of this study to English as a Second Language (ESL) practitioners.

Keywords: language, culture, crime, Alekwu, Orokam, Ogbadibo

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Introduction

Language is one of the core values that define the existence of human society. It is a medium of exchange which characterizes every linguistic community of the world; it is an indelible source of identity. It is defined in so many ways. To Dada (2007:2), language is "an arbitrary vocal system of communication used among members of a speech community". Essentially, it is a set of contextual codes that are intelligible and meaningful to those who use and thus share them.

Language could be described as representation of human reasoning, which is either positive or negative. In every human society like the Orokam community, language is seen as an important nonsense. This is because, firstly, it can be used to establish mutual relationships among family members, peer groups, age grades, intra- and inter-community unity. Secondly, it is used to cause communal disintegration, to bring about divorce between husband and wife, clash of interest, abuse etc. Onuigbo's view corroborates that of Orokam people thus:

If language is simply a means of communication through the use of spoken sounds and graphic symbols, there would have been no much problems but language is so critical in the development of life that every stage, every position, every profession and every action in life devices a special form and structure of language for effective operations. (2019, 2 – 3)

From the foregoing, it is apparent that language is useful for human beings to express their experiences in their relationships with fellow human beings. Orokam people are good users of Orokam dialect of the Idoma language to express their true sense and essence of their world view. We shall, in subsequent paragraphs, briefly discuss the world view and/or culture of Orokam people, and the relationship between language and culture.

Culture occupies a significant position in the lives of people that attach meaning(s) to it. It defines the behavioural patterns determined by common world view, values, beliefs, thoughts and institutions in a given society. Culture is communication and communication is culture. According to Aguenue (2003: 84), culture is "all the qualities which group men together and distinguish them from the rest of the animal kingdom.

Language and culture are intertwined; they are inseparable. They develop together and influence each other as they evolve. The import of the above statement is that there cannot be language without culture, neither

can there be culture without language. Hence, language and culture which are available to Orokam people create a unique and uncommon identity about them.

Orokam is a community in present-day Ogbadibo Local Government Area in Benue State. It is difficult to give the most concise and satisfactory account of the history of Orokam because there is no written record in that regard. Available sources of information to Orokam history are archaeological materials and oral tradition. Oral tradition seems, however, to override other due to lack of proper documentations of Orokam history. Orokam is proud of her native heritage, ancestral traditions, elaborate traditional tales, artistic expressions, music and varied culture elements, prominent among them is the Alekwu-spirit.

Many of the Africans' traditional belief systems and their cherished cultures have been eroded following the advent of Christianity on the continent. However, a reasonable number of Orokam in particular, and Idoma people in general still stand firm to their traditional Alekwu-spirit, which is seen as a bond between the living and the dead. The people host an annual 'Aje Alekwu' festival during which traditional religious practitioners commune with, and worship their ancestors.

Alekwu, as earlier noted, is said to be the spirit of the progenitors who died years ago in Orokam. Alekwu is a traditional divine force of the Idoma people, generally accepted by the people to have the ability to ensure, and rebuff any individual who goes contrary to the ethics, standards, and conventions set by the Idoma communities. The fear of Alekwu is still the beginning of wisdom among Orokam people of Idoma nation; despite the presence of Christianity in Orokam, the average Orokam person fears Alekwu-spirit. The Idomas have strong attachment to, and worship of Alekwu-spirit of the ancestors. The deity is invisible and acts as a watchdog in the affairs of families and communities; it also checkmates such vices as adultery, theft and murder.



A Symbolic Image of Alekwu

Crime is not a new concept in the history of human race; there is no society that is crime free. As people are different, so also are their ideologies and perceptions about things and people in their environments. The researchers see crime as a deviation from what is right; as acts that could cause danger and pain to people. A crime is any behaviour that violates a law and which results in a punishment(s). Punishments can range from payment of a fine to incarceration. The level of the offense or crime will usually be set in proportion to the severity of the crime. (https://criminal-law.freeadvice.com/criminal-law/criminal-law/crime_law.htm).

Legally, crimes are defined as acts or omissions forbidden by law that can be punished by imprisonment and/or fine. Murder, robbery, burglary, rape, drunkenness, child neglect, and failure to pay one's taxes all are common examples of crime. There is no one cause of crime. Crime is a highly

complex phenomenon that changes across cultures and time. As cultures change over time, behaviours that once were not criminal may become crimes. Orokam community is not an exception in terms of criminal activities.

'Alekwu'spirit and rites have not gained adequate awareness among neighbours of Orokam, tourists, friends and well-wishers. In other words, people from other communities do not have adequate knowledge of the activities of 'Alekwu'. It is against this background that this study was undertaken to unveil the activities of 'Alekwu' as crime controller among Orokam people. There are different misconceptions about 'Alekwu' among Orokam people and the non-native speakers, which need clarifications. This also necessitates this study.

The study is anchored on Hymes's (1962) theory of ethnography of communication, which caters for social and cultural practices and beliefs in a speech community. The theory is most appropriate in this study, because the study examines the cultural beliefs and practices among Orokam people of Benue State.

Alekwu and Crime Control among Orokam Indigenous People

The presence of the Western religion – Christianity – has eroded some cultural values among Orokam people. First, 'Alekwu' means spirit; and there are two types of spirits, which are 'alekwu iho' - the spirit that is holy or the spirit that is good, and the second type is 'alekwu obobi' – the spirit that is bad. When the word 'alekwu' is mentioned, many persons would blindly begin to say: 'alekwu die, die and die forever'. Some Christians at the mention of 'alekwu' would say, "Owoicho ko taa", which means, may God forbid.

Every community of the world has a way of checkmating the activities of her people, so the progenitors of Orokam in time immemorial gathered to set standards on how people should relate with one another. These ancestors foresaw the future of Orokam community which is made up of the five clans named after the progenitors: Ai-Inamu, Ai-Ona, Ai-Okò, Ai-Onyirofe/Ako and Ai-Agboriko respectively. The need to institute cultural norm that would protect and preserve the community gave rise to Alekwu. According to Alachi:

...seen as a 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 socio-cultural 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 (2012, p. 32)

Alekwu has come to stay in Orokam as a sacred being that regulates and supervises the activities of every Orokam person whether at home or diaspora. In spite of the presence of Western Christian religion in Orokam land, Alekwu is a very strong spirit the image and the activities of which cannot be eroded.

Alekwu can be likened to Opata's (2005) "Ekwensu". Opata points that Ekwensu as it is called today is a misrepresentation of the original meaning of a deity that stands to ward off evil doing from the Igbo communities by lashing evil doers with evil, suffering and all forms of calamities. But the missionaries who could not get the true sense of Ekwensu therefore translated wrongly (translation error) by the Christian missionaries. (pp. 125 - 126)

People, mostly Christians, who must have been exposed, disgraced and visited with evils as a result of their evil deeds castigate Alekwu and describe it as evil spirit. This notwithstanding, Alekwu frustrate evil doers by lashing them with evils such as deadly sicknesses and even deaths. Anyone caught in the act of evil doing and has been afflicted by any of the punishments of the 'Alekwu', the Orokam community would excommunicate the person and if the person eventually dies, no one is expected to weep or give such an evil doer a befitting burial.

Alekwu can be appeased when the evil doer is ready to confess all his/her evil deeds at the early stage of the identification of the crime. For the victim to confess, a reasonable number of native speakers, predominantly custodians of the cultural tradition, males and females as well as responsible youths must be present before the confession can be done after which 'Idoko ijija' – which is the cleanse rite would be administered by the eldest man of the community who is known as 'Okpareko' or 'Obiokwute'. After the cleansing, the eldest man and other members of the Council of Chiefs would admonish the repentant soul to turn a new leave as well stay away from the

old ways. It is after this that the person can fully participate in the activities of the village, but would not be given some sensitive positions of leadership for some time.

Life Styles that Alekwu Frowns at in Orokam Community

Alekwu spirit is being feared so much in Orokam even more than the supreme God, because, firstly its punishment is immediate and, secondly it does not forgive easily like the Almighty God who is always merciful. Below are some sharp practices that Alekwu frowns at:

i. Abortion and/or Murder

This is a serious crime in Orokam. No Orokam son or daughter is expected to take the life of any person in the land unlawfully. If a spinster from Orokam, by mischance, fails to preserve her virginity by becoming pregnant for a man, such a lady is expected to give birth to that baby. But in a situation that she decides to abort the pregnancy, she will attract Alekwu's death penalty to herself, for spilling innocent blood of a child on Okam soil. If either of her parents, or any of her siblings, relatives, and the man who is responsible for the pregnancy (if he is a native of Orokam) contributes towards that abortion, such a person will equally die.

In a related development, if an Orokam person kills a fellow Orokam person, such a killer would be visited by uncommon and dangerous diseases, which would force the killer to confess his/her evil deeds and will die after the confession to serve as a deterrent to others.

ii. Adultery

When a woman who is married to an Orokam man commits an adultery, such a woman will be visited by a powerful force of Alekwu through sicknesses, restlessness and horrible dreams/nightmares which will make her confess her atrocious act, or even die. The woman will only die if:

1. the husband is not aware of the act, or
2. he is aware but terminates their marriage, or
3. refuses to have sexual intercourse with her, or
4. avoids anything that will keep her close to him nor her male children.

Others steps to be taken to prevent the woman from dying include:

5. the woman goes before the Council of Elders/Chiefs and the general public to confess openly, mentioning all the men that had slept with her, after which
6. all the men involved in the act would be summoned to pay for damages done to the tradition before the woman's husband can now take her back home after the cleansing.

But if the husband is aware of his wife's adulterous lifestyle, and decides to hide the act from his kinsmen in order to avoid public disgrace/shame, such man will die while the wife will live. Worthy of note is that today many young girls have refused to get married to Orokam men because of Alekwu; the implication is that they have planned to live adulterous lifestyles in their marriages.

It must also be noted that Alekwu does not kill an Orokam man, who has concubines and do have sexual intercourse with them outside his marital home. Just like the African societies at large, the Orokam culture believes that a man is polygamous in nature, and can therefore take more than one wife if he chooses, but the woman is not allowed such privilege.

iii. Stealing and Falsehood

Orokam tradition frowns at theft and stealing lifestyles. Anyone who has the tendency of stealing is always exposed by Alekwu. Such a fellow is often subjected to public disgrace. The person has to carry what he/she has stolen on his/her head and would be meant to move round the Ukwo Orokam Market. He/she would be in front of the crowd as the youths follow him/her flogging him/her amid disgrace to serve as deterrent to others.

In a related development, there are people who steal the mandate of the rulership of the community such as 'okpara-eko' or 'obiokwute' (eldest) title in order to enjoy the privileges associated with it. As soon as the person is enthroned as the custodian, if he is not qualified to be on the throne, in seven or fourteen or twenty-one days of enthronement, Alekwu would take his life. In this case, the person must have committed two offences – stealing and falsehood. Because of this ugly consequence, many are afraid to receive some of the benefits meant for the eldest thereby helping to put in place, the virtue of sincerity among Orokam people.

It is also important to note that in those days when people were stealing people's penis for ritual for quick money making purpose, no one

ever entered Orokam community to steal penis without being caught. Alekwu is believed to have fenced the community with spiritual protection and that prevents many others who intend to engage in any evil to desist from it.

iv. Injustice and Unfair Treatment during Burials of Parents and Marriages

In Orokam, if one's father dies and the child fails to bury him with a cow, such a child is not expected to bury his mother with a cow neither would he partake in the eating of cow meat in another person's burial. If the person dares to eat such meat, Alekwu will kill him. In a situation where the child was not financially buoyant when the father died, but becomes affluent before the death of the mother, and he wants to kill a cow for the mother, he will first of all buy a cow, invite his father's relatives and re-bury the father with it before burying the mother with a cow.

In a related development, if a man marries a wife and only paid part of the bride price, if the wife gives birth to a girl child and the daughter wants to get married, the man must not collect any of the bride price he did not pay during his own marriage, else Alekwu will take his life for being unjust/unfair to his in-law. If he must collect the full bride price from the proposed son-in-law, he must first of all re-visit the wife's family and pay his own full bride price before he can collect from the son-in-law.

v. Wrong Judgement

Alekwu stands for fairness and justice. Many have gone to their early graves because of wrong judgements and false witnesses. There was a case of boundary dispute where a wealthy man from Orokam returned to the community and encroached on a poor man's land. The poor man reported the case to the elders. The wealthy man bribed three elders so that they would false fly testify against the poor man. When they did and succeeded in giving the plot of the land to the affluent fellow, these men died because of unfair judgement.

According to Romans:

Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. So anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished. For authorities do not strike fear in people who are doing right, but in

those who are doing wrong. Would you like to live without the fear of authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you. The authorities are God's servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course, you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God's servants, sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong. So you must submit to them, not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience. (13: 1-5)

It is important to note that the researchers are core Christians, but they do not romanticize with what Alekwu forbids, because what Alekwu frowns at are the same with what God asked the Christians not to do in the bible. Alekwu wants Orokam people to love one another and this is the same with what the bible has commanded the people of God not to do. The Bible talks about the same love which Alekwu preaches about. The biblical record in the book of Romans says:

Owe nothing to anyone except for your obligation to love one another ... you will fulfill the requirements of God's law. You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet ... love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to others, so fulfill the requirements of God's law. (13:8-10)

From the above illustrations, God is at the centre of activities in Orokam. When one is respecting God by doing the biblical instructions, such one is at the same time obeying the constituted authorities instituted by the elders of the land through Alekwu.

In addition to Alekwu's core roles of checking criminality, preserving justice and fairness in Orokam, Alachi and Tyokyaa (nd) identify other fundamental functions of Alekwu to the people as:

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

Implications of the Study for Teachers and Learners of English as a Second Language (ESL)

The study:

- i. provides Alekwu as a tool for both semiotic and semantic analysis of cultural symbols.
- ii. also provides the impetus of how a group of people reasons, speaks, hears, feels, evaluates and interprets events and experiences.
- iii. establishes how Orokam people communicate, which will help other speech communities to diversify their relationships, interactions and linguistic contacts.
- iv. brings to the knowledge of learners of ESL and other languages the basic information about indigenous people and their patterns of communication.
- v. brings about historical and social ideas, knowledge, techniques, methods, beliefs, procedures, rules and regulations, rewards and punishments.
- vi. provides information on safeguards against attack and extinction of a people's values, norms, beliefs and moral codes.
- vii. sharpens students' skills in the identification of their roles in the 21st century society.
- viii. provides the point of convergence and divergence between the English and the Orokam (African) traditions.

Conclusion

Alekwu spirit is increasingly being used among Orokam community as instrument for checkmating and curbing crimes among the people. Alekwu, to a large extent, is being revered among the people and as a result, the indigenous people of Orokam fear Alekwu even more than a pastor or reverend father who is a representative of God among the people. The fear of Alekwu is seen among Orokam community as the beginning of righteous beliefs practices.

This study has been able to unfold the relationship between language and culture as well as Alekwu spirit in Orokam community. It has shown that Alekwu, in addition to portraying the very rich cultural heritage, cultural norms and beliefs among Orokam indigenous people, also helps to control crime

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