
'Iwa-Akwa' in Igboland: The Gateway to adulthood

By

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ABSTRACT

In traditional African Society, life is sacred, observed, reserved, revered, celebrated from birth, growth to death and even here-after. The African does not just migrate or move into the next social status or group as though he is walking into his neighbor's house from his own. Consequent upon the African's belief in the spiritual forces, their relatedness and involvement in physical world, the gods and the entire supersensible world should and must be involved, not just for the pump and pageantry but for the attendant spiritual protection and position such change can bestow on the initiates. This movement has been properly identified as Rites of Passage. One of such Rites of Passage is 'Iwa-akwa' among the Ihitte/Uboma people of the present day, Imo State of Nigeria. Ordinarily, translated into English Language as Wearing Cloth Ceremony, this rite of passage ushers in male adolescents with its accompanying rites and rituals into manhood or adulthood. However this rite draws our attention to a more critical area of passage which is the gravamen of this work that Rites of Passage are not limited to life crisis Rituals, but may accompany any change from one state of being to another. In this study, the researcher adopted observation, documented and interview methods as his sources of data collection while this work remains a descriptive and sociological methodological approaches in solving the problems set out in this work. The findings remain that such a cultural celebration reflects among others the thinking of the community, their hope, aspirations and belief that humans are intrinsically connected to the supersensible world so much so that each movement from one stage of life to another must and should be celebrated not only with pump and pageantry but also with the accompanying rites and rituals to so properly fortify himself to face the vagaries and vicissitudes of life. This to the Igbo man is the sure way to live and fulfill his purpose here on earth.

KEYWORDS: GATEWAY, ADULTHOOD, 'IWA-AKWA', IGBOLAND.

Introduction

A fallout of the Igbo Cosmology or world-view is the fact that a budding young man or woman goes through a number of developmental stages before he or she is regarded as a full blown adult. Uba (1985) even opines that many psychologists have advanced a number of theories in support of their findings on these physiological and intellectual changes that take place in a given young person. Regardless of the developmental model one prefers, adolescence is generally, regarded as a time of special developmental significance. Flavell (1963) observes that adolescence is the last of Piaget's four intellectual ages of man (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and formal). Rites of Passage are another term for

'Puberty Rites'. Formal presentation of adolescent boys for initiation into adulthood through 'Iwa-akwa' (cloth wearing) is an event which form part of the activities which adolescents engage in as part of the ceremonies, rites and rituals which confer on them status of adulthood. The initiation marks the passage of an adolescent from the social status of a boy child to the social status of an adult. An initiate thus goes through a social transformation in which he gives up one identification for another.

Van Gennep (1996) stimulates our interest when he opines that the universe itself is governed by a periodicity which has repercussions on human life, with stages and transitions, movements forward and periods of relative inactivity, so that rites of passage include life crisis Rituals like rituals to mark transition into different phases of human life like birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher social class, occupational specialization and death. Rites of Passage also celebrate time and events. Rites of Passage observes Metuh (1987) are further found in all societies but tend reach their maximal expression in small-scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies, where change is bound up with biological and meteorological rhythms and reoccurrence rather than with technological innovations. In consequence therefore 'Iwa-akwa' as representing this Rite, does not only concern the individuals on when they are centered, but also mark changes in the relationships of all the peoples connected with them by ties of blood, marriages, political and economic associations. So that as Turner (1970) puts in, their "big moments become the big moments of others as well."

Iwa-akwa (Cloth Wearing) festival

According to www.uhuri.org, 'Iwa-akwa', an adult initiation ceremony that takes place in Obowo, Ihitte/Uboma, Ehime Mbano and part of Ahiazu Mbaise Local Government Areas of Imo State and perhaps in few other communities, has its origin in Obowo. The ceremony is found in other areas due to its proximity to Obowo. While other communities can easily state when the ceremony started in their communities, Obowo can hardly trace its origin because it is as old as one can imagine (as Adam) in Obowo clan. I do vehemently disagree with the above position as this research reveals, none of the villages and or communities in Ihitte/Uboma knows when this initiation rites started in their land.

Though it is not the intension of this work to confirm or debunk argument in support or against the claims of authors about it originated, all the researches and interviews conducted in the course of this work within Ihitte/Uboma point to one direction-ie- "the ceremony is as old as the people" they are born into it. They never copied nor borrowed it from anybody or any people. Refinedng (2020) writes that 'Iwa-akwa' is an adult initiation ceremony. It is clearly an initiation into manhood that takes place between the ages of 24-26 years. It takes three years to prepare for the next 'Iwa-akwa' ceremony once one has been completed. The latest initiates are usually referred to as senior age-grade while the upcoming set is called the junior age-grade. After the completion of 'Iwa-akwa' ceremony, the junior age-grade (next set) immediately start their preparation, subjecting to and receiving directions from the senior age-grade; since they are considered to be more experienced. Before their initiation, the senior age-grade guides them through the customs, providing supervision from the beginning of their initiation through the main market-square display, which is the peak of the 'Iwa-akwa'.

During the market square display, new initiates would appear with their elegant long-woven

wrapper costumes. The display is usually well organized as only performers are allowed to enter the ring (ogba) while the crowd stays behind to cheer them and dance. The initiates move and dance in a single line within the ring (ogba) while the upcoming initiates dance in front of them, dressed in elegant uniforms. According to a source of oral tradition, the immediate age-grade set will have to approach the elder age-grade to request age-grade selection for them. This system purely teaches and maintains traditional respect in the community. Within the three years, the initiates would perform the 'Ishi nri Iwa akwa,' a mini ceremony intended by their parents to announce the participation of their son in the forth coming 'Iwa-akwa'. Once the initiation is completed, it becomes the responsibility of the immediate age-grade to prepare the next initiates just as they were guided in the traditions of the Land.

The importance of age-grade in this part of Africa has made the 'Iwa-akwa' one of the most celebrated festival among the people Ihitte/Uboma. Coming of age ceremonies, rituals and rites of passage for men are common all over the world. In Ethiopia, young boys who want to identify as men must successfully jump over a castrated, male cow four times while naked, symbolizing the childhood they are leaving behind them. Even in the small Island of Vanuatu, young boys come of age by jumping off a 98'foot-tall tower with a bungee-like Vine tied to their ankles, just barely preventing them from hitting the group. 'Iwa-akwa' represents this in part of the Igbo land being discussed. In 'Iwa-akwa' the participants' mother has to have been married properly to the community and be admitted by women of the community and the father has to have properly passed through the initiation stage in his days. The participant also shouldn't have any link or heredity with Osu (outcast). It is to be noted that the big George wrapper must be blessed by the traditional priest who is the spiritual leader of the community.

The chief priest will further approach the community or village deity especially the earth mother deity (Ala) to appease it, ask for her protection throughout the duration of the celebration. This is usually done libation, sacrifices and rituals. In parts of Nsụ Mbano axis, each initiate, no matter how highly placed is further expected to carry out their task without complaining, they are given buckets to go fetch water from their stream for their seniors; each water they fetch must be very clean if the initiate doesn't want to be sent back. For if the seniors notice any dirt in the water, the person who fetched that bucket would be asked to go back and fetch another one. It is reported that on the average, each candidate goes to the stream three times. This amounts to fetching three buckets of water. The 'Iwa-akwa' is celebrated December ending or early January of the next year depending on the market day.

About this period, most people are around and home on holidays and for other celebrations. Okeke (1991) writes that the festival of 'Iwa-akwa' is done differently on different market days of the partaking villages because the people believe that the gods of the village are more happier during their market days, when they would be in the mood to render assistance to the people. Forming a single line, the celebrants would set out from the place of their local shrine after the necessary sacrifices, to the market square (another location of the market deity), singing, dancing, shooting their dance guns into the air, while tying their long wrapper (George) around their waists and covering all their lower frame down to their ankles. The initiates who will have no shirts on them, will have their bodies decorated with white chalk (nzu). Rainmakers are also involved. Although the period of the festival falls into dry season, the Igbo do not take anything for granted especially given the religious/sound importance and significance of 'Iwa-akwa'. The purpose of engaging the rainmaker is to forestall the activities

of the enemy prior who may want to involve rainfall on such days against the wishes of the people.

Breaking of the Kola nuts, pouring of libation at the take of site, the eating of the kola nuts together by the village priest, family heads and other priests, coupled with the throwing away (to the ancestors) particles of the kola nuts serves as means of communal relationship in bounded love and care for the world of the celebrants and that of the supersensible world. At the end of the day, and after the exercise, at the market square, the initiates/celebrants are carried shoulder high to their houses where they continue to entertain their guest with all manner of delicacies while they are being showered with gifts of different kinds especially in monetary form.

Rituals in 'Iwa-akwa'

Metuh (1987) says that there are rituals/rites which mark change from passive to active membership in the community with the accompanying privileges and obligation. During these rites and rituals, initiates are taught the implications of community life, that is, living together, obedience to elders, public spiritedness, endurance and entrusting the secrets of the esoteric traditions and love of the group. The sacrifices done during this festival include those by the village traditional priest at the commencement of the festival, at the take off point of the initiates and at the market square which function to connect the village, her people and the initiate to the deities for religious unification in the interaction of beings; for a peaceful celebration and for the general good of the land. Such sacrifices witness the killing of animals like goats, chicken (cock) and in some case a ram, depending on the demand of the gods as may be prescribed by the diviners. When such rites and rituals are performed, they call for qualities such as tolerance, endurance, courage and strength.

By successfully going through these rite processes, the erstwhile adolescent attests to his readiness to assume the responsibilities of adult life. The degree of emotional involvement of the rite of 'Iwa-akwa' especially the falling on the ground on the road to the market square, the discipline by the senior age-grade and the jumping of some hurdles amounts to some form of physical discomfort leading to pleasurable experiences much later as one is happy now as an adult. Further Enekwe (1987), gives two definitions of rituals that would serve well for Igbo meaning of ritual in this circumstances. Firstly, Enekwe defines ritual as "a prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and power." This is absolutely true of rituals in 'Iwa-akwa'. They involve the mystical beings and power of the deities, ancestors and other divinities or spirits. In the second definition, Enekwe sees ritual as an act or action intentionally conducted by a group of people employing one or more symbols in a repetitive, formal, precise, and highly stylized fashion. That is also observed in 'Iwa-akwa' festival. When put together Enekwe argues what rituals provide for the people who use it thus "Rituals provides information and reduces anxiety by making people believe that what has been desired has been affected or will be fulfilled." By creating its own image of the world desired, ritual brings a certain reality into being.

Thus religious ritual moves the gods, the ancestors or the spirits. The rituals associated with 'Iwa-akwa' projects the visible (initiates, communities) to the invisible reality (deities, ancestors). It therefore becomes a physical action of religiously inviting the spiritual entities for communion through the desired intensions of the votaries. As a religious act it symbolizes

communion with unseen powers of the spiritual reality of the people's belief for the desired intention and the objective. Herein it has connected the initiates with the adulthood of the spirits in similitude of their physical self and social position. Metuh (1987) notes further that initiation rites like the ones observed in 'Iwa-akwa' prepare young people for marriages and procreation which are means of implementing the sacred duty of perpetuating and strengthening the life-force of the clan. Thus the Igbo tradition through the instrument of 'Iwa-akwa' is sure partaker in this life force.

Values and beliefs associated with 'Iwa-akwa' as a Rite of Passage

The need to have enough money to buy the cloth, the gun, the gun powder, the food etc to be used for the 'Iwa-akwa' and the attendant joy of being a man has forced the average adolescent in Ihitte/Uboma, Obowo, Mbano and part of Mbaise where 'Iwa-akwa' is practiced even today, to set out early in life to take up a trade and thus save money. This sense of mission and commitment has indirectly encouraged many a young man to be their own ambassadors in his place of sojourn. Uba (1985) posits concerning this fact that most of the time these youths have succeeded to save enough money from their businesses to celebrate their passages and establishing themselves as independent nuclear units of their families. Some also succeed in building their own houses before the rite and marrying their own wives, instead of hiring young girls they might not marry after the trial sex experience which characterizes the ceremony in some communities. In the same vein, such adolescents acquire for themselves the spirit of discipline, industry, perseverance and independence.

The Rationale for 'Iwa-akwa'

The rationale for 'Iwa-akwa' is to allow the boy adolescent graduate into manhood properly and completely with not only the knowledge, commitment and involving of his immediate environment but also with the knowledge, support and blessing of the spirit world. The boy/adolescent is opportune to taste the challenges of endurance, humility and perseverance as he goes through all the processes before becoming a man. Thus in his psyche is created the importance of attaining manhood/adulthood which is synonymous with wisdom and new knowledge. Okeke (1991), Woko (2021) and Onyeocha (2007) agree with this position in relation to the belief and views of the people under study. In the world-view of Igbo and tradition, the notion about the universe, about time and space, about things considered private to people and places, and those other things that are communally owned and shared, there must not be any failure or disappointment. All these experiences cumulatively enable generations of youths to develop from childhood to adulthood. The adolescents through 'Iwa-akwa' find that in spite of their attempts to fit into the society, they are alienated and that despite their feelings and the urge sometimes to revolt, they cannot simply break away from the tradition by either leaving it or organizing an uprising. A close look and study of 'Iwa-akwa' will expose one to the intensive experiences and their spiritual linkages and training which the rites of 'Iwa-akwa' instill into the adolescents, enabling them to meet five basic challenges in the society:

The challenge of adventure.

The environment of 'Iwa-akwa' – the three years intervals, the year of celebration or initiation, the attendant spiritual practices, the whole preparation are periods and adventures made to

instill endurance, daring and skill. 'Iwa-akwa' and all the training associated with it and exacted on the initiates by their senior age-grade, the courage to stand out and join your fellow initiate are all the lessons of life which the rites impact on the youth. Further the wrapper used is a symbol of courage. Traditionally, the initiates were assumed to be naked but after the ceremony, they are now clothed adults, ready to attend community meetings, pay their dues and take part in the decision making process of the community as Duruaku (1997) rightly observes, 'Iwa-akwa' festival is one through which young adults are taught the demands of their new statues, serving a function that one can boldly term education. 'Iwa-akwa' through this way, becomes an institution collating the positive traits in the individual to build a positive, peaceful and progressive community (Umukoro 2000), and further helps to facilitate social integration through group interaction thereby building a sense of mutual understanding.

The challenge of creativity.

The 'Iwa-akwa' festival provides an opportunity for the initiate to take part in the exercises before, during and after his initiation. These exercises are without doubt challenges for learning and creation. There is no doubt that the initiates take some time off to reflect on what was going on, to think of alternatives and to arrive at an understanding of the culture of the Igbo adults (Okafor 2021).

The challenge of service.

The ceremony and exercises undertaken by the initiates and their families emphasize selfless service to the community. All the unusual errands and obstacles to which the initiates are subjected to during this process and the observation of the routine rituals involving sacrifices are signs and existence of training for selfless service to the community. This is true from the side of the diviners, the priests and the medicine men (Metuh 1987). The male initiates as they go through the training among other reasons are very well prepared even to serve the community in the long run as good husbands, good fathers and good warriors. Although the male adolescents can get married without 'Iwa-akwa' ceremony but he undergoes through the rigors and the processes as a full-fledged and well brought up man ready to defend his community at a very short notice (Okeke 1991).

A moral development and moral Judgment.

A careful study of the child rearing practices in Igbo land shows that the ego development affects moral judgment. Also ego development while related to general cognitive development depends on other factors such as social environment. Every generation of Igbo adult and elders (senior citizens) see the youth as would Keniston (1977) as a product of the forces which opposed the norm of the culture. Almost always, their suspicion is confirmed by the psychological existence of an identity search, continual grouping, a great deal of experimentation with major institution form, symbolic rejection of parental values, significant and widespread counter cultures and an obsession with personal taste and self expression, increased age segregation and alteration of family socialization processes.

The challenge of logical inquiry

A challenge to explore one's curiosity to formulate questions or personal problems and to pursue a solution is provided by the Iwu-akwa institution. It provides opportunity to the youth for the challenge to acquire and to seek to win. Apart from the opportunities which the age grade system offers people for leadership, it creates a forum for the sharing of points often with equals and colleagues on the many opportunities it offers to its members. The communal experience the Igbo youths enjoy provides a strong sense of solidarity, belonging and identity. Society here expects them as most active and virile members to identify themselves with the aspirations of the community but also to project its norms.

'Iwa-akwa'- A socialization Avenue

For purposes of socialization in the moral domain, societal values, beliefs and attitudes must be internalized in the young. Thus, the Igbo elder as it were decided presumably at the dawn of history, that children must come to adopt adult values, as their own, and conform to them irrespective of the hope of external reward or fear of external punishment. Society agents began therefore by imposing values and by controlling children from without. Thus, the ceremonies of 'Iwa-akwa' connected with its attendant rites are loaded with values attitudes and beliefs intended for the moral growth of the adolescent male. Therefore, the institution and all about its more supposed to help the adolescent to be critical of their moral judgment, to be astute, and to be more comprehensive to their strength.

Ethical value of 'Iwa-akwa'

Since ethical viewpoints seem to reflect the mental maturity of people who hold them, the moral beliefs and attributes built into the institution of 'Iwa-akwa' help the Igbo adolescent to become susceptible to reason, to persuasion and discussion. This is why as a way of life, important family concerns are brought for discussion by the entire family or kindred during or after major family meals. Topics of such meetings include misdemeanors, marriage and the need for family members to represent or reject the family ideals outside. Among the Igbo, the adolescent is directly and indirectly assisted to outgrow his childhood nation that moral rules are fixed and fined.

'Iwa-akwa' and cultural learnings.

After completion of initiation into manhood, the adolescent's mind is filled with cultural learning. He tends to generate conclusions similar to his culture. The process of cultural learning is not supposed to rid him of the inner turmoil, reflection and systematic thought he should experience in order to reach his conclusion. Thus, adolescents have opportunities for the first time to develop intellectual awareness of the reasons behind social standards, customs, and manners. As Children, They were conditioned to these culture norms, now as adults they think about them and the appropriateness of their institutionalization and enactment. In such situations, conclusions are not predictable or wholesale; instead, general trends are usual outcomes.

Symbolism in 'Iwa-akwa'

Shaw (1972) says a symbol in a general sense is a word or phrase or other form of expression

having a complex of associated meaning. Nwaorgu (2001) adds a symbol is something we can perceive and with which we can connect a meaning or significance. According to Uba therefore a symbol can be viewed as having values different from those of whatever is being, expressed. Symbolism is the practice of representing objects or ideas by symbols or of giving things a symbolic associated character or meaning. The function of symbolism is to represent a reality or a truth and to reveal them either instantaneously or gradually symbols can be material or visual. Some part, if not all the attire of 'Iwa-akwa' has meaning. The cloth wearing ceremony symbolizes a member of things. The long wrapper which the initiates wear or put around them while being presented at the market symbolizes an "amour of manhood" and the gun they shoot into the air symbolizes strength. Their preparedness to acquire weapons represented by the Dane gun, required in the constant war which they as men adults and guardians of their villages will champion for the rest of their lives when and if the need arises.

Religious signifiers of 'Iwa-akwa'

The festival is usually preceded by series of rituals in form of sacrifices, libation and consultations by the traditional priest. Such religious ritual service projects the visible to the invisible reality. It is a physical action of religiously inviting the spiritual entities for communion through the desired intensions of the votaries. As an Igbo ritual symbolism, a religious act is not a mere human act. As a religious act, 'Iwa-akwa' symbolizes communion with the unseen powers of the spiritual reality of the people's belief system, their desired intension and the objectives therein. As a stage which one must pass before attaining adulthood which allows the male to qualify to hold the ofo - the symbol of authority both religiously and politically, it then becomes in my considered view that for a male to qualify for any religious role in the community he must go through the rites of 'Iwa-akwa'. After the initiation into adulthood, the initiate qualifies to hold religious offices in the hand and can pour libation in favour of the ancestors.

Conclusion

'Twa-akwa' in Igbo land is a Rite of Passage. Passage from adolescent to adulthood, connoting meaningful transformation in the life cycle of the people. It marks a transition from one stage of life to another. This passage is accepted by the Ihitte/uboma people as an integral part of the larger Igbo community with its religious ceremonies as great event of life and marked with peculiar religious ceremonies and rites. The initiates are led into the deeper secrets of the society- its culture and history. They learn discipline, self reliance as well as a trial of endurance to prove their mettle as brave men. They thereafter become full-fledged men in the society, assume roles as men and begin to contribute their quota in social stabilization and development.

The festival is well and alive in Igbo land. Till today it has remained the only rite of passage from adolescent to adult or manhood. And so shall it remain among the people even in the near future.

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