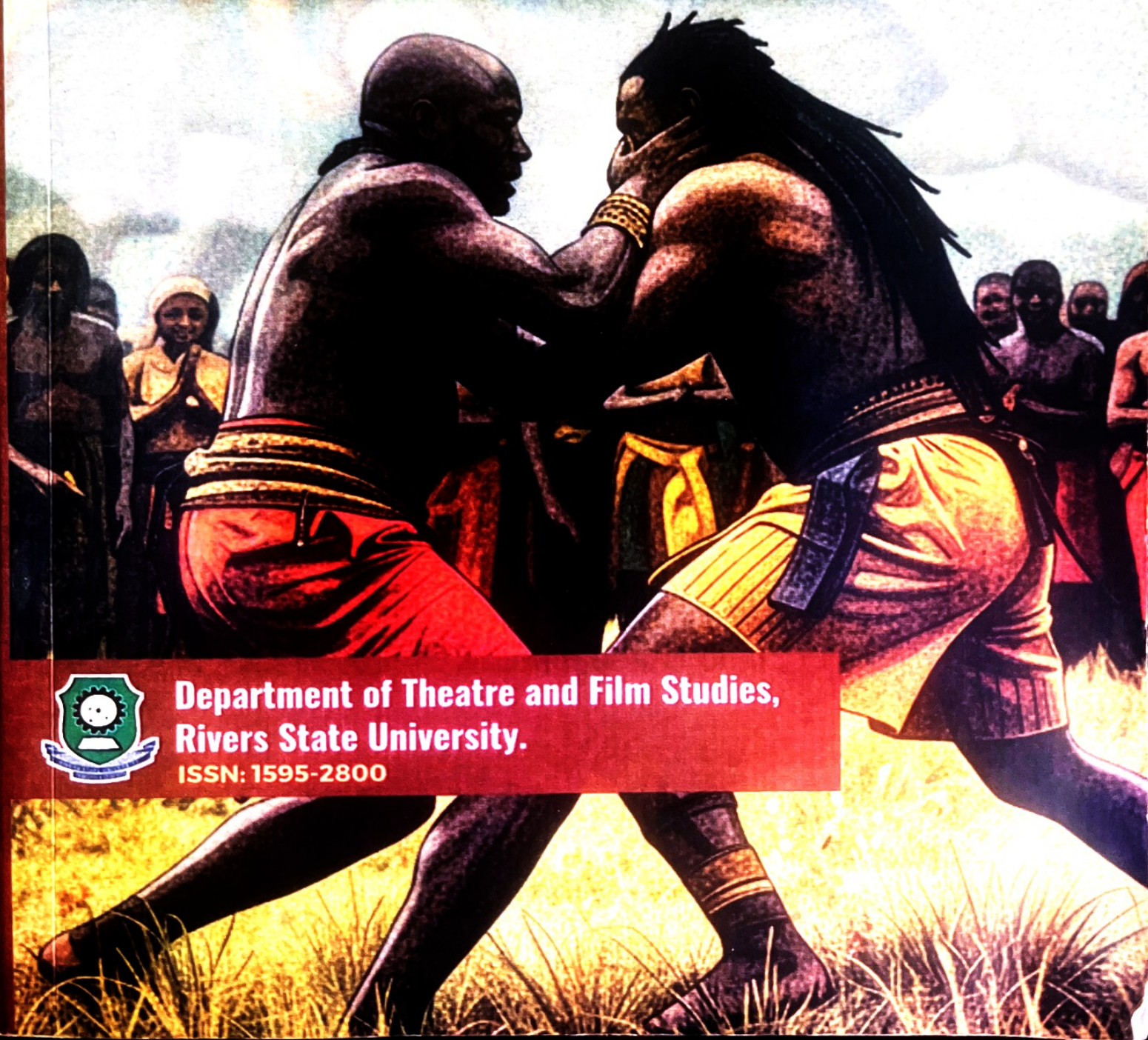


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Stage, Sound, and Spirit in the Vocal Reality of the Idoma Alekwu Masquerade in African Theatre

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Abstract

Sound, costume, movement, and belief converge in masquerade performances across West Africa. Among the Idoma people of Central Nigeria, Alekwu, an ancestral institution, makes invisible spirits present through the power of voice alone. This study examines how vocal techniques in Alekwu performances function as primary dramaturgical agents rather than decorative elements. We analyse timbral aesthetics of "spirit speech," ritual pragmatics of chant and call-and-response, acoustic properties of costume and environment, and ethical dimensions of utterance within communal order. Drawing on performance studies and sound anthropology, we argue that Alekwu sounding practices produce an acoustemology knowledge through sound that orders space, anchors authority, and transforms human voice into ancestral communication. Voice operates as mask, scenography, and juridical force simultaneously. This research challenges Eurocentric theatre paradigms that privilege visual spectacle and written text over sonic dramaturgy. By theorising voice as an ontological agent within African performance, we advance debates beyond Idoma ethnography. Alekwu offers a model for understanding how African theatre constructs social power and cosmology through sound rather than sight. Findings carry implications for three areas: African performance theory requires frameworks that centre voice as a structural element; voice pedagogy must engage with timbral transformation as a cultural competence; and heritage documentation needs audio-first methodologies that capture sonic authority. We demonstrate that decolonial dramaturgy emerges when scholars privilege indigenous sonic epistemologies over imported visual paradigms. Alekwu's voice reveals voice not as ornament but as architecture, building worlds, enforcing laws, and

summoning ancestors into being.

Keywords: Stage, Sound, Spirit, Idoma, Alekwu Masquerade,

Introduction

If one thinks of African Theatre without the sounds, one is only thinking of half the stage. In most African views of the performing arts, voice is sung, spoken, shouted, ululated, buzzed into resonators, or rendered hoarse through specific timbres higher than that of ordinary speech, i.e., almost a sure invocation of spirit, social authority, and aesthetic intensity (Finnegan, 1970; Nketia, 1974). The Alekwu institution among the Idoma people in Benue State, Nigeria, symbolizes the presence of ancestors who intervene in matters of morality, kinship, land, and justice (Ogbole, Ikyernum, & Imo, 2024). Veneration of this institution through masquerade ceremonies, attunements, funeral rites, oath-taking, or processions depends entirely on highly codified vocal performances that quite literally assert the presence of Alekwu among the living (Anyebe, 2015; Ogli, 2022). In this aspect of vocal performativity, which is a significant agent in the efficacy of the masquerade, the Alekwu are distinguished from mere theatre in providing a fully multisensory engagement wherein the very sounds represent ancestral agencies (Beeman, 1993). This articulation is, in itself, peculiar, and through such atypical sonic expressions, the restrictions of traditional modes of performance are defeated, and the audience is thus transformed from being mere social observers to active co-creators of a shared spiritual and social reality (Avorgbedor, 2022). Thus, the study argues that the vocalism of the Idoma Alekwu masquerade, rather than being ancillary to the performance, is essentially what plays an ontological role in shaping the immediate space within which it is performed as well as the larger socio-spiritual landscape (Rea, 2007).

Above all else, attention is paid to voice in the Alekwu theatre: how it sounds, by what mechanism it is heard, and how it is commanding. We argue that the Idoma actors and audiences subscribe to one familiar voice theory—an indigenous dramaturgy whereby timbre, register, and prosody musically represent a mask for the human body and a theatre for the invisible. In this regard, combining concepts like acoustic masking and acoustemology (Feld 1996; Potter 2020), the Alekwu voice-body acts to operationalise a cosmology via sound. This sonic embodiment transforms the masquerade from mere spectacle into a creative and living agent, bridging the realms of ancestors and

men. This representation studies the dynamics of Alekwu's vocality to present how sound production means, vocal textures, etc., in performance, contribute to its presence perceived as ancestral and projection as a social authority (Patch & König, 2018). Thus, this acoustemological interface qualifies sound not merely as an auditory conglomeration but as an epistemic effect through which knowledge is structured, social order is legitimised, and communication with the spiritual realm takes place, thereby cementing the role of the masquerade in negotiating the worlds of loci and spirit (Isichei, 1988). The multisensory articulation, ties into the pan-African theatrical traditions where performances are known for their immersive quality as well as their deep engagement with the spiritual and communal identities (Asigbo, 2012).

The very name of the ancestors and the institution through which the Idoma ritual life is channelled (Ogbole et al., 2024) is known as Alekwu. Also, in some Idoma areas, processions of pre-harvest or inauguration of the early-year season consist of chanting, adjudications, and masquerade appearances under the name of Eje-Alekwu (Alachi, n.d.; InlandTown, 2021). The disguising in performance (ekwu being simply an abbreviated form of alekwu) acts as an emanation for the presence that convokes the dead, addressing the living (Anyebe, 2015).

According to the Idoma arts scholars, for example, vocal genres such as dirge, praise poetry, invocation, and stylized public announcement constitute resources for ritual theatre and festival activities, death rites such as Alekwu Afia chants, and other specialized masquerades such as Odumu (Ogli, 2022; Ogli, 2021). Due to the lack of manuscript materials, studies so far unwittingly suggest that vocalisation be considered structure and not ornament in Idoma masquerade dramaturgy (Anyebe, 2015; Ogli, 2022).

Methodology

This synthetic essay positions itself as an amalgamation of published scholarship involving Idoma ritual performance, Idoma music, social structure, etc., with allied West African masking research on Idoma and sound studies. My sources, covering peer-reviewed articles and monographs (Anyebe 2015; Finnegan 1970; Nketia 1974; Ogbole et al., 2024) and open research outputs on Alekwu Afia and Odumu (Ogli 2022, 2021), also encompassed a range of contextual literature on acoustic masking and

acoustemology (Feld, 1996; Driver, 2017; Potter, 2020). When publicly accessible community archives supplement academic sources (e.g., Alachi n.d.), such evidence is considered emplaced knowledge rather than definitive ethnography. This construct opens the way for a broad interrogation of the Alekwu institution, along with a spectrum of significations from which to project an understanding of its sonic practices and culture. The methodology equally draws upon the fields of performance studies and ethnomusicology to analyse with a critical view how vocal techniques in Alekwu masquerades go beyond mere aesthetic application to lie at the very core of the construction and assertion of communal identity and spiritual affiliation (Omoera, 2008; Nwosu, 2019). This multi-disciplinary approach secures the vantage point from which to study how the said vocalisations interact with specific acoustic environments to determine their capacity to affect perception and engender community participation in that acoustic space. Spotlighting vocality within Alekwu performances throws African traditional performances into the limelight since, invariably, oral traditions and sonic means are crucial in meaning-making and facilitating spiritual encounters, which oftentimes involve music, dance, and verbal artistry channelling toward a shared experience (Oripeloye, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Under African theatrical theory, masquerade is constituted as an indivisible dramaturgy consisting of mask, costume, choreography, music, and space (Finnegan, 1970; Nketia, 1974). A new discipline has emerged to elucidate the acoustic process within the mask, specifically how voices within the masquerade serve as devices for vocally altering identity, thereby rendering the plane of sound an effective masking surface (Driver, 2017; Potter, 2020). Feld developed acoustemology-knowledge-in-sound-auditory ways of perceiving environments and relations (Feld 1996).

The application of the above concepts to Alekwu is a threefold level:

Timbre-Mask: Distortion of voice or buzz or altered voice by breath that turns human speech into 'spirit speech'.

Pragmatic-Mask: Fixed chants, proverbs, and prohibitions with juridical force;

Spatial-Mask: This basically provides for the orchestration of spatial sound in compounds, groves, and squares, seemingly re-mapping the civic space into a form of ritual theatre.

Thus, by this framework, Alekwu's vocalisations operate as immensely intricate forces that pierce the "ordinary" ear toward the most sublime and cosmologically charged sounds, consonant with human transformation of an existence into a community and, respectively, the collective setting of the cosmos in motion. Such a refined approach is bound to corroborate a widespread anthropological consideration of the "voice" as being both literally sonic and at the same time metaphorically expressing social agency and power, thus emphasising the need for the interrelation of these levels to arrive at cultural constructs and juridical identity as observed in the Idoma context (Weidman 2014).

Timbre and Technique: Making the Voice a Spirit Rough Timbres and the Buzz Aesthetic

In West African contexts, instrument-makers and singers generally buzz through the membranes or rattles or through vocal growls, adding sonority and dehumanising the sound source. Within Mande musics, the buzz aesthetic becomes a form of acoustic masking through which masquerade voices "sound more-than-human" (Driver 2017). Idoma Alekwu singers and masqueraders also use these timbral devices, Alekwurattles, masking cloths, distance, and sometimes simple resonators, Alekwuto, to render the voice uncanny and, in doing so, denote the presence of the ancestors. Such a purposeful alteration of voice is fundamental for affirming the spiritual authority and otherworldly nature of the masquerade, transforming human performers into alternative paths for communication by the ancestors (Haas, 2016). It is more than just an aesthetic choice; the vocal alteration acts as a semiotic tool, endowing the performance with significant metaphysical meaning, bridging the earthly plane to the ancestors (Schreffler, 2023). This particular process of voice modulation validates the Yoruba metaphysical worldview of the mouth and its ability to serve as a mediator between the physical and spiritual planes, a worldview also mirrored in Igbo with the speech surrogacy mechanism by means of an instrument called the oja flute (Alabi, 2024; Carter-Ényì et al., 2021).

Resonators, Cloths, and Articulations

In Africanist organology, sound-distorting elements may be conceived as portable masks for sound, ranging from tubular instruments held in hand to membrane insertions inside the mouth (Potter 2020). Although Idoma conceals have been documented in an extremely limited way, the field description of Idoma masquerades stresses mouth covering, layering of cloth, and

interposition of enclosures that filter formants to alter pitch perception of the human voice to destroy the identity recognition thereof. In effect, it is probably further on the spectrum of actor analogy than instrument mimicry: the voice heard belongs to Alekwu and not to a performer.

Due to the deliberate obstruction of the human voice characteristics, the soundscape becomes a liminal space plunged into the boundary between the human and the spiritual being, deliberately blurred, an auditory manifestation of the ancestral spirits. Using distortions of the human voice with techniques such as the ones described by ANGUS-numbered amplitude modulations and time-domain filtering, recreates the 'roughness' that characterises the vocal alarming sensation that enhances the perception of emotional negativity, making these voices of the Alekwu sound even more 'otherworldly' (Liuni et al., 2020).

Register and Prosody

The range of Alekwu alternates between low declamation in the chest register-low-pitch voice- and high-pitched calls. One level of pitch is rendered for enactments of witchcraft concerning social proscriptions, blessings, and verdicts; another level is associated with threats for the community's mobilisation: summoning and processions. Nketia asserts that the choice of registers in African vocal practice is socially implicated in public address or in concerted activity, rather than in the mere demonstration of expression (Nketia 1974).

The Pragmatics of Spirit Speech: What the Voice Does

Invocation and Witnessing

The Alekwu voice does the work of invocation: it calls upon the gods, announces their arrival, and enrolls persons as witnesses. Ogli, therefore, proceeds to elucidate the funeral chants of Alekwu Afia, explaining that the chants affirm social bonds and voice a theology of ongoing presence (Ogli, 2022). "The formulaic lines, proverbial expressions, all these empower their Alekwu voice to 'speak the community into being.

Adjudication and Moral Theatre

Many Idoma stories recount how Alekwu adjudicates theft, adultery, false oaths, and other offences via dramatised public announcements during feasts. Present anthropological studies of the Alekwu ancestral cult stress social regulation and the adjudicating power of the spoken verdict (Ojo-Ass

Publication, 2023). The voice acted as the law within this theatre of performance, and its power came from the common belief amongst the people that Alekwu listened and answered.

Blessing, Farewells, and Lamentations

The funerary rites and memorial ceremonies would see the Alekwu vocal corpus mourn, praise, and swear away expressions. The structure of the chants (antiphony, responsorial refrains) splits the community in speech: Mourning becomes public schooling by which the dead then instruct the living in voiced memory (Finnegan, 1970; Ogli, 2022).

Staging the Sound: Space, Movement Acoustemology of Place

In this understanding, I explain that Eje-Alekwu trails, shadowed boundaries, and sacred groves are also acoustic designs, where a place is known by its sounds when Alekwu speaks. Boundaries are marked by bells, rattles, and call sequences; silence, on the other hand, marks the threshold where the ghost comes into focus (Feld 1996/2014). Performances thus turn an ordinary soundscape of community space into a ritualised realm that must be listened to with intention by spectators to participate in the ritual.

The Procession and Choreophonology

Procession in Idoma denotes an inseparable interplay between the choreography of steps and the phonology of chant-cadenced walking stages for syllabic call-and-response. For instance, the Odumu masquerade performs its sequence of appearance protocols interspersed with musical baiting and responses from the ensembles concerning danger and prestige (Ogli 2021). Within this framework, the voice cues the body, and the body cues the voice.

Costumes as Acoustic Surfaces

Sounds and rustles breathed in by the mask and layers of raffia or cloth stand absorbed, adored, and scattered. The single porosity of the costume will transform voice projection between near field effects (being an almost whispering thunder right by the mask) to full semantics and perceptibility at a distance. When the theatre raises the timbral code to express identity and status, we may therefore consider costume a form of aural scenography or yet another mask for sound. Studies of comparative masks in West Africa clearly witness these sonic functions without actually theorising them (Finnegan,

1970).

Aesthetics and Ethics: The Alekwu Voice

Authority Without a Face

Alekwu becomes disembodied authority once vocal alteration severs identification with any individual performer. Personal identity dissolves. What remains sounds impersonal and supra-personal a voice floating beyond human attachment. This detachment creates a binding force, where Communities hear ancestral commands rather than mortal utterances. Masked vocality transforms speech into law because nobody speaks; Everybody listens instead. Dramatic anonymity operates across African masking ecologies, where the voice separates from the body to represent social order. Yoruba Egungun, Igbo Mmanwu, and Kalabari Ekine each tradition deploys sonic disguise as juridical technology. Human throats channel otherworldly verdicts, while costumes and distance obscure the personal origins of sound.

Authority gains strength through facelessness when performers cannot be identified; their words carry the collective weight of their opinions rather than individual perspectives. Vocal masking erases biography. Communities receive pronouncements as ancestral wisdom emerging from cosmological realms, rather than neighbourhood compounds. The separation between the sound source and the visible body produces an epistemic gap, a space where spirits allegedly speak. Listeners suspend their disbelief not because they lack knowledge of human performers, but because ritual protocol demands the acceptance of vocal fiction as a social fact. Belief becomes a performative act. Accepting masked voice as an ancestral presence maintains communal cohesion and reinforces moral frameworks passed down through generations. Alekwu's vocality demonstrates how African theatre constructs authority through strategic sonic anonymity, turning known neighbours into unknown judges. (Finnegan, 1970; Driver, 2017).

Gender, Secrecy, and Right to Speak

Like most ancestral institutions, Alekwu establishes one particular way through which access to sacred speech might be acquired: only one sound becomes Alekwu. Sonic restrictions of power govern who may speak, while sex and age create boundaries around sacred utterance, and men of certain ages typically gain permission to voice ancestral presence. Women face systematic exclusion from performing masked vocality in most Alekwu contexts. Young

boys remain outside ritual speech until initiation marks their entry into sonic authority.

These restrictions operate through embodied knowledge rather than written law, communities transmit vocal protocols across generations, teaching some bodies which sounds they may produce whilst silencing others. Gender becomes audible through absence women hear Alekwu pronouncements but rarely voice them publicly.

Contemporary discourse reveals fractures within this sonic hierarchy, academics debate whether women's exclusion from Alekwu vocality represents sacred necessity or patriarchal control disguised as tradition. Some communities maintain strict gender boundaries whilst others negotiate limited female participation in festival dances and public gatherings. Women attend performances, respond during call-and-response sequences and receive Alekwu's social sanctions yet performing masked ancestral speech remains largely prohibited.

Ogbole et al. (2024) document ongoing tensions around female audibility in Alekwu ceremonies, questions emerge: Can women channel ancestral voices? Does cosmology demand male performers or does social custom merely prefer them? Would female Alekwu voices undermine spiritual authority or expand ritual possibilities?

Being audible sits at tradition's sharp edge where reform cuts slowly. Women negotiate visibility and voice within frameworks designed for their silence.

Christianity, Islam, and the Postcolony of Sound

Since the dawn of Christianity and Islam in Idomaland, theological and sonic contestations have taken root. In their new sound regimes (loud preaching, hymnody, adhaan), churches and mosques may compete with or absorb the sonic authority of Alekwu. Communities report accommodations, such as rearrangements of the festivity calendar and selective participation, while scholars presumably focus on Alekwu's current drafting into the continuous socio-moral soundscape (InlandTown 2021; Ogbole et al., 2024).

Idoma Vocal Form: Genres and Devices

Chant Modules and Formulae

Alekwu chanting, notably the Alekwu Afia (funerary), is an example of

modular composition, with invocatory openings; genealogical or topographical naming; moral exhortation; and closure formulas that ritually seal the act (Ogli, 2022). Antiphonally constructed, there is a lead-response from just a handful of attendants, very few, to the whole village (if an entire village can be termed a genuine chorus).

Proverb, Praise, and Threat

Alekwu's actions could be so densely laced with the aforesaid proverbiality as well as recitations of praises and names whose illocutionary force gets further intensified by masked voices (Finnegan, 1970). Praise calls raise the reputation of an individual; threats restrict the freedom thereof. In Alekwu timbre, such utterances become ancestral orders rather than mere individual rhetorics.

Meter and Footwork, and Drum Talk

Giving exposition to some Idoma repertoires: it is such that speech-rhythm patterns may be made to coincide with those of idiophone or membrane, such that drum signals anticipate the spoken lines; that is, the celebrated African scenario in which prosody and percussion coencode meaning (Nketia, 1974). Now, in cases where the documentation is lacking or patchy, comparative Africanist musicology holds largely that it is more of a cue than a strict text setting; in cues, the drum sets up the line, while the voice finishes it.

Audience as Co-Vocalists: Participation and Knowledge

The Idomas cannot be said to desecrate the act of the passive because the community interacts with the performance by giving them cues, policing silences, and setting distances (how close a man can stand) as indexes of piety and knowledge. Following Feld's acoustemology, positioned listening is itself ritual work-to hear Alekwu correctly is to inhabit Idoma sociality correctly (Feld, 1996/2014).

Case Glimpses from Documentation

Odumu as Prestige and Peril

Odumu, as an unstable entity, Ogli further explains the phenomena accompanying its appearance, including musical contingencies and sacrificial protocols, highlighting the sonic summoning as well as containment (Ogli, 2021). Odumu would stage vocal elements to dispel all dangers with offensive calls and percussive stops, ensuring the crowd moved in discipline.

Alekwu Afia Funeral Chant

Longer past scholars have delineated Alekwu Afia singing as the expression and agent of grief, morality and continuity: the performance goes on to enshrine the departed within a cosmic affiliation and teaches the living about the duties assigned to them from Alekwu (Ogli, 2022). The voice remains the fundamental moving entity during the actual transition: from the civil to the ancestor.

Festival Circuits and Public Proclamation

According to local history and community archives, Eje-Alekwu is envisioned as a pre-harvest circuit, and its proclamation investigates the appropriateness of immoral dispositions in the field of commerce, marital fidelity, and land relations: intonations and refrains in the spoken law (Alachi, n.d.; Ogbole et al., 2024). Opposing views hold that these proclamations are largely ineffective in enforcing their social norms because of the inherent performativity of the masquerade. Therefore, adherence to such law could very well be more symbolic than actual.

Voice and the presence of Alekwu in the African theatre canon.

In African theatre studies, masking and ritual action are most important. Voice-centred analysis has, however, remained underdeveloped compared to studies of dance and visual form. The Idoma case goes on to argue for a vocal theory, wherein timbre, register, and acoustic masking stand alongside each other as primary dramaturgical media. Uniting Finnegan's verbal-arts perspective, Nketia's communal song theory, and Feld's acoustemology, Alekwu is a model: a theatre where voice is scenography, law, and ontology-in-one (Finnegan, 1970; Nketia, 1974; Feld, 1996).

Hints for Teaching and Practice

Voice Training: Timbre work, such as buzz, growl, and breath noise, should be approached by African voice pedagogies as a way of cultural competence and not merely as an effect. One should basically mask with safety, meaning the transformation of the voice without injury, in line with traditions such as in Alekwu.

Sound Design: Curators and theatre practitioners mounting African presentations treat costume and space as acoustic devices; the microphones should respect timbral coding rather than destroy it.

Heritage Documentation: Audio-first archives, meaning high-fidelity field recording of chants, processions, and crowd responses, are the very lifeblood of intangible heritage management, standing alongside visual archives of masks and costumes.

Applied Ethnics: It will be of respect to handle restricted utterances and the politics of audibility, with the very understanding that who may sound Alekwo is itself a matter of ritual citizenship (Ogbole et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The Alekwo theatre speaks and acts within African performance as a medium to shape the world of sensibilities. In contrast, in Idoma, the voice stands as a natural blossom from the follicle; the voice transmutes opacity into such an audible authority that it wraps the town around its concretions in sacred corridors and spells out the collective ethic of a people in sound. The voice in Idoma is like a mask and a stage: an exquisitely fashioned instrument for bringing the ancestors into public discourse. To comprehend African theatre, we must begin with what the mask shows and what the mask brings forth in sound: sounds that command, lament, bless, and bind. For Alekwo's teaching, sound acts in absence of spirit. Wright's teaching brings forth the deep ontological import of vocality in Idoma theatre traditions where the intangible presence or spirits of the forefathers is concretely captured and mediated through peculiar and refined sonic manifestations. Such a redefinition challenges the conventional Western idea of a theatre, which is viewed mostly in terms of sight and glory or spoken words, by placing a huge premium on the power of sound to transmit ancestral authority and collective ethic. Such an understanding of African theatre would thus lend itself to a paradigm shift towards acoustemology for African performance, in other words, engaging further with indigenous philosophies of sound and their critical role in developing theatrical meaning and experience. Giving credit to African theatre, especially one deeply embedded in a heterogeneous cultural framework like Nigeria, as a key resource for decolonising efforts and promoting posthuman consciousness. This re-examination of performance relations resonates with continued efforts in applied ethnomusicology, ethnochoreology, and linguistics to safeguard intangible cultural heritages by researching how indigenous forms of articulate expression, particularly through their music and dance, communicate important cultural values. This obviously works in great merit in the Nigerian situation, where the cultural

lines comprise a plurality, theatrical shows are very important channels in the growth of the land and the articulation of complicated socio-political issues.

This study establishes voice as scenography plus law plus ontology within Idoma Alekwu masquerade performance traditions. Timbre becomes dramaturgical medium alongside register and acoustic masking practices. African performance analysis gains a vocal theory wherein sound constructs social power and cosmological presence simultaneously. Alekwu offers a paradigm for rethinking global theatre studies beyond Eurocentric frameworks. Decolonial contexts centre voice rather than text or visibility in performance creation. Acoustemology emerges as an epistemic framework through which knowledge structures itself and communities understand their worlds. Sound orders space and legitimises social arrangements among living participants. The human voice transforms into a communal instrument of ancestral authority, without individual attribution. This framework challenges theatrical models that privilege visual spectacle over sonic embodiment in cultural expression. African dramaturgy requires engagement with indigenous philosophies of sound as a constitutive force. Alekwu demonstrates how disembodied authority functions as a political technology through carefully modulated vocal practices that separate the speaker from the speech.

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