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# THE DEVELOPMENT OF OBITUN DANCE FROM THE PUBERTY RITE OF THE ONDO PEOPLE

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## ABSTRACT

*Obitun dance of the Ondo people of Ondo state of Nigeria has become a form of entertainment all over the country today and the Obitun cultural dancers are well known throughout the country and everywhere they have performed within and outside Nigeria. However, when Obitun dance is performed in the modern times the old people say "it is no longer the 'Obitun' they had known and had partaken in". This study therefore, specifically seeks to find out what Obitun dance has been from the traditional times in relation to what is obtainable now. This work takes a look at the development of Obitun "dance" in the traditional and modern societies and documents it in both periods, the origin of the ceremony/dance, its functions and usage, with the style of performance. This work thus concludes that what is referred to in our contemporary society as Obitun dance is a pure creation and product of the modern society, which is distinct in purpose, junctions and performance from the Obitun ceremony of the traditional society.*

*Key words: Obitun Dance, Cultural dance, Obituu rite, development.*

## Introduction

The emergence of cultural dances in Nigeria in the "60S" introduced another dimension to the practice of dance in Nigeria. Dances that have existed in an ethnic group for decades as purely religious activity and performed probably, only at night or at a specific place - village square, community gathering or kings' palaces etc. - suddenly began to appear on the stage, television and public shows generally for different purpose. This is because cultural dance emerged then as a source of cultural identity for groups that found themselves stuck up or scattered in the urban centres during the early contact with the so called western "civil ization".

People from the same ethnic background then came together as a means of identifying themselves with home. These groups entertained themselves with some of their ethnic dance steps, which were done with

the incorporation of new styles due to the influences of the Urban centres. This move however, opened up many of the ethnic dances to "limelight" and at the same time to many alterations and adjustments, thus, marking the beginning of the socialization of many Nigerian traditional dances. Ever since, people have continued to go via the new discovery leaving the traditional form to die. Some traditional dances whose socialization had started long earlier had become forgotten already. Some of the contemporary performers of such dances do not even know the way it used to be done and the society had come to accept these new forms as the authentic ones.

Quite unfortunately many of the traditional forms were not documented in black and white probably because the practitioners were not literate, willing or informed. They may even have felt that writing it will expose it to "stealing" by other people. Otherwise it is simply not the custom to write it since the societies were basically oral. The origin and practice of the dance as a communal art without a single authorship cannot be ruled out as one of the factors that have affected its documentation.

Therefore, a legacy is lost without realizing it. Many of the Nigerian ethnic (traditional) dances up till this moment have no written literature for people to read, make reference to, or study to make people know about them. It should be noted too that these dances were so many that their number alone poses enough problem to people who may want to document them.

There must be well over four thousand traditional ethnic dances all over the country to be documented. With the level of development and economic crisis in the country now, it becomes almost impossible or rather very difficult to get to these dances. The above will therefore, necessitate the basis for this study, for this is the reason why in modern society many people do not know that the fantastic Obitun dance they see today only existed in the traditional society as a puberty rite with little or no dance attached to it at all. The little dance movements that took place during the rites were just spontaneous and not given any form. This is why this study attempts to trace the origin, function, usage and style of performance of this ceremony/dance in the traditional and modern societies. The methodology used for carrying out the research therefore include to a large extent critical observations and oral interviews because the traditional form is confirmed extinct today. (Olupona, 1992, p. 135) confirms this assertion when he says:

Obitun was still widely practiced until 1920s, the early years of Christianity in Ondo when it was

considered no longer necessary and therefore it became extinct'.

This constitutes the first limitation to this work. One would have loved to see a video recording of the traditional form but it was not possible since it took place in "the 1920s". Coupled with the above is the fact that only very few people could give tangible evidence on the traditional form. Many people, even relatively old people, discuss the modern form thinking it is the traditional. Even people of about eighty years of age say, "only older people can remember (the ceremony) very well".

### **The Traditional Obitun Ceremony**

There are various accounts regarding the origin of the Obitun ceremony of the traditional Ondo society. These accounts range from myth to legend and to history. Many of them are found to be highly irrelevant when compared to the practice and function of the ceremony. However, we found the account given by the female King - Oba Comfort Adekunmi Adesida, the Lobun of Ondo, more dependable if viewed vis-a-vis the Yoruba traditional belief about the existence and influence of unseen spirits in whatever they do.

According to her, the origin of Obitun rite goes back to once upon a time in the earliest time of Ondo (she could not say precisely the date but she says it was many generations before her), there was an outbreak of sudden deaths in the town and the victims of these untimely deaths were girls and boys who had just approached puberty. The outbreak defied all attempts to bring it under control. As a last resort, a combination of herbalists and Ifa priests were drafted to inquire from the oracles what can be done. Ifa not only told them the cause of the outbreak, it prescribed the solution as well. The cause, ifa said was because of non-appeasing "Ogba" (literally, unseen mates) of the girls and boys who then took their living mates away. The prescribed solution given by Ifa involved a nine day set of rites through which the spiritual mates would be warded off and pacified too.

A sacrifice of all edible things was to be made and was quickly put together as directed by Ifa. Upon acting on this, the sudden deaths stopped. Therefore, because of the gravity of the tragedy and the extent of the damage already done in the town which affected almost every home, with some homes losing as many as five to six boys and girls, the people came together and pressed on the king's council to make the rite a permanent and compulsory thing for the people, so that, such tragedy will be halted forever among the people.

Also, because the victims of the sudden deaths were young boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 17, that age bracket was chosen as best for them to undergo that rite. The girls' rite was therefore called "Obitun" which in Ondo dialect, literally means "maiden" while the boys rite was tagged "Aapon - apon" (the boys heads have been shaven) because boys' heads were usually shaven for the rite.

For many years thereafter no case of sudden deaths was recorded among the boys and girls in the town. So, the rite became accepted by everybody, at certain period in the past it was compulsory for everybody and in fact, nobody could get married without undergoing the rite. Some special ceremonies were however put in place to go along with the rite probably to make it interesting and lively, and to make it attractive for people to be interested in doing it and or to provide a festive atmosphere for everybody's participation.

In the traditional times, that is, from the conception to sometimes before 1900, Obitun, the girls' puberty rite of Ondo people was used for two main purposes. The first, was to ward off all the unseen mates (which everybody has), that may have been worrying the initiate consciously or unconsciously which may want to interfere with her progress later in life as a married woman and a mother-to-be. This is perhaps the most important reason for the rite.

Secondly, the rite is considered as a means of expressing gratitude to God for providing a solution to the death calamity of the earlier days and also for keeping the initiates till that time and asking for his continuous protection on the initiates, even after the initiation rites and throughout her lifetime.

However, in making the rite mandatory, some conditions were attached to performing it, which gave rise to both psychological and other functions the rite achieved. These conditions include: the consideration of a woman who did not undergo the puberty rite, as not having achieved anything in life. This gave rise to a popular saying in Ondo town which is "wee sobitun, we sapon kiya wee se?" meaning: you neither did the Obitun nor the Aapon rites, what are you worth? Such a person is therefore, not considered for any chieftaincy title, not respected as a woman and not accorded any recognition. At death, they are not allowed to be buried within their husband's house as usual, but outside the town. The customary "Opoji" - the mourning period observed by a bereaved man for the dead wife is not observed for a woman who was not an Obitun.

Invariably, the girls upon undergoing the Obitun rite were carving a big recognition for themselves in the society and the chance to become anything of their aspiration within the society. They are also preparing themselves for decent burial at death and demanding a befitting "Opoji" from their husbands. In the traditional time, it was usually impossible for a girl who had not done the rite to see someone who will want to marry her like that. This is because it is believed that such a girl, who will definitely have husband among the unseen mates, is prone to sudden death and various other mishaps in life. The unseen mates are feared and believed to be more powerful than the living beings. Therefore, the unseen husband will not want anybody to be rival to him and therefore can kill the living husband or the girl so that she will not be able to go into another marriage. It is alleged that the unseen husband can also make the girl childless and uncontrollable by the living husband. So, no bachelor attempts to marry any uninitiated girl. Therefore, when the girls perform Obitun rite, they are also paving way to getting a husband very quickly. They also save themselves and their husbands from untimely deaths, mishaps and barrenness. It also serves as means of telling the would-be husband that they have surrendered to him and are prepared for marital life and any hardship that may come with it.

Performing Obitun rite also afforded the families of the initiates to present to the whole town, the marriageable girls in their households for courtship. Usually after the initiation, all eligible bachelors troop to that house to try and have a catch. Also, the nine days period of the rite contain serious training sessions where instructions are passed to the Obitun usually on how to relate and look after a husband, cook good and indigenous foods, relate with the co-wives (where applicable) and the husband's relatives and more importantly how to avoid all tempting extra marital affairs and obey societal ethics of a married woman.

For the above reasons, there was a time when all girls at puberty perform the Obitun rite without a single exception. Obitun ceremony of the traditional society was therefore an initiation ceremony which (Duerden, 1977) defines as the process where:

*An individual is initiated into the association of the adults at a very early age and that association is a kind of "closed shop" which he or she may not join until they are ready to learn to accept the responsibilities of parenthood ...*

It is assumed that initiation rite curtail the young ones of their youthful exuberance and equip them with the necessary maturity expected of an adult. Initiation therefore, involves rites of passage, which (Gennep,

1961) says has three stages; stage of separating the initiates from their previous stage of being - "rite de separation", the short period of transformation "rites de marge" and finally, "rites d'agregation" which is the stage of assumption of the new status.

*Obitun dance can also be seen as a "maidens dance" which is a traditional dance performed at virgin stage or premarital stage as an expression of beauty, innocence of body and allied to fattening rites or when young women are initiated into adulthood (Akinsipe, 1997).*

Iyeh, (20 II, p. 67) describe maidens dance as "a traditional dance performed by girls of a particular age group who are initiated into adulthood". Many initiation ceremonies abound in Nigeria of which some are not known beyond the four corners of that society and so many are dead or forgotten like the Obitun ceremony of the Ondo people. Obitun dance in the traditional times was more rites than dance. The nine days ceremony witnessed dances on the eve of the third, seventh and the ninth (final) day. Whenever the ceremony was going to hold, girls that have reached puberty in the town, come together (although can be done separately) and fix the date. Their parents would start to make provision for all the needed materials for their daughters. These included provision of plenty of foodstuffs, clothing, ornaments and sacrifice materials for the ceremony. A matron is sought for them all or for each of them as they might have earlier agreed. They also gather at an agreed house usually the most suitable among those of the participants.

On the eve of the ceremony, different rites are made to Agbe - the Obitun's special hair style and Esi - the special drums played for the ceremony. The Agbe rites consist of using nine coconuts, two kolanuts and the hindleg of a bush meat to pray for her. To invoke Esi drums, nine yams, 203 cowries, two kolanuts and the hindlegs of a bush meat were used. All the above were usually done to prevent trouble and crisis and also invoke the spirit of the drums to attend the ceremony. At night, they do an all night singing and dancing. It is believed that it is a taboo for the Obitun to sleep that night, so the songs and dances were meant mainly to keep them awake and liven up the atmosphere. At daybreak, the spectators depart and the Obitun withdraws into the inner chamber where they are not seen or allowed to be visited. to take a rest. They are also relieved. of their costumes. After some rest. they begin to learn the "Egbee" (choruses) which contain series of instructions for their future roles as wives and elders.

The next outing of the Obituns is on the third day when Kungsi - a younger girl who was usually chosen to attend to the Obitun for the nine - days

ceremony, performs the task of warding off the unseen mates of the Obituns. (Kunsi is like the little bride's maid in the Christian wedding). They are usually girls far younger in age than the ones undergoing the initiation. They too, are usually adorned but not as much as Obitun. To ward - off the unseen mates Kunsi touches the Obitun's head and chest with three kolanuts and three bean cake (akara), the thigh of an animal, three wraps of pounded yam, and 203 cowries, she accompanies these with a lot of prayers for the Obit un. Such prayers include those meant to cast out the Ogba:

*We cast out Ogbafroni your head. We cast out Ogba from your stomach. We cast out Ogba from your chest. We cast out Ogba from your legs. We cast out Ogba from your body. We cast out Ogbafront your bone. We cast Ogba from following you. Let Ogba leave your household. ...*

This same format is repeated on the seventh day except that each of the materials for the rites would become seven in number.

On the ninth day, which is the final day of the ceremony, the rite is completed on the street very early in the morning. The warding off of Ogba begins inside the house to the front of the house through the streets; at shrines of *Idwnalo*, *Ogun aise o*, *Ogun ki* (all different shrines of *Ogun* - the Yoruba god of Iron). Rites were also performed at Igele Maroko (the king's market) and Lobun - the female king's palace. Obitun then returns home without looking back. This day all the materials for the rites like previous ones would only have become nine in number. In the evening of this final day, an outing ceremony is performed in the Obitun's best attire and adornment possible. They dance round the town once again, acting like adults for the first time in their lives. Later, in the evening, each of them returns to her parent's house where another sacrifice of a chicken is made to round the ceremony up.

The dance in the traditional times was not choreographed. The initiate's dance freely as much as they could. The form and style of the dance was thus, not uniform. In fact there was no particular form or style. One of my informants told me that "there is even very little dance the Obitun can do with her delicate ornaments. weariness (because they are kept awake and busy through the nine days) with heavy attire". For example, the beads arranged around the neck of the Obitun is said to be so much that the Obitun can only look forward and hold the neck straight. Therefore, the few dances done were very minimal and pedestrian. They were probably, little swings right and left while in a procession. In short, the usual walking and perhaps little hops, jumps and tilts. However,

whatever is done is extemporaneous and not given any form of notice. One of my

informants says of Obit un dance in the traditional society that:

*It is not special at all it is mere dancing as you like and as you can dance which can pass unnoticed or which only few people may note.*

Another person says:

*Obitun just dance freely to keep herself from sleeping they is no prescribed form.*

It therefore becomes obvious that the dance is not in focus at all. This also explains why there is no period of teaching, practicing or rehearsing of the dance at all, in the nine days duration of the ceremony.

Having made the point that Obitun in the traditional society evolved purely as puberty rite meant to ward off "Ogba" and function mainly as an initiation ceremony from girlhood to womanhood, we shall now focus on what Obitun is in the modern society.

### **Obitun Dance of the Modern Society**

Obitun as a puberty rite began to decline with the advent of Christian and Islamic religions, in Ondo, around the 1920s. The period between 1920 and 1950 witnessed its gradual and final decline. However, as stated earlier, during the cultural dance era some Ondo indigenes scattered in the cities also came together to do something that can remind them of home, and which everybody can participate in. They later evolved a type of dance which they decided to call Obitun Dance.

The choice of this name may be to give their dance a real indigenous and famous title from home and more probably because they incorporated dances that "look like what is done by Kunsi - Obitun little assistant in the traditional society". Involved in this experience are mostly youths who were born during the collapse of the Obitun puberty rite and many that probably had no opportunity to take part in or see any traditional form of the dance. The purpose was not to ward off any unseen mates but to do something that can stand as a means of cultural identity, foster love and unity among them and relieve them of tension. Such a thing must however be unique and linked to their home. Somehow, Obitun became their choice. At the same time, many other ethnic dances of other groups also evolved as cultural shows. Not long, these shows became competitive among the local ethnic groups of the urban centres because of the Federal Government's involvement in the '70s; in the rejuvenation of the arts and culture through the National Festival of Arts and Culture. (Malomo, 2002, p. 4) in his survey of the National theatre in 1985 says: "During this period, arts and culture

received its biggest boost in the country, through increased government expenditure and sponsorship, cumulating in the proliferation of cultural infrastructure and art organizations ... This development has made some people to regard the 197005 as period of "culture boom" in the country ...

Obitun dance featured in FESTAC'77 and ever since became the dance of Ondo state and the first choice dance to represent the state at any cultural show or competition. Following the success recorded by the dance in the area of cultural performances, some groups later emerged and began its commercialization. These groups found the dance capable of providing them a sort of livelihood due to the popular demand for it. They came together to stylise the steps, formulate movements and add patterns to attract their audiences.

The dance thus, became a package for commercial entertainment on stage, at gatherings, launching and other social occasions. They travel around with it to make money. Involved in this experience were combination of drummers, dancers, choreographers as well. One name that rings a bell among the pioneers from all my informants is that of late Mr. Olopade the town's famous drummer. Today, the On do State Arts council perform Obitun dance on regular basis. It can be seen in many school's cultural show within and outside the state. Also, worth mentioning is the fact that many other states cultural centres perform it. The Kwara and Oyo State Arts Councils to mention a few do it. Obitun cultural dance is thus a household name all over Nigeria today, featuring at both states and National festivals and ceremonies.

Obitun dance in the contemporary society has form and style but the form and style is largely personal and unique to the individual choreographers and group of performers. There is usually a beginning, middle and an end. The beginning usually consists of entrance of the performers, which is immediately followed by homage to the audience before the commencement of the performance proper. (See Akinsipe, 2013, for details on the dance).

They proceed with various entertaining movements until the middle when a mock ritual takes place. For this mock ritual one of the dancers who have been carrying a white calabash, comes forward and put down her calabash, which at least contains pieces of kola nuts. Then the lead singer, in most cases and sometimes another dancer, takes up the role of the ritual performer. She breaks the kolanut and prays at times to "ward off Ogba" as a representation of the traditional usage, but in most cases

pray generally for all the people present. She goes ahead to break the kolanut and throws it on the door. Everybody shouts for joy and the calabash is removed for the dance to continue. Various joyful songs are sung until the climax when the plate dancer is invited to come and demonstrate with her plates. She then becomes the focus of attention. She places the plates of various numbers, according to the perfection of the plate dancer on different points/places on her body and turns round and round in a swinging movement with them. As soon as this is over, the group rounds off and departs

The selection and arrangement of the different steps that take place within the above plot is largely the choice of the group. Different groups use different styles either consciously or unconsciously while some groups just copy others with little or no variety. The secondary school dance group, for example, will just reproduce whatever somebody who had either seen or performed in one dance group teaches them. Thus they will not be in position to claim evolving any style and will neither give credit to their source too.

Actually, dance in most African societies is regarded as communal/public property. If you choreograph (create/ design) any new step another person can pick it up and use it without giving credit to you. There is no copyright in the traditional African setting. Somebody's steps can be varied, developed or modified by another person to become a step. This is the case with the practice of Obitun dance in the modern society. Obitun contemporary dance follow the Yoruba pattern of dance. The style include bending forward from the waist, stamping of the feet on the floor, shifting, shuffling to the right and left, little leaps and jumps all in parallel position. The body poise includes bent knees and tilted trunk. The movement is polyrhythmic and largely dependent on percussion. There is usually an antiphonal relationship between the soloist and the chorus.

The floor pattern/formations include forming of two or more linear lines that can be vertical or horizontal, single line like in a procession, especially to come in or depart. Others include turning on a spot, crisscrossing and forming a big circle or two small ones that move in different directions. These constitute the major floor patterns.

The full 'professional' groups rehearse frequently and create more styles through improvisation. Others only rehearse for a few times prior to the performance and after it, they disperse only to re-gather when there is another performance. Obitun dance in the modern society is therefore an ensemble of sparkling movements performing functions ranging from

provision of means of livelihood to its practitioners, becoming a cultural symbol of unity to the Ondo people, to being one of their greatest means of entertainment, relaxation and pleasure, especially to enliven ceremonies.

### Conclusion

We have tried in this paper to document the development/transformation of Obitun ceremony in the traditional society into cultural dance in the modern society. The factors surrounding its origin, its usage and functions, the performance modes, as well as, the importance the society accords it during both periods were also discussed.

It is established in this paper that the Obitun puberty rite in the traditional society is not the same with the Obitun modern dance. It is now useful to the Ondo people as a ritual theatre and now a source of great enjoyment. Notwithstanding the shift in purpose at both periods, the functions it performs remains highly relevant that its practice and practitioners still

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