

THE *ALEKWU* TRADITION AND MARITAL STABILITY AMONG THE IDOMA ETHNIC GROUP IN BENUE STATE, CENTRAL NIGERIA

Guda Frederick Nda, PhD,
Department of Sociology, Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi. Email:
gudanda2015@gmail.com;
Phone Number: 08128001079
Dekera Fanen
Department of Sociology, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State
Dekera46@gmail.com
Iordaah Sedoo
Department of Sociology, University of Mkar, Mkar, Benue State.
Anseta Kumayemen
Terwase Agbadu Settlement, KM4, Gboko Road, Makurdi, Benue State.
Onah, Onuminya Emmanuel
Department of Sociology, Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi
Abah, Ogwebeleide Joy
Department of Sociology, Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University, Makurdi.

Abstract

The apparent decay in moral values and traditional means of social control in our contemporary society has become worrisome. As belief in traditional systems seem to decline, the efficacy of these moral systems to direct, control and sanction behaviour becomes in doubt. Among the Idoma ethnic group, the *Alekwu* is believed to oversee the conduct of individuals and punish offenders. However, increasing incidences of marital instability, moral laxity and erosion of communal values in the area questions the efficacy of the *Alekwu* tradition. This study examines the cultural and spiritual nature of the *Alekwu*, the role of *Alekwu* in promoting marital stability and factors influencing the state of *Alekwu* in contemporary Idoma society. The study is guided by the functionalist and social control theories. Relying on secondary data, the study situates *Alekwu* within the broader context of Idoma cosmology, where ancestors are believed to observe and sanction human conduct. Findings also reveal that *Alekwu* upholds the moral sanctity of families by punishing offenders with misfortune, sickness or death. It was also found that, in spite of the influence of factors such as modernization, western education and religious pluralism, *Alekwu* has remained a respected spiritual force that regulates moral behaviour. The study concludes that the *Alekwu* tradition has remained a vital moral framework capable of complementing modern social systems in promoting marital stability. Recommendations include, strengthening the *Alekwu* tradition through strict cultural observances, as well as reintegration of *Alekwu* values as integral to moral and familial regeneration among the Idoma people.

Keywords: *Alekwu*, Morality, fidelity, spirituality, Marital stability.

Introduction

Marriage is a sacred and respected institution. Being at the very foundation of societal existence, marriage is regulated by firm explicit rules. Among African societies the institution is not only a social contract, but also governed by religious and moral obligations, because marriage is considered a vital institution that not only unites two individuals but also brings together families and communities. In order to forestall the peace and harmony of society, it is pertinent to ensure marital stability.

Marriage among the Idoma ethnic group in Benue State, Nigeria, extends beyond the union of two individuals to represent the continuation of lineage, preservation of communal values, and the reaffirmation of ancestral morality. The Idoma people, predominantly found in the southern part of Benue State, occupy nine local government areas including Otukpo, Okpokwu, Ogbadibo, Ado, Agatu, Apa, Ohimini, Oju, and

Obi. They are linguistically and culturally distinct, with a social life deeply influenced by their traditional religious beliefs, ancestral reverence, and moral codes that emphasize harmony, fidelity, and respect within family relationships.

At the heart of the Idoma traditional moral structure lies the *Alekwu*, the ancestral spirit, regarded as the custodian of justice, truth, and fidelity. The *Alekwu* tradition is characterized by rituals and ceremonies that are performed to invoke the blessings and protection of ancestors and deities. These rituals are often conducted by traditional priests or elders who are believed to have the spiritual authority to communicate with the spiritual realm. The tradition is deeply rooted in the Idoma people's belief in the supernatural and the importance of maintaining harmony between the physical and the spiritual worlds (Ene & Adoyi, 2024). According to Odeh (2021), acts of moral transgression, particularly adultery, deceit, and betrayal, are believed to invite *Alekwu*'s spiritual retribution. When a person commits an anti-social behaviour, for instance, a married woman sleeps with another man, there is a persistent burning urge in her to make a public declaration and confession. If this is not done, the person will experience misfortune or mysterious illness or both. This is interpreted as the vengeance of the ancestral spirits which propels individuals towards good moral conduct in order to avert the wrath of the gods. As reported by Ejeh and Onoja (2023), the fear of *Alekwu*'s wrath acts as an invisible moral compass guiding individuals toward honesty, discipline, and marital fidelity.

Marital stability is a critical aspect of the Idoma culture, and the *Alekwu* tradition is believed to play a crucial role in maintaining marital harmony. The tradition is thought to promote communication, understanding and respect between spouses, and to provide a framework for resolving conflicts and challenges that may arise in marriage. Despite the importance of the *Alekwu* tradition, there is a need to examine its impact on marital stability among the Idoma people because over time, the influence of modernization, Christianity, and Western education on the traditional Idoma values is gradually being felt. The younger generation increasingly questions the legitimacy of *Alekwu*'s authority. This cultural doubt has generated scholarly debate on the continuing relevance of *Alekwu* in promoting family and marital stability (Okopi & Oche, 2024). While some view *Alekwu* as a fading ritual practice, others argue that it remains an enduring moral institution capable of sustaining social order even in modern context (Okopi & Oche, 2024). This study, therefore, interrogates the nature of *Alekwu* as a ritual and moral system, examining its influence on stabilizing marriages in the Idoma society and its transformation under contemporary social and cultural change. The problem of this study, therefore, emerges from the intersection of tradition and modernity. While *Alekwu* has historically operated as a moral compass among the Idoma, the forces of modernization and religious pluralism have introduced competing systems of belief that challenge its authority. The increasing embrace of Christianity and Islam, coupled with Western education and urban lifestyles, has redefined moral boundaries and altered the meaning of ancestral worship. As a result, the sacredness of *Alekwu* is often questioned or dismissed as superstition. This has led to a cultural dilemma where moral infractions that were once restrained by fear of ancestral punishment now occur with fewer social repercussions. Marital instability, infidelity, and moral indiscipline appear to be on the rise, prompting the question of whether the weakening of *Alekwu* observance has contributed to these social issues.

By examining the *Alekwu* tradition and its impact on marital stability, this study hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural and spiritual factors that shape marital relationships in Idoma culture. The findings of this study may also have implications for the development of culturally sensitive approaches to promoting marital stability and family well-being in Idoma communities.

Objectives of study

1. To examine the cultural and spiritual nature of *Alekwu* among the Idoma ethnic group.
2. To analyze the role of *Alekwu* in promoting marital stability among the Idoma ethnic group.
3. To investigate factors influencing the state of *Alekwu* in contemporary Idoma society.

Conceptual Clarification

The *Alekwu* tradition/ritual

Within the Idoma cosmology, *Alekwu* represents the ancestral spirit who serves as a custodian of justice, morality, and communal ethics. It embodies the collective spirit of departed ancestors believed to observe, guide, and discipline the living. *Alekwu* is simultaneously a moral code and a ritual practice through which spiritual authority is enacted. Its rituals involve invocation, sacrifices, and divination, yet its deeper essence lies in the enforcement of moral discipline, fidelity, and honesty within families and communities (Agbo, 2022; Odeh & Abah, 2021). According to Ejeh and Onoja (2023), *Alekwu* is a hybrid institution that bridges the visible and invisible worlds, sustaining moral order by linking ethical behaviour to spiritual consequences. In this sense, *Alekwu* is viewed as a total moral institution within the Idoma worldview.

In anthropological and sociological literature, ritual is broadly defined as a system of symbolic actions through which a community expresses and reinforces its shared values, beliefs, and relationships with the sacred (Turner, 2020). Rituals are not only ceremonial performances but structured expressions of cultural identity and social control. Among traditional African societies, rituals mediate between the physical and metaphysical worlds, affirming social cohesion and transmitting communal norms. Within the Idoma setting, *Alekwu* rituals serve precisely these purposes because they reaffirm ancestral authority, reinforce marital fidelity, and restore balance when moral or spiritual order is breached (Okopi, 2022). Hence, while *Alekwu* involves ritual practices, its meaning transcends ceremony, functioning as a dynamic social institution that upholds justice and collective morality.

Alekwu is invoked at the critical moment during marriage ceremony when the union between the man and woman is being sealed before both families and the ancestors. This point marks the spiritual transition from courtship to a sacred marital covenant. The invocation typically occurs after the exchange of dowry and before the final blessing of the couple, signifying that the marriage is not merely a social agreement but a moral and spiritual bond under ancestral supervision. The materials used in this invocation kola nuts, palm wine, and, in some cases, the blood of a sacrificial animal serve as symbolic instruments through which the presence of *Alekwu* is invited and its binding force established. The officiating elder or family priest, acting as the spiritual intermediary, presents the kola nuts to the ancestors by raising them toward the sky while chanting invocations in the Idoma language, calling upon *Alekwu* to witness and sanctify the union (Agbo, 2024). Palm wine is then poured on the ground as libation, a symbolic act of communication with the ancestral spirits, inviting them to partake in the ceremony and bless the couple with fertility, peace, and fidelity. Where animal sacrifice is performed, a chicken, goat, or sometimes a ram is used, and a portion of its blood is sprinkled on the ancestral shrine or near the couple's feet to seal the covenant. This act represents the ancestral approval of the marriage and the spiritual enforcement of moral discipline. Once *Alekwu* has been invoked in this way, the couples are bound not only by social norms but by spiritual obligation, and any breach of fidelity, deceit, or betrayal becomes an offense against the ancestors themselves. The Idoma believe that *Alekwu* continually watches over the couple, ensuring adherence to moral conduct and punishing transgressions through misfortune or illness until cleansing rites are performed to restore spiritual balance (Audu, 2023; Abah, 2021).

This ritual moment is regarded as the heart of the marriage ceremony because it transforms the relationship from a human contract into a sacred covenant. The presence of *Alekwu* establishes moral order within the family, ensuring that both partners understand the seriousness of marital vows and the spiritual consequences of violating them. The invocation of *Alekwu* during marriage thus functions as both a religious rite and a moral institution that regulates fidelity, strengthens marital bonds, and preserves communal harmony within Idoma society.

Marital stability

Marriage is an approved union between two consenting adults. In this study, marriage is considered as a culturally approved union between a man and woman for the purpose of companionship and procreation. In African context, marriage is not a personal affair but a communal contract involving families, ancestors, and

spiritual forces (Audu, 2023). Marriage stability refers to the persistence, quality, and moral harmony of a marital relationship over time, often measured by the couple's ability to maintain satisfaction, fidelity, and mutual commitment despite internal and external challenges. In sociological terms, it reflects the degree to which a marriage continues without separation or divorce, sustained by emotional, economic, and social interdependence (Johnson & Amato, 2021). Researchers generally view stable marriages as those in which partners exhibit effective communication, shared values, and conflict-resolution skills that promote enduring companionship (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2020).

From an anthropological and psychological standpoint, marriage stability also encompasses the subjective perception of fulfilment and security within the marital bond. It is maintained when couples uphold not only emotional closeness but also societal expectations and moral standards that define acceptable marital conduct (Lee, 2023). In many African societies, including the Idoma, the endurance of marriage is deeply tied to collective values, ancestral approval, and adherence to moral codes that preserve family honour and lineage continuity (Oche & Agbo, 2022). Thus, marriage stability combines both personal commitment and social conformity; it is as much a reflection of private emotional balance as it is of community ethics and institutional support. Scholars emphasize that stability in marriage cannot be understood solely as the absence of divorce but must also include the presence of trust, emotional satisfaction, and adherence to cultural or religious principles that reinforce the sanctity of the union (Peterson, 2020; Adeoye, 2024). In this sense, stability emerges as both a psychosocial construct and a cultural outcome, shaped by the intersection of personal responsibility, social norms, and spiritual or traditional values such as those embodied in the *Alekwu* institution among the Idoma.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Functionalist theory and the Social Control theory. The theories complement each other as they provide a solid foundation for understanding the role of *Alekwu* as a moral and spiritual institution that regulates social behaviour and ensures family stability among the Idoma people.

Functionalist Theory

The Functionalist theory emphasizes the importance of social institution in maintaining social stability and promoting social cohesion. It is often associated with the works of Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer and Talcott Parsons. In his work, the elementary forms of religious life, Durkheim (1912) views religion as an essential institution that contributes to the cohesion and stability of society. Durkheim argued that religious beliefs and practices are not merely about worshipping divine beings, but about reinforcing shared values, moral order, and social solidarity. Religion, therefore, serves a functional role by uniting individuals through collective consciousness, providing moral guidance, and ensuring conformity to societal norms. In relation to this study, *Alekwu* rooted in the traditional religion of the Idoma ethnic group performs these same social functions. *Alekwu* is not simply an ancestral cult; it is an institution that maintains equilibrium by defining what is right or wrong, rewarding virtue, and punishing wrongdoing. Through rituals and moral sanctions, *Alekwu* strengthens social ties, fosters honesty, and upholds marital fidelity. The fear of ancestral wrath functions as a powerful social control mechanism that preserves family harmony and deters deviant behaviour. The collective participation in *Alekwu* rituals and adherence to its moral code unify the Idoma people around shared beliefs, thereby maintaining social order. Modern functionalist interpretations, such as those by Parsons (1951) and Radcliffe-Brown (2020), also emphasize that cultural institutions evolve to meet the moral and psychological needs of society. In this sense, *Alekwu* can be understood as a social system that adapts to changing moral environments while retaining its foundational purpose of reinforcing truth and justice. Even as modernization and Christianity have impacted the traditional context of *Alekwu*, its ethical framework continues to serve the functional need for social balance and marital stability.

Social Control Theory

The Social Control Theory, propounded by Travis Hirschi in 1969, provides a complementary explanation for the role of *Alekwu* in maintaining moral discipline and marital stability. The theory posits that individuals refrain from deviant acts when they are strongly bonded to societal norms, values, and

institutions. These social bonds attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief are what prevent people from engaging in behaviours that threatens social order. Within Idoma society, *Alekwu* represents an invisible but powerful mechanism of social control. It instills moral restraint through fear of ancestral punishment, creating psychological and spiritual attachment to the values of truth, chastity, and justice. The moral teachings associated with *Alekwu* serve as a preventive control against marital infidelity, deceit, and social disobedience. Individuals act morally not merely because of legal sanctions but due to the internalized belief in *Alekwu*'s omnipresent watchfulness. This internalization of moral order aligns directly with Hirschi's concept of internal social control, where societal stability depends on the strength of moral bonds rather than coercive enforcement. The weakening of *Alekwu*'s influence through modernization and religious transformation can be analyzed using this same theory. As traditional beliefs decline and new moral systems emerge, the strength of social bonds weakens, leading to increased moral laxity and family instability.

The Theoretical Implication combining the insights of the Functionalist and Social Control perspectives provides understanding of *Alekwu* as both a religious and moral system. Functionally, it preserves social order by providing moral direction and promoting unity. As a system of social control, it enforces conformity through spiritual accountability and fear of ancestral punishment. These theories illuminate historical sustenance of family stability and how its decline corresponds with moral and social transformation in Idoma society.

Methods

The study adopted a qualitative and interpretive approach anchored on the analysis of existing scholarly works and oral traditions, related to the Idoma people and the *Alekwu* institution. It relies primarily on documentary analysis drawn from ethnographic reports and sociological studies. This approach provides a framework for understanding *Alekwu* not merely as a ritual act but as a symbolic moral order that regulates conduct and sustains community life among the Idoma. In adopting a descriptive design, the study sought to interpret the symbolic practices and moral values embedded in *Alekwu* within its cultural context rather than through empirical measurement. Data are generated exclusively from secondary sources, including books, peer-reviewed journals, theses and reputable online materials dealing with Idoma cosmology, African traditional religion, and social control mechanisms to support the discussion on issues raised.

Discussion of Findings

The cultural and spiritual nature of *Alekwu* among the Idoma ethnic group

The *Alekwu* operates as a living moral authority among the Idoma people, functioning as both a religious and social control system. Within the Idoma cosmology, *Alekwu* is perceived not merely as an ancestral cult but as a spiritual embodiment of the ancestors who watch over the living, ensuring conformity to the moral code established by tradition (Ene & Adayi, 2024). This conception aligns with the functionalist theory, which views religion as a collective mechanism that reinforces moral order and regulates behaviour (Durkheim, 1912; Turner, 2021). *Alekwu*, therefore, is not a passive belief system but an active spiritual force that guides ethical conduct and punishes deviance through invisible sanctions such as illness, misfortune, or social ostracism.

The oral traditions of the Idoma, transmitted through community elders and custodians of *Alekwu* shrines, describe *Alekwu* as the "living eyes of the ancestors," emphasizing its omnipresent role in supervising moral behaviour. Oral accounts suggest that individuals who commit adultery, theft, or deceit may face ancestral retribution if they refuse confession or restitution, an interpretation consistent with social control theory's emphasis on internalized moral discipline (Hirschi, 1969; Obasi, 2022). The fear of supernatural punishment reinforces conformity, illustrating that *Alekwu* functions as an internalized social regulator rather than an external coercive force. According to Agbo (2020), *Alekwu* represents "a metaphysical conscience of the Idoma people," serving to sustain discipline and communal trust. Similarly, Ede (2021), argued that *Alekwu*'s authority lies not in physical enforcement but in the moral anxiety it generates among violators of cultural norms within the Idoma ethnic group.

The Role of *Alekwu* in Regulating Marital Stability among the Idoma:

One of the central findings of this study reveals that *Alekwu* serves not only as a spiritual force but also as an enduring moral institution that sustains fidelity and harmony in Idoma marriages. Within Idoma cosmology, *Alekwu* embodies the spirits of the ancestors who oversee human conduct and impose sanctions on those who violate social and moral boundaries. This institution functions as the invisible court of justice where moral transgressions, particularly adultery, deceit, or false accusation, are spiritually judged and punished (Agbo, 2022; Audu & Onoja, 2023). Through this ancestral surveillance, *Alekwu* enforces behavioural conformity and moral accountability, thus maintaining the stability of marriage and the integrity of the community. A major dimension of *Alekwu*'s moral authority is revealed in the process of confession and cleansing following an act of marital infidelity. Oral traditions consistently affirm that when a woman commits adultery, the offense is not considered a private matter between partners but a moral violation against the ancestors and the entire community. The offender must appear before the *Ai-OnyakuwocheOle* (the council of elders) and publicly confess her wrongdoing. This confession is witnessed by both family members and members of the broader community, symbolizing the restoration of moral transparency and communal trust. During the confession, a woman is required to mention the name of the man with whom she committed adultery, as concealment would be interpreted as a continued defiance of *Alekwu*'s authority. After the public acknowledgment, the adulterous man (the man who committed adultery with the woman) must pay damages as compensation for the desecration of marital and communal purity. This payment is not simply punitive but restorative, emphasizing responsibility and reconciliation rather than humiliation. The ritual proceeds with the performance of *Idoko Ijja* (the traditional cleansing rite) that spiritually purifies both the offender and the community. According to Idoma oral tradition, the *Idoko Ijja* is a sacred rite of atonement designed to cleanse moral pollution (Ohoga) and restore the offender's harmony with the ancestral order. Once the cleansing is complete, the woman is admonished by the *Ai-OnyakuwocheOle* to uphold the moral codes of truth, faithfulness, and self-discipline that define marital integrity. She is then spiritually released from *Alekwu*'s wrath and reaccepted into the moral community. Similarly, a husband who covers up his wife's infidelity may also face punishment, including death or misfortune (Ejeh & Onoja, 2023; Daniel, 2023; Abah, 2016, March 20). This ritual demonstrates how the *Alekwu* institution functions as both a punitive and restorative moral system. As Ejeh and Onoja (2023) observed in their ethnographic assessment of Idoma ancestral practices that the *Alekwu* sanctions are not primarily intended to destroy the offender but to reintegrate the individual into the moral order of the society. The *Alekwu* causes a burning urge in the offender to confess and make their offences public; but the punishment is melted by the priests who represent the ancestors to purify the offender. However, when the offender refuses to confess and make the offence public, the *Alekwu* punishes with misfortune or sickness or both.

The act of public confession before the *Ai-Onyakuwoche Ole* serves a performative function that reinforces social norms and educates others about the moral consequences of wrongdoing. As noted by Audu (2023), the fear of public exposure and ancestral vengeance compels individuals to maintain fidelity and honesty in their marital relationships. This symbolic deterrence forms a powerful moral mechanism that discourages deviant behaviour even in the absence of physical enforcement. Oral traditions further suggest that *Alekwu*'s authority is reinforced through its association with divine truth. The custodians of the Idoma culture often describe *Alekwu* as the eye of the ancestors that sees both visible and hidden actions. It is believed that any attempt to conceal adultery or deceit results in physical or spiritual affliction, such as prolonged sickness or misfortune, until the offender confesses and undergoes cleansing (Ejeh & Onoja, 2023; Daniel, 2023; Ojo, Akinola & Peter, 2024; Abah, 2016). Such narratives, consistently passed down through generations, function as instruments of moral education that shape individual conscience and marital behaviour. As Okopi (2022) observed, ancestral moral systems such as *Alekwu* operate through the internalization of fear, reverence, and moral obligation, ensuring that social control is achieved not by coercion but through voluntary moral discipline.

The *Idoko Iija* ritual, in particular, represents a crucial moral and symbolic renewal process. Ethnographic accounts note that this cleansing ritual not only purifies the offender but also restores the spiritual equilibrium of the entire community. The ritual, which involves symbolic washing, libation, and prayers to the ancestors, reestablishes the moral order that adultery disrupted (Ejeh, 2022; Agbo, 2023). By integrating spiritual purification with social restoration, the *Idoko Iija* demonstrates that Idoma justice is deeply holistic addressing the moral, emotional, and communal dimensions of wrongdoing simultaneously. From both oral testimony and scholarly interpretation, it becomes evident that *Alekwu's* system of confession and cleansing provides a moral balance that modern institutions often fail to achieve. While contemporary religious institutions may offer forgiveness, *Alekwu* combines forgiveness with accountability, ensuring that social order is not disrupted by unconfessed guilt or moral hypocrisy. The blending of public confession, restitution, and ritual cleansing strengthens both marital fidelity and community trust. This process underscores *Alekwu's* role not merely as a punitive institution but as a custodian of social stability and moral regeneration among the Idoma (Daniel, 2023; Ojo, Akinola & Peter, 2024; Abah, 2016).

The Idoma people interpret marital harmony as evidence of moral uprightness and respect for ancestral prescriptions. The *Alekwu* institution reinforces this stability by deterring infidelity and dishonesty through spiritual sanctions, ensuring that the moral integrity of marriage is preserved. Research in contemporary Idoma communities suggests that where *Alekwu* observance is strong, cases of marital conflict and infidelity are remarkably low, underscoring its role as both a moral and spiritual mechanism for sustaining family life (Ejeh & Onoja, 2023; Abah, 2021).

Factors Influencing the State of *Alekwu* in Contemporary Idoma Society

There has been a gradual but significant decline in the observance of *Alekwu* as a moral institution within Idoma society. This decline is largely attributed to the rapid forces of modernization, religious pluralism, and urban migration affecting the traditional fabric of Idoma life. Historically, *Alekwu* occupied a central position in the moral and spiritual regulation of Idoma society, serving as both a religious and judicial mechanism that bound the living to their ancestors. Yet, with the increasing penetration of Christianity, Western education, and globalization, many Idoma people have begun to interpret, conceal, or abandon the institution altogether (Audu, 2023; Odeh, 2021). Modernization, in its broadest sense, has introduced new belief systems, social aspirations, and moral frameworks that often conflict with ancestral traditions. The spread of formal education and exposure to urban lifestyles have redefined people's perceptions of morality and spirituality. According to Abah (2022), the movement from communal living to individualized existence has eroded the social mechanisms that once enforced collective morality. Younger generations now tend to view *Alekwu* as a relic of the past a symbol of primitive religiosity that contradicts the rational ideals of modern life. The idea of ancestral punishment, which once evoked deep fear and obedience, now faces skepticism among the educated elite who question its metaphysical authority.

Furthermore, the prevalence of Christianity and Islam in Idoma land, has also contributed significantly to the decline in ancestral belief. Christian missionaries in the early 20th century actively discouraged *Alekwu* observance, labelling it idolatrous and demonic. This missionary condemnation was further reinforced by the modern Pentecostal movement, which interprets ancestral veneration as a form of spiritual bondage (Onoja & Agbo, 2022). As a result, many Christians openly renounced *Alekwu* rituals, choosing instead to seek forgiveness through church confession rather than ancestral reconciliation. The once-vibrant moral system rooted in ancestral accountability thus began to lose its authority to new forms of religious morality. This religious shift has not only altered the traditional spiritual practice, but also weakened communal moral surveillance. In traditional settings, *Alekwu* ensured that moral behaviour was a collective responsibility. Every act of wrongdoing was a spiritual offence that affected the entire community. With the rise of individualized Christian spirituality, morality became privatized and detached from communal judgment. Ejeh (2023) argued that while Christianity promotes personal salvation, *Alekwu* emphasizes communal harmony and ancestral accountability; the replacement of the latter with the former has consequently diminished social cohesion. Similarly, the impact of modernization is equally evident in the transformation

of marriage values. Under traditional Idoma morality, fidelity was sacred because marital infidelity was believed to provoke and attract ancestral wrath (Ene & Adayi, 2024; Abah, 2016). Today, moral transgressions such as adultery are dishonesty are often viewed through a secular lens, resolved privately rather than through ritual purification. Oral accounts indicate that many young couples now prefer modern forms of counselling or church prayer to the traditional *Idoko Ijja* cleansing rite. This shift suggests a deeper epistemological transformation from a worldview grounded in collective spiritual order to one shaped by individual conscience, religious pluralism and globalisation.

The erosion of traditional social control systems like *Alekwu* has broader implications for community life. According to Odeh (2021) argues, modernization without moral continuity produces a cultural vacuum where traditional norms are displaced but not adequately replaced. This vacuum created by displacement of cultural values manifests in increasing cases of marital breakdown, infidelity, and weakened kinship ties. The fear of ancestral retribution, once an internalized moral compass, has been replaced by reliance on external legal or religious institutions that lack the same communal resonance. This has led to what Abah (2023) referred to as “moral fragmentation” a condition where individuals oscillate between traditional values and modern beliefs without full allegiance to either. The rise of Pentecostalism in particular has played a transformative but controversial role in this moral reorientation. Pentecostal teachings often portray *Alekwu* as a demonic spirit incompatible with Christian salvation. This theological framing compels converts to renounce ancestral allegiance through deliverance prayers, symbolically severing ties with their lineage (Audu & Onoja, 2023). While this provides spiritual identity for converts, it simultaneously discredits the ancestral moral system that sustained social order for generations. The rejection of *Alekwu* has therefore led to a breakdown of traditional sanctions, making moral discipline a matter of personal faith rather than collective accountability.

Nevertheless, oral traditions persistently emphasize that *Alekwu* is not merely a religious cult but a moral covenant that binds generations together. Elders recount that when people abandon ancestral values, moral disorder becomes inevitable because the spiritual chain linking the living and the dead is broken. This belief resonates with the functionalist perspective that moral institutions derive their authority from collective representations shared by the group. Once these representations lose credibility, social regulation weakens, and deviant behaviour becomes normalized (Agbo 2023). Despite these transformations, (Okopi 2023) argued that *Alekwu* has continued to adapt in subtle ways as a cultural identity rather than a religious obligation. Cultural associations in urban areas now invoke *Alekwu* as a symbol of Idoma heritage during festivals and community meetings. This redefinition reflects what cultural theorists call “religious syncretism,” where traditional beliefs are reinterpreted within modern frameworks to maintain continuity without direct conflict with Christianity or Islam. While this adaptation preserves *Alekwu* as a cultural marker, it simultaneously dilutes its function as a moral regulator (Okopi 2022).

The overall finding suggests that the decline of *Alekwu*'s institutional force is not merely a rejection of ancestral religion but a complex negotiation between tradition and modernity. As Idoma society continues to modernize, the communal essence of moral regulation gives way to individualized ethics shaped by global and religious influences. Yet, elders continue to emphasize that moral order cannot be fully sustained without ancestral accountability. The diminishing observance of *Alekwu* therefore represents not just the fading of a ritual but the weakening of a moral foundation that once anchored the Idoma social world. This finding aligns with broader African sociological research, which observes that modernization often produces dual moralities traditional and modern that coexist in tension (Ekanem, 2020; Agbo, 2023). In the Idoma context, this tension reflects a society negotiating its identity between ancestral piety and contemporary faith, between collective morality and individual freedom. The challenge that emerges is how to preserve the moral wisdom of *Alekwu* while engaging the realities of a changing world.

Conclusion

This study has examined the *Alekwu* tradition and marriage stability among the Idoma ethnic group state. The study established that *Alekwu* as a traditional belief system, is a comprehensive framework of social

control embedded in ancestral authority and communal ethics. Its function transcends the spiritual realm, extending into the regulation of interpersonal behaviour, the reinforcement of fidelity, and the promotion of family cohesion. The findings reveal that *Alekwu* operates as an indigenous moral system deeply woven into the fabric of Idoma social life. By invoking the presence of the ancestors as living moral witnesses, *Alekwu* reinforces the sacredness of marriage, demanding honesty, fidelity, and accountability between spouses. Violations of marital vows are believed to attract spiritual sanctions, which serve as deterrents against moral decay and social disorganization. Within this framework, the *Alekwu* embodies what Durkheim (1912) termed the “collective conscience” a shared moral order that binds individuals to the community. Despite its enduring moral potency, the *Alekwu* institution faces existential challenges in the context of modernization, Christianity, globalization, and urban migration. Contemporary Idoma youths increasingly adopt individualistic moral frameworks that contrast sharply with the communal ethics of their forebears. The decline in *Alekwu* observance is mirrored by rising marital instability and the weakening of extended family networks that traditionally mediated moral behaviour. This transformation highlights a sociological transition from communal morality to personalized ethics, raising critical questions about the sustainability of indigenous moral systems in pluralistic societies (Ochefu & Abu, 2023; Agbulu, 2022). The study therefore concludes that *Alekwu* remains an indispensable aspect of Idoma moral consciousness, capable of enriching modern approaches to marital harmony and communal ethics when interpreted as a cultural philosophy rather than a religious cult.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion reached, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. There is a need to preserve the *Alekwu* institution by strengthening its ethical and communal values through storytelling, festivals, and inclusion of the indigenous knowledge in local education, so that the younger population begins to understand *Alekwu* not as a superstitious relic, but a system that promotes discipline, honesty, and marital fidelity.
2. As custodians of cultural continuity, parents should consciously teach their children the importance of integrity, respect for tradition, and responsibility in relationships. When these virtues are lived and taught within homes, they can rebuild the moral structure that *Alekwu* once guarded.
3. Identify shared moral grounds and foster mutual respect between traditional and modern moral systems, so as to reduce the conflicts between globalization, Christianity and western education with cultural values, to promote a balanced moral framework that upholds both spiritual conviction and cultural identity.

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