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## CONTENTS

1. The Impact of Human Migrations and the Globalisation  
of Epidemics in World History: A Perspective of  
Medical History  
*Uji, Wilfred Terlumun, PhD* 1
  
2. Socio-Economic Implications of Collapsed  
Industries in Benin City, Edo State, 1970-2015  
*Bridget Oghale Omoruyi, (Mrs.) &  
Daniel Olisa Iweze, PhD* 13
  
3. Gender, Development and Society: Women  
and Development of Kilba Community in Adamawa  
State, North-Eastern Nigeria, C.1500-2019 AD  
*Samuel Wycliff & Afordia Barmi Wajiga* 34
  
4. The Development of Smallholder Agricultural  
Plantations in Ijebuland of Southwestern  
Nigeria Upto 1951  
*OSIYALE, B. O, PhD, 'Niyi Ogunkoya and  
Erinosho, T.O. PhD* 54
  
5. Interrogating China's Influence on Africa in  
the 21st Century: New Scramble,  
Partnership or Imperialism?  
*Abah, Danladi PhD &  
Tanko Angyetsokwa Adihikon PhD* 84
  
6. The Cultural Significance of Kengbe Dance in  
Ilorin Marriage in the 20th Century  
*Adeshina Lukman* 109
  
7. The Relevance of Arts and Social Sciences  
Education for Nailonal Unity and Development  
in the 21st Century  
*Johnson H. Pongri, PhD* 124

|     |                                                                                                                                                                      |      |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| 8.  | Islam and Nation Building in Nigeria<br><i>Mohammed Yusuf Danladi</i>                                                                                                | 138  |
| 9.  | A History of the Indigenous Gbagyi People of New<br>Karu, Nasarawa State<br><i>SABO, Anche Ugah &amp; SHIMIDEYI, Maikasuwa</i>                                       | 153  |
| 10  | Military and Boko-Haram Insurgency in Nigeria<br><i>Jesutunwase Jones Segun</i>                                                                                      | 171  |
| 11. | Interrogating Military-Police Feuds in Nigeria:<br>A Study in Inter-Agency Rivalry in the<br>Face of Security Challenges<br><i>Kolade Olubiyo PhD</i>                | 199  |
| 12. | Rescuing History from Her Antagonists:<br>The Role of History in Nation Building<br><i>Malang Fanneh,</i>                                                            | 127. |
| 13. | The Abua/Odual Group and Her Cross River<br>Neighbours Since the Pre-colonial Era<br><i>Uwem Jonah Akpan, PhD</i>                                                    | 148  |
| 14. | A Historical Study of the Sustainability of an aspect<br>of Tiv Indigenous Farm Technology:<br>Hoe & Hoe Making<br><i>Terwase T. Dzeka, PhD &amp; Samuel T. Ihom</i> | 277  |

# The Cultural Significance of Kengbe Dance in Ilorin Marriage in the 20th Century

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## Abstract

Marriage as religious and social institutions was the only occasion with the most elaborate feast in Ilorin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. The 20<sup>th</sup> century marriage in Ilorin was full of both cultural and religious activities which usually spread between five and seven days, with its attendant activities<sup>2</sup>. Kengbe dance which was parts of the cultural aspect of marriage in Ilorin was often accompanied with its peculiar songs in Yoruba language but its cultural politics has influenced the different ethnic groups that made up of Ilorin community and this explained why the tunes, the dances and the dresses of the Kengbe dance group were of northern Nigeria outlook. The wolimah marked by the public reading of Quran by the bride/groom was parts of religious activities<sup>3</sup>. This paper examines the cultural activities attached to marriage in Ilorin with reference to the significant roles of Kengbe dance in marriage ceremony in Ilorin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also analyses the stages or places where Kengbe dance took place during marriage as well as the replacement of the cultural aspect of the marriage ceremony with modern innovations. The method of research and information gathering used are secondary source and primary source, mostly

interviews with veteran Kengbe dancers and singers, old, young men and women in Ilorin community.

### Introduction

In Ilorin, Kengbe dance was an important cultural display by different ethnic groups that composed Ilorin community as parts marriage ceremony. It occurred in three (3) different stages of marriage ceremony<sup>4</sup>. The first being on the run-away day i.e (ojo-sisa), when the bride will escape or run away from her parent's house to any of her either paternal or maternal relative. The second stage was on the eve of marriage ceremony i.e (ojo aisun iyawo) while the third was on "manga or igba day when items bought for the bride were displayed and counted in the public before being taken to her husband's house.

Kengbe dance in Ilorin was often accompanied with different songs and tunes such as warning and advice songs to the bride, praise and abusive songs, entertaining and elegiac or nostalgic songs to express the feeling of the departure of the bride from her family house.

### Marriage in Ilorin in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Marriage rites and ceremony in Ilorin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were unique as they were neither northern nor southern Nigeria outlook; this was because Ilorin is a conglomerate of various ethnic groups<sup>5</sup>. The age long peaceful co-existence, intermarriage and relationship as well as the factor of Islam accounted for the blend of the culture of various ethnic groups present in Ilorin<sup>6</sup>.

Marriage rites in Ilorin usually started with the man's parents to go and ask for the young woman's hand in marriage, this was after the agreement of the feelings for the young man and woman to get married, which they would have informed their parents<sup>7</sup>. The groom's parent must have equally asked

around about the characters and background of the bride's family before ever asking for her hand in marriage<sup>8</sup>.

The next stage will be for some selected elders from members of the groom's family to go ahead and ask for the young woman's hand in marriage if they were satisfied with their investigations. The family of the bride too would do their own investigations such as spiritual consultations before giving their daughter's hand in marriage as proposed<sup>9</sup>. If their investigations too were favourable, the union would be approved by the family of the woman and the man's family would then pay a thanksgiving visit to the woman's family with a gift of money and 20 kolanuts called "obi sa'alubarika"<sup>10</sup>. The means of conveying approval to the man's family could either be verbal or written but the message bearers would be given a gift of unspecified amount of money and kolanuts, which shall be delivered to the head of the family<sup>11</sup>, the money and kolanuts usually between 20 and 50 as the case may be shall be shared among the family members and this at times served as a means of announcing the giving out of their daughter's hand in marriage to other extended family members<sup>12</sup>.

Sweets and kolanuts were usually sent out as invitation to the wedding ceremony<sup>13</sup>. The marriage ceremony lasted for between five and seven days, it started on Sunday for the royal and Fulani brides and grooms that have wolimah while marriage ceremonies started on Tuesday for the people in Oke-Imole and other parts of Ilorin<sup>14</sup>.

Apart from the royal and Fulani families of Ilorin, whose marriage ceremony continued on Monday or Tuesday with (sisa-iyawo) i.e the traditional migration or escape of the bride from her parent's house to any either of her paternal or maternal relative, and other rites such as dance of royal family (ijo olomoba), most of the other marriage ceremonies and rites are the same with the people of the Oke-Imole axis of Ilorin whose marriage ceremonies usually started on Tuesday<sup>15</sup>.

On Tuesday, there will be a wake keeping on the eve of wolimah ceremony where traditional waka music would be played, this will go along with corn-cake (masa) frying and eating. Wolimah was scheduled for Wednesday where the bride/groom with their decorated slates in their hands, toured the houses of their teachers, in-laws and own parents and relatives in an entourage of friends. At each station, they read the chapter written on the slates as though to convince their hearers that they have truly "completed" the Quran. At the end of the recitation, they were given presents such as money; cow bought by bride/groom was usually slaughter at the teacher's house who could keep back as much as half of the animal<sup>16</sup>. It should be stated here that, the feast of completion of the learning of how to recite the Quran in Ilorin was often merged with wedding ceremony for which the word "wolimah" was more often appropriately used<sup>17</sup>. The graduation ceremony for the completion of the Quran was then postponed till the time the graduand will get married to avoid double expenses<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, if bride or groom did not learn how to read the Quran, marriage would still hold without wolimah activities<sup>19</sup>. Thursday was set aside as the bride's wedding day while Friday was the groom's wedding day in Ilorin<sup>20</sup>. Saturday was referred to as the "manga or igba" day<sup>21</sup>.

It is interesting to know that three days after the bride's wedding ceremony day, usually Saturday, was the igba day i.e (ojo-igba) as stated above, where various items except cloths bought for the bride were displayed outside for public counting and transferred to her husband's house. These items are igba in Yoruba because they were different kinds of pots, plates and utensils amongst others, hence, igba day i.e ojo igba, but the cloths were taken to the groom's house few days before the traditional visit of the bride to her family house after the marriage called "jijilo"<sup>22</sup>. The igba day was also set aside for the preparation of meals usually 42 pieces of corn-meal (Eko tutu)

and beans cake (Moin-moin) each by the groom's family which shall be given to the bride's family, this food was referred to as manga food i.e ounje manga<sup>23</sup>.

More interestingly, money and ten (10) kolanuts would be given to the people that brought the bride's items (igba iyawo) and they were usually wives from the bride's family home. But manga food shall be collected by the immediate family members of the bride who are females and this was perhaps the origin of the word "manga" because these female members of the bride's family were often the ones called magajia and from there, it was shortened to "manga"<sup>24</sup>.

### **Understanding the Kengbe (Dalabash Drum) Used in Ilorin**

Calabash or gourd is generally called "Kengbe" in Ilorin, Kwarya in Hausa, Tumbugel in Fulani, Evoh in Nupe and Igba or Kengbe in Yoruba language<sup>25</sup>. It is a percussion instrument consisting of either a half or large calabash which produces sound when struck with the wrist and palms<sup>26</sup>. Drum is any wonderful instrument that produces pleasant sounds for the purpose of entertainment, rhythm or music<sup>27</sup>. Calabash or gourd is an object which produces sound when strike with palms or wrist, hence, calabash drum.

In Ilorin, the gourd used during marriage ceremony for Kengbe dance was the large one; face up where the singer would be striking it with the wrists and palms while two (2) chorus would at the same time be beating the calabash by the sides with short sticks. Although, the hemispherical calabashes that are partly submerged in a bowl of mortar facedown are also used in Ilorin especially during dances to entertain the Emir, royal and Fulani family weddings which is often referred to as "ijo olomo Oba"<sup>28</sup>. Thus, the half calabashes are commonly used as drum by the people of 'Afin'axis of Ilorin

It is interesting to know that the songs of Kengbe dance in Ilorin were in Yoruba language even though the tunes, dances

and dresses at the event were of northern Nigerian outlook, little wonders here because Ilorin is of different ethnic composition.

### Stages of Kengbe Dance During Marriage Ceremony in Ilorin

- a. The first stage or place where Kengbe dance took place during marriage ceremony in Ilorin in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the day that could be described as "run-away day" (ojosisa). There was a marriage tradition in Ilorin whereby the bride would escape or run away from her parent's house to any of her either paternal or maternal relative about three days to the commencement of the marriage ceremony usually on Sunday<sup>29</sup>. This is also referred to as traditional migration as explained previously above. At this place, the bride's Kengbe dance group would visit her there where they would entertain her with calabash drum and songs.
- b. The second stage was on the eve of the marriage, which is also referred to as "wolimah" eve (aisun wolimah)<sup>30</sup>. When the women were busy frying corn cake (masa) and the men were in attendance watching and listening to waka music, young girls, probably the bride's Kengbe dance group would go somewhere within the compound entertaining themselves with calabash drum<sup>31</sup>. It was not necessary that the bride be present or be in the midst of the Kengbe dance group this time because calabash drumming on the eve of the marriage was not the main activity but only a side attraction. The main activities on the eve of the marriage included waka music and corn cake eating because the eve was meant for "wolimah" where the bride/groom shall read some portions of Quran to the public audience the following day<sup>32</sup>.
- c. The third stage of marriage ceremony where there was Kengbe dance in Ilorin marriage in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was on

the "manga" or igba day<sup>33</sup>, full explanation on the igba and manga day has been explained above. As these activities were going on, the bride and her Kengbe dance group would go to a place, a bit far from home, where various Kengbe entertaining songs would rent the air. In fact, the groom and his friends would have to visit and give them money before they return the bride back home<sup>34</sup>.

### Songs of Kengbe Dance

Kengbe dance in Ilorin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was often accompanied with different songs such as warning, advice, praise, abusive and entertaining songs amongst others.

#### Warning and advice songs

Example of an advice song of Kengbe dance is:

"odowore kulumbu omo elepo  
odowore kulumbu omo alata  
iya oko dowore  
baba oko dowore.....<sup>35</sup>

The literal interpretation of the above songs is the advice to the bride to be of good conduct and behavior to the groom's parents. There was also a warning song to the entire Kengbe dance group about the dangers of pregnancy abortion, for example,

"eyin elegbe mi kekeke  
teba loyun emamase  
ati seyun lati lorun  
ati lorun sa lati wona  
idi oro re aiye le o"<sup>36</sup>

#### Praise songs

Kengbe dance song was also used to praise any one such as the bride or the Emir of Ilorin, for example:

1. "odi olorire, iyawo dolorire  
odi onile tuntun, iyawo doni letuntun eba ona o  
odi eleni tuntun, iyawo di eleni tuntun amuro iha!"<sup>37</sup>

The above song was praising the bride as the most fortunate, owning new house and mats.

2. idobale laofi ki oba  
ki oba ki oba x2  
idobale laofi ki oba  
ki oba ki oba x2  
won ki ki oba loro  
farayi ola, salama onile  
Sulu kanaini oba oba Sulu  
wun ose sheu fun oba x2  
fun oba fun oba x2  
Oba wa loni sola o eya!  
wun ose sheu fun oba  
fara yio la  
salama onile  
Sulu kanaini  
oba oba Sulu

This song was a popular Kengbe song to pay homage to the 9<sup>th</sup> Emir of Ilorin, stating that one does not greet the Emir on stand but in prostration

3. lekunle oba lensoro oba x2  
okan sete robo robo  
okan sete pipan  
lekunle oba lensoro oba

The above song was a form of an abuse and warning to the people that are backbiting against the personality of the Emir in his domain

### Abusive songs

Kengbe dance song was full of many abusive songs but it is interesting to know that most of the abusive songs used to be sung on "manga day". When the bride and his friends visited the Kengbe dance group at a place they took the bride to but fail to give them money, the abusive songs then sang like:

"agbada lari yepere o  
agbada lari yepere  
kosi kobo lapo boda  
agbada lari yepere!"<sup>38</sup>

It means that the groom just put on flowing gown without a kobo in his pocket. Other common abusive song is the one below:

adarinmagbe  
ponla ponla  
apola enu  
woni edarin  
egbenu lowo  
toba sowo ni  
aopin dede  
eoro loko  
eoro nile  
ejo abosi nbe lenure o

The song above was abusing the choral group of the Kengbe dance that doesn't sing simultaneously as expected by the singer

### Entertaining songs

Songs of Kengbe dance were generally entertaining, thus, all the songs explained above were by the way of entertainment and this explained why there was a specific song to encourage the chorus to make the songs lively and interesting<sup>39</sup>, such as:

1. "eroju ebawa gberin x2  
eni ti koba gberin wa  
bodun de koni le raso  
ewu iya re ni yio ma woka o  
bodun de koni le raso"

This was telling the choral group to be serious and that the failure would lead to inability to get money to buy cloths during festivals.

2. edake emapariwo o x2  
agbofulani lawa yi  
wara tutu lao fi somi

The song was telling the Kengbe dance group to be silent as they were in the Fulani garden apartment where they would drink whey as water

3. nigbatawa nfi somoge x2  
odabi kama dagba mon o  
kasama ba omoge lo

The dance group was remembering when they were involved in youthful behaviours, as if the time should not pass.

4. moyi yi moyi gbiri ri x2  
mosebi boda nfa siga o  
ase eyin re lota yo enu

This above was a humorous song to entertain the hearers and it was making jest of a person with an oblong tooth, saying that they thought he was smoking cigarette due to his pointed out tooth.

5. morikisa loja oba x2  
mori elede tonfa siga o  
mori ologbo ton npe omoge

This song was entertaining the people by referring to the immature boys that were trying to woo girls as pigs smoking cigarette and cats wooing girls in the market

6. won duro won un wenu wa x2  
won bere won un wenu wa  
won se bi awa yio lesi wi o  
basiwi kole gba enu won

The above was part the entertaining Kengbe dance song where the singer was telling the jealous lookers that if she misstated, they dared not say it out

### Replacement of Kengbe Dance with Modern Innovations

Kengbe dance in marriage ceremony in Ilorin is now being replaced with modern innovations such as sister's eve or bridal shower and marital talks amongst others<sup>40</sup>.

On the eve of the marriage i.e (ojo aisun) when Kengbe dance usually took place is now being replaced with sisters eve or bridal shower where the bride's friends mainly females organizes a disco party<sup>41</sup>.

The reasons for the replacement of Kengbe dance in marriage ceremony in Ilorin presently is due to exposure to western civilization, acquisition of western education, reduction in the population of elders in the society, scarcity of gourd or calabash (Kengbe) and its high price. However, it should be noted here that efforts are being made to resuscitate this dying aspect of the cultural marriage activities or ceremony by introducing Kengbe dance into the parts of a wedding reception programmes in some weddings in Ilorin as at present<sup>42</sup>.

### Conclusion

Kengbe dance was an important cultural display during marriage ceremony in Ilorin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It occurred in

three (3) different stages of marriage activities. Kengbe dance was not just a mere dance but often accompanied with different songs such as praise, advice and warning as well as entertaining songs.

Calabash or gourd is generally called "kengbe" in Ilorin and the one used for Kengbe dance during marriage was the large one where the singer would be striking it with the wrists and palms while two (2) choruses would at the same time be beating the calabash by the sides with short sticks, all to produce percussive sounds.

Kengbe dance in marriage ceremony in Ilorin is now being replaced with modern innovations such as sister's eve or bridal shower and this is due to the exposure to western civilization and education, demise of elders and scarcity of gourd or high prices.

It is interesting to know that efforts are now being made to revive Kengbe dance by its introduction into the parts of a wedding reception programmes in some weddings in Ilorin lately.

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