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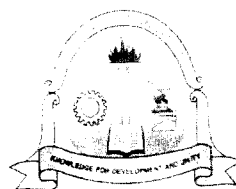
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# KJHS

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## EDITORS NOTE

*KJHS* is an annual publication of the Department of History, Kaduna State University that comes out every September. It publishes well-researched articles, book reviews, review articles and scholarly opinions from scholars, researchers, policy makers and opinion molders among others, on wide range of topics within the disciplines of Humanities; dealing with issues that augments knowledge and ideas, whose lessons would provide the path towards scholarship development, peace, harmony, and security in Nigeria, Africa and the world.

*KJHS*, which is peer reviewed, is also fully refereed that seeks to promote deeper understanding of issues in Nigeria, Africa and the world through scholarly researches and exchange of knowledge useful to students, researchers, academics, policy makers and opinion molders as well as enriching the general readers. Its editorial policy is neither committed to any constricted ideological prism nor political viewpoint. Instead, it recognizes that a wide range of multi-disciplinary approaches are fundamental in understanding those wide ranges of issues surrounding the respective disciplines of History in particular and the Humanities in general. It equally appreciates that opposing viewpoints and ideologies, which have shaped and are still shaping the understanding/misunderstanding of historical issues are legitimate in academic discourses. This is one of our responsibilities in a University and as professional historians, our aim is the universalisation of knowledge and cross-pollination of ideas for development and human progress.

*KJHS* made history when it made its debut in September 2009 as the first ever departmental journal in the Kaduna State University. Since then, it has not only been consistently rich in its contents, but in appearance too. Today, in September 2013, we have the fifth volume.

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- All submitted articles and/or reviews should be typed double space leaving adequately wide margin on both sides.
- Articles should strictly be between 4,000-5,000 words or 17 pages of one side of A4 size paper, including the references, while book reviews should be 1, 500 words, all in 12 font size. Any addition will incur some charges.
- Author(s) should forward original hard copy of manuscript (not submitted elsewhere for publication) to the address stated above.
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- In the case of cited journal articles, it should be in double quotation marks and name(s) of the journal(s) underlined, indicating volumes, number and pages.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Notes to Contributors

ARTICLES	Page
Black Africa and the Arabs <b>Ali A. Mazrui</b>	1
Crisis and Conflict in Central Nigeria: The Case of Jukun and Tiv <b>Hamid Bobboyi</b>	21
Issues in Pre-Colonial Inter-State Relations: The Example of Hausa and Saharan States from the 16 <sup>th</sup> to the 19 <sup>th</sup> Centuries <b>Mujtaba Liman Arabu</b>	50
Colonial Justice System in Northern Nigeria: A Study in the Establishment and Administration of Zaria Central Prison, 1903-1967 <b>Mohammed Buhari</b>	64
Spirituality, Aesthetics and Cultural Feminism of <i>Obitun</i> Festival amongst the Ondo People of South-Western Nigeria <b>Briget Itunu Awosika and Shadiat Olapeju Shuaib</b>	76
An Analysis of Youth and Urban Violence in Nigeria <b>Mahmoud M. Lawan and Aminu M. Dukku</b>	89
The Mass Media and Nation Building in Nigeria <b>Emmanuel Jegede</b>	117
Understanding Poverty and Corruption in Nigeria, 1960-2011 <b>Aliyu Abubakar Kware</b>	127
A Preliminary Investigation into the Changing Nature of <i>Almajiranci</i> Phenomenon in Northern Nigeria <b>Nura Aliyu</b>	142

## Spirituality, Aesthetics and Cultural Feminism of *Obitun* Festival amongst the Ondo People of South-Western Nigeria

Briget Itunu Awosika and Shadiat Olapeju Shuaib

### Abstract

Culture and tradition in any human group are intertwined issues than separated and both determine not only the positive growth but identities of people, societies and even civilizations. In most of African societies, the influence of Western culture has made most of traditions, cultures and festivals to become jettisoned irrespective of their immeasurable values. This paper discusses *Obitun* traditional festival in Ondo, South-western to bringing to limelight, the historical, spiritual and aesthetic importance of its usage for mass initiation of maidens into womanhood. The spiritual efficacy of the annual festival to ward off infertility, miscarriages and youth mortality after appeasing the *Obitun* goddess at *Augo* and the aesthetic use of costume and make-up are all enunciated in the paper. An analysis of the importance of the items of costume and make-up used by the *Obitun*, her *Apeto* during the twelve-day festival is also analysed. The theatrical constituents of special drumming, singing and rhythmic dance steps and the peculiar decorations are also listed. The paper, which is both a cultural and theatrical study of an important ceremony to showcasing the virtues in Yoruba traditions, observes and concludes that *Obitun* festival has more to its celebration than mere cultural dances and posits that the practice, which is now moribund, be rejuvenated, protected and preserved.

### Introduction

The traditional festival known as *Obitun* is being observed by 'Ondo' and 'Bini' people who hail from Ondo and Edo States of the old Western and Mid-west Regions of Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> It is an annual traditional festival involving rites performed for twelve solid days by maidens to not only indicate attainment of maturity but to indicate their readiness for marriage. The rites performed during *Obitun* are usually rounded-off with massive handing-over of all successful brides to their grooms while prospective brides who could not make it in that year would go back to prepare against the next festival. *Obitun* is a cultural festival entrenched with a lot of spirituality, aesthetics, feminism and fun fare in the use of costume and make-up. By costume here is meant what the *Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary* defined as "a manner of

... dressing; involving outer dresses or garments, which unspoken language, charged with subtle impressive power and messages that words do not possess to reflect ethnicity, social class, culture, personality task and aesthetic prowess”<sup>2</sup> to the onlooker. On the other hand, the art of make-up generally include the practice of painting, enhancing, and altering the face, hair and body of a person or group of persons with cosmetics and other substances so as to enhance appearance. But within theatrical context, it is perceived by Buchman as the vital link between the artist and the audience, which if properly used, it helps the actor project his roles effectively to the audience.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Concept of Culture**

Religion and culture are intertwined and central to what we are; they give meaning to life. While religion is based on relationship between the human being and his creator, culture deals with the issues surrounding the identity of daily lives of individuals or communities.<sup>4</sup> The concept of culture is that individual society has its own body of customs, beliefs and social institutions created and developed by people who are found in same groups with similar identity, history, values, needs, beliefs and goals. Culture has a rich intellectual background in the philosophical, literary and historical traditions, which refers mainly to ideas of enlightenment and refinement in the realms of learning, morality and art with great emphasis on creativity and excellence. This must have been why Akinbinuade opined that a cultured person is one who can appreciate and contribute to the richness of the culture and tradition of his environment.<sup>5</sup>

### **History of *Obitun* Festival**

The history of *Obitun* festival is said to be surrounded by myths following the unprecedented and mysterious death of female youths at puberty due to a severe drought in the history of the Ondo people.<sup>6</sup> The alarming rate of occurrences of the deaths compelled the elders to consult the *Ifa* oracle for solution and the solution proffered was the appeasement of the “River goddess”, *Oluwa* with the performance of *Obitun* as an initiation ceremony for all females at puberty and *Apon* for boys. The *Obitun* initiation was also to be performed by all women found to be suffering from infertility and miscarriage, as well as those who were pregnant alongside all matured females. The intent of the celebration was to avert sterility, miscarriages, death at puberty, inability to find the right suitors and all sort of misfortunes. During the ceremony, exciting songs were rendered to appease the *Oluwa* goddess at *Augo*, a spot

where the shrine of the River goddess was sited. The *Obitun* was to be dressed in heavily beaded costumes to enhance her chances of being shielded by the *Oluwa* from evils.

Each *Obitun* was adorned by all the items listed above with a pot of edible items carried by the *Apeto* (servant to the *Obitun*) on her head to the bank of the *Augo* River. The journey to the *Augo* River was made by dancing to the rhythm of the *Esi* drum from the *Ugha Lila* (One of the courtyards within the palace of the Oba) to the bank to the *Augo* River. The dancing steps and appearances of the *Obitun* and the *Apeto* are similar to the *Guce Wankuku* dance of Malawi in South Africa and the Swuange dance amongst the Tiv people in Benue State, Nigeria. The celebration usually lasted twelve consecutive days and the evils befalling the indigenes disappeared after the appeasement. Since the celebration of *Obitun* was seen to have magically averted deaths of all kinds at that time, the celebration became an annual spiritual and cultural activity for the prevention of sterility and premature deaths among the 'Ondo' people. The *Ondos* accepted to continue to celebrate the *Obitun* festival as a mark of triumph over the strange evil spirit and to mark the great transition from childhood to physical and spiritual maturity to adulthood. Since the *Obitun* was used as a marriage ceremony, the costumes and make-up also became the traditional wedding outfits for brides in Ondo Kingdom since then.

The word *Obitun* is an Ondo dialect while the Binis call theirs *Obuton*.

According to Adeyemi:

The two words mean the same: young maidens beautifully adorned with accessories of worth and fame added to body make-up from local cosmetics such as local white chalk, cam wood, emery dust, yellow ginger and *laali*. The costumes of the *Obitun* include items of accessories from flat golden metal, beads, locally woven cloths from silk or linen yarns, animal hair, hides and skins, feathers or birds, white and red local chalks *Efun* and *Efun Ado* and the cam wood *Osin*.<sup>7</sup>

In tracing the history of *Obitun*, Akinbinuade similarly noted that when the Ondo people became fed up with sudden and unprecedented increase in female

youth mortality as many died mysteriously at puberty,<sup>8</sup> it got to an alarming stage that the elders consulted *Ifa* for a solution who then prescribed the offering of a sacrifice to appease the spirit world and in particular, the River goddess known as *Oluwa*, which then also prescribed the performance of an initiation ceremony by the youths *Obitun* for girls and *Apon* for boys. By this, youths were to offer sacrifice made up of edible things to be dropped at the banks of River *Oluwa* or at any 'T' junction. The type of drums to be beaten during the ceremony was *Esi* while the ceremony should be performed on special twelve days and rounded off on the twelfth day at a place known as *Ugha Lila*.

An oral source claimed that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, *Ifa* instructed Ondo people to take sacrifices to *Augo* stream in order to survive the severest drought ever known in the history of Ondo kingdom and sacrifices to avert sterility among young brides as well as mortality amongst youths, and pregnant women.<sup>9</sup> The sacrifice was meant to drive away *Ogba* in order to avert this miserable and ridiculous situation. *Ogba* was believed to be the image created alongside an individual to bring misfortune in one's life.

The *Obitun* must be taken care of to ensure that the *Ogba* would not turn round her fortunes into misfortunes. One of the things she must be prevented from doing was carrying loads on her head; the provision of water, food and clothing must be thoroughly supervised by the *Apeto* who acted as her servant and who could be seen as the chief bridesmaid during the celebration of the festival.

During this ceremony, exciting and beautiful songs were rendered based mostly on a tree called *Apipon*. This is why the *Obitun* was often instructed not to eat the fruit from this tree for the remaining period of her life. To avoid further misery and premature death, the people of Ondo Kingdom continued the celebration of *Obitun* as part of their culture for a very long time. This culture is almost gone into extinct as a result of westernization and education. As a result of the solution found to the problem of the mysterious deaths amongst the youths, gradually the Ondo people accepted the ceremony which they tagged as *Obitun* as a mark of their triumph over the spirit of misfortune, bareness and death.<sup>10</sup> The festivity that goes with *Obitun* is therefore a period of initiation that goes also with celebration.

Generally speaking, the period of initiation in any African society is a very vital moment in the rhythms of an individual's life, which is also a rhythm of the corporate groups of which the individual is a part. Therefore, *Obitun* ceremony is a puberty ceremonial rite performed by all female adolescents to mark their transition from adolescence to adulthood. It is usually an occasion for considerable ritual and elaborate cultural activities. At the stage of *Obitun* ceremonial performance, a female adolescent is ushered into adulthood both physically and religiously. The rites reveal that a girl-child has become a matured female adult; and any girl who does not perform this rite was regarded as a non-entity as she might not find a suitor who would ask for her hand in marriage.

The origin of *Obitun* costume and make-up is covered in different kinds of myths which date back to several years ago. Costumes, which are the mode of fashion or personal attire and dress used for *Obitun* includes hairstyles, style of clothing or personal adornment belonging to a particular nation, class or period.<sup>11</sup> The images created by the costume used generally influences how others perceive one and delivers a unique message about an individual.<sup>12</sup> Costumes are used specifically during certain traditional festivals or activities to link us with our past, create awareness for children in the contemporary time and serve to perpetuate culture through age to age transfer. It could be observed that costume embrace certain features these include the hairstyle, headwear, footwear, garments, body adornment, and other accessories. As an effective means of communication, costumes in the traditional context give immediate information about nationality, culture and religion with far greater regional variety.<sup>13</sup> That could have been why Shuaib sees the role of costume in defining the age, occupation, period, socio-economic status and personality of the wearer.<sup>14</sup>

### **Aesthetics in Obitun Costume and Make-up**

Bada<sup>15</sup> and Adeyemi<sup>16</sup> were in agreement that at the peak of its glory, *Obitun* with the costume, make-up and dances soon became a social age-grade group affair. They further gave credence to the *Obitun* affairs that while the celebration was on the process, mothers of eligible bachelors who watched these theatrical performances of the new *Obituns* were free to choose brides for their sons after the performance. Since an *Obitun* who was not chosen would have to perform this ceremony the next year, it became an essential duty for the mother of a would-be-*Obitun* to make it a point of duty that her

daughter is well groomed in readiness for *Obitun* celebration so that it was a once-for-all affair for her. It was a serious shame for an *Obitun* and her mother if she was not hooked at her first participation in the ceremony. In order to make a success of the putting, accessories of worth and fame were adorned by the *Obituns* and even her mother if she was sure of having prepared her daughter well for the occasion.

The *Obituns* were given special beauty regimen of bevy beauties with beads, *Aso-Oke-Alaari*, chalk and cam wood in a manner comparable with the *Mbopo* or *Mboi* puberty rites of maidens in the Efik/Ibibio communities of the South Eastern Nigeria and the *Mgbede* rites amongst the Igbo people. The contemporary function of *Obitun* dance troupe as a medium of entertainment in schools, social and cultural functions, can be compared with the *Tule Wankuku* dance of Malawi, South Africa, and the *Swuange* Tiv dance.

Yoruba elders who are the custodians of culture also agreed, that *Obituns* costume and make -up have great potentials and aesthetics that could earn them international recognition when foreigners would be creatively challenged while Africans in Diaspora would find them stimulating and encouraging to spark up the urge for home-coming. These points are totally agreed to that Nigerian woven textiles have received approval from the 'White House' for duty-free importation into the United States of America.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Costumes and Make-up used in the Obitun Festival**

<i>IYATA</i> -	a local handbag
<i>IRUKERE</i> -	flywhisk or horsewhisk
<i>AKUN</i> -	Beads
<i>EGBA OWO</i> -	bangles for the wrists
<i>IKO IDE</i> -	feather of a big bird
<i>EFUN</i> -	Local white
<i>UDA</i> -	Sword
<i>AAYIN</i> -	Local paint made from leaves
<i>OPOPADE</i> -	Beaded Crown
<i>SAWORO</i> -	Ankle Bangles
<i>EGBA OWO</i> -	Wrist bangles
<i>AKUN</i> -	Beads of various shapes and colours
<i>OSUN</i> -	Cam wood
<i>UDA</i> -	Gold/metal sword

ASO ALAARI- Locally woven fabric from silk yarn  
IYATA - Hand bags.

### **Spiritual Relevance of Costume and Make-up in *Obitun* Festival**

This section identifies the various costumes for *Obitun* festival and explains their uses as follows:

***Iyata:*** This is a local handbag is hung across the body. They are in two forms, each has the picture of a crown or African mask on each side with two large eyes or a crown drawn on each. *Iyata* is believed to drive away all barriers in an “*Obitun*’s” marital life.

***Irukere:*** This is a horse whisk used by both *Obitun* and *Apeto* during the ceremony. It is usually held upright in the right hand and manipulated during dancing. Other people in Ondo and environs used the horsetail during cultural celebrations while the king uses the horse whisk to show his blessings and acknowledge cheers/greetings from people within and outside the palace. The philosophical meaning of the *Irukere* is to show success, fulfillment and happiness.

***Akun Beads:*** Beads were brought to Ondo town from Oyo by the twins of *Alaafin*: one of who became the first king in Ondo for royal identification. Beads generally serve spiritual and social roles of joy and wealth, especially, the reddish brown beads called ‘*Iyun*’. (Rubies) They are very expensive and in good use among Yoruba people who cherish quality beads. *Obitun*” are heavily beaded with “*Akun*” during celebrations.

***Egba Owo:*** These are set of wrist bangles used by the *Obituns* to adorn the wrists: usually made of beads. They bangles knock against one another to give rhythmic sound as the “*Obitun*” Dances.

***Iko Ide:*** This is a Sparrow feather also called *Odidere* in Yoruba language, which is used to decorate the hair of an “*Obitun*” after its been made into a ‘ball’ or ‘doughnut’ shape.. This is done with the brief that the hair is one of the actors that decide the beauty of a woman. In order to make the matured girl more beautiful, *Iko ide* is used to adorn her hair.

**Efun:** This is a local white chalk is called *Efun* It is used to make designs on the body of an "Obitun". The belief in using *Efun* is that it renders the body invulnerable to any evil wish of the people who are present to watch the new *Obituns* at their initiation ceremony.



**Photograph 1:** An 'Apeto' in her *Obitun* regalia with items for Sacrifice

**Source:** Picture taken by the researchers at Ondo 12/4/2011

**Osun:** Cam wood or *Osun* is rubbed on the face, neck, palms, feet and used to make inscriptions on the chest and waist of the *Obitun*. Its use signifies prosperity for the *Obitun* in marriage.

**Uda:** or Sword is a metal adaptation of indigenous African leaf *Akoko* used as mark of choice during the coronation of a new king or chief. Kings and chiefs in Ondo kingdom have similar words called 'UDA' which serve as the mark of the authority vested in the individual that possesses it as well as strength for him/her to carry out the roles attached to his/her traditional 'office'. The 'UDA' is used by the "Apeto" as a protective symbol during the celebrations.

**Aayin:** This is a local paint made from leaves: the paint is rubbed on the face and palms of the *Obitun* as a form of cosmetics to beautify her. It is the belief of the people that the beauty of an *Obitun* is not complete if *Aayin* is not used, and that she will be seeing evil spirits, because the using only beads to cover the *Aayin* is believed to prevent the evil spirit from tormenting an individual.

**Aso Oke/Alaari:** This is the locally woven material that is used to cover the body from the chest downwards. In the past, *Obituns* used to expose their bodies using only beads across the breasts portions and the pubic section, but due to modernization they to cover the body from the chests to the pubic areas and beyond with the *alaari*, which is used as a wrapper round the areas mentioned above.



**Photograph 2:** Obitun in full regalia and accessories

**Source:** Picture taken by the researchers at 2010 Ekimogun Day Celebrations.

**Opopade:** This beaded crown is designed like the crown and must be worn by the *Obitun* throughout the period of the celebrations. Anyone who wears *Opopade* must not carry anything on her head for three consecutive months.

**Saworo:** These ankle bangles makes sound to announce that the *Obitun* still exists so that the *Ogba* who used to be a terror to the *Obitun* can get the signal because *Saworo* makes a lot of noise. When the *Obitun* dances, the *Saworos* make rhythmic noise which fizzles life out of the *Ogba*, and make it to become jittery and depart from the vicinity.

It is observed here that nowadays, the *Obitun* festival has become more of a cultural and entertainment affair with little or no reference to its origin and manner of practice. Mother in-laws now groom the new brides in the rudiments of home-making for forty days after marriage because the new bride is not allowed to socialize or go for any outing until after forty days of marriage. Immunization, good nutrition, knowledge of good grooming and the media have become the order of the day, hence, people hardly take ill, so they do not need to consult *Ifa* oracle concerning any ailment as the rate of epidemics has reduced. People now behold the *Obitun* group at ceremonies performing as cultural troupe and traditional dancers to thrill audience at wedding, chieftaincy, royal coronations and carnivals particularly during *Ekimogun* Day as we can see below:



**Photograph 3:** Obituns in action- dancing

**Source:** Picture Taken by the researchers at Ondo 7/12/2010



**Photograph 4:** Obitun troupe at a cultural outing

**Source:** Picture taken by the researchers at a Chieftaincy Installation  
22/12/2010

### **Conclusion**

The *Obitun* festival and all the ceremonies that go with it is an indication of the known reputation of the Yoruba people with cultural sensitivity. Though most of the cultural principles are becoming moribund or in the decline with overlapping consequences on identity and history makes this study an important step towards cultural reawakening especially as it relates to the theatrical aspects of traditional ceremonial costume and make-up. Using the *Obitun* festival in Ondo Kingdom as a case study, it is meant to also guide against our cultural erosion by re-appraising our cultural costumes and make-up as contemporary wedding adornment.

One important cultural change in the *Obitun* festival is in the article of adornment. Until these days, during the festival, beads were worn on the waist; some were worn across the neck to the armpit of both arms, while matured

girls exposed unexplored, firm pointed nipples on their wedding day. Today however, these are being abandoned and regarded as primitive and instead the traditional fabric for this outfit today is a hand woven cloth of heavy cotton sometimes sparked with metallic thread, this is called "Asooke- alaari" in Ondo dialect, often worn by a bride with a dazzling display of coral beads and other semi precious beads on her wedding day.

The aesthetic values of the traditional costumes we've examined are those aspects of culture that should be encouraged for contemporary use and be preserved for future generations. Steps needs be taken to guide against this cultural erosion. Contracting a marriage, which in the past used to be accompanied by religious rituals before the ancestral gods, today takes place according to the printed words of the ordinance; which is cultural erosion that should be checked to revive the spirituality in 'Obitun'.

The need for a review of "Obitun costumes and make-up in line with contemporary fashion to make it occupy its rightful position requires the attention of the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Kabiyesis and Ondo State government and Yoruba film producers should encourage cultural activities in its various dimension, which will make the producers of the costumes and these make- materials boost their businesses. Developing and mounting programmes that showcase the richness and historical values of our costumes to create contemporary awareness to people who are up-coming for the perpetuation of Nigeria's cultural heritage should also be encouraged. We should renew our interests and pride in our traditional fashion, textile and decorative arts and any Nigerian in the Diasporas should yearn for cultural identity, adopting various forms of traditional dresses and food etc to demonstrate a kind of cultural renaissance. Hence, the spirituality, aesthetics and cultural feminism of *Obitun* festival amongst the Ondo people of south-western Nigeria is both a cultural and theatrical study of an important ceremony to showcase the virtues in Yoruba traditions.

## Notes

1. A. M. Akinfenwa, *Ile-Oluji, Traditions, Growth and Neighbours*, Ibadan: Adeline Ventures, 1999, see Pp73-75.
2. Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary,
3. H. Buchman, *Stage make up*, New York: Watson Gruptill Publications, 1989, P. 12.
4. M. H. Kukah, *Religion, Culture and the Politics of Development*. Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization, 2007, P. 16.
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6. A. M. Akinfenwa, *Ile-Oluji, Traditions, Growth and Neighbours..* op cit Pp. 44-47.
7. M. C. Adeyemi, *Ondo Kingdom its History and Culture*, Ibadan: Bounty Press Ltd., 1993, P. 17.
8. K. O. Akinbinuade, *The History of Ondo Kingdom...*op cit Pp. 44-47
9. Fawehinmi, Oral Interview conducted at Ondo Town on the 12<sup>th</sup> June 2006. But the claim of 16<sup>th</sup> century when the event was claimed to have occurred is something that Historians need to verify.
10. A. M. Akinfenwa, *Ile-Oluji, Traditions, Growth and Neighbours...*op cit, see P. 12.
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12. B. I. Awosika, *Wardrobe Planning and Maintenance*. Ondo: Pat Ade Printing Press, 2003, 12.
13. Ibid
14. S. O. O. Shuaib, "Costume and Make-up Practice in Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Problems and Prospects". An Unpublished M.A. Dissertation Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin, 2005, p. 10.
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16. M. C. Adeyemi, *Ondo Kingdom its History and Culture...* op cit P. 17.
17. Punch March 15<sup>th</sup> 2005.