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THE ADUGUBAI AND IGBU DANCES IN KOU COMMUNITIES BURIAL RITES

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Abstract

Dance as a non-verbal means of communication serves various purposes. It entertains, expresses emotions and circumstances, exhibits the culture of a people, and even shows class distinctions in society. As part of their culture, serving any of the aforementioned purposes, Nigerians (indeed Africans) dance on various occasions – when a child is born, when someone dies, during festivals and worship ceremonies etc. In all these occasions, different types of dance are performed. This article focuses on the adugubai and igbu dances performed by the Kou, an Ijo group found in the Western Niger Delta sub-region of Nigeria, as part of their burial rites. The dances are only performed for men, but not for every man. They are only performed for some men of distinction when they die. The adugubai is performed for the chief/high priests of highly recognised and revered deities, and men who owned slaves. The igbu dance is also performed for chief/high priests of highly recognised and revered deities, but is in most cases, performed for men who had killed a human being, lion, tiger or leopard in their lifetime.

Introduction

The Kou are a relatively unknown Ijo group (clan) in the Western Niger Delta sub-region of Nigeria. They are currently found in Ekeremor Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, though some of their satellite villages such as Agge-Okibou and Okibou Zion are also found in Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State. Their major settlements are Agge, Amazor, Azamabiri, Ogbeintu and Orobiri (Agoh, 2017). Orobiri is the oldest of these settlements, and is also the traditional headquarters of the people.

In the fairly distant past, according to traditional historians, the major Kou settlements were nine in number. They were Agge, Amazor, Azamabiri, Odiamabiri. (popularly known as Iyoungbene), Ofonibeinghabiri, Ogbeintu, Orobiri, Osimaibio and Otibiri (Erezene, 2010b). But today, only five of these settlements are still in existence, namely, Agge, Amazor, Azamabiri, Ogbeintu and Orobiri. Odiamabiri and Otibiri are no longer in existence. People were said to have died so frequently in these settlements that the few survivors left out of fear to live in other Kou settlements (Erezene, 2010b). The case of Odiamabiri (Iyoungbene) is the most recent of all. The Kou of this settlement left mostly from 1972 when Mrs Nimizinaghan Adugbe (the maternal grandmother of this writer) died. The few remaining indigenes of the place then decided to go back to Ogbeintu and Orobiri; their original homes. Osimabio is, at present, a

THE ADUGUBAI AND IGBU DANCES IN KOU COMMUNITIES BURIAL RITES

quarter (*idumu*) in Agge. So is Ofonibeinghabiri which is today a quarter (*idumu*) in Orobiri (Erezene, 2010b). In other words, Osimaibio and Ofonibeinghabiri still exist, but not as independent communities. In fact, the Kou of Osimaibio have been struggling to re-establish the fact that they had constituted an independent Kou settlement in the past, and should be so treated. Azamabiri was also deserted for quite a long time but is being rebuilt. Agge Palm Bush (Okoubibi) which is often recorded as a separate Kou settlement in some documents, is a fairly recent offshoot of Agge. It was originally a fishing camp founded by indigenes of Agge like Agge-Okibou.

Until quite recently (in fact, until the creation of Bayelsa State in 1996), the Kou were erroneously treated as Iduwini; a neighbouring Ijo group to them by many scholars (Erezene 2003, 2015). This mix-up was mainly caused by our British colonial masters, and was compounded by the people (Kou) themselves (Hook, 1929; Fellows, 1929; Erezene 2015). For quite some time, another Ijo group that call themselves the Tabo (the Ijo of Azagbene, Bilabiri, Ogbotobo, Tunu, and Torububogbene) had also struggled to be officially recognised as a separate Ijo group from the Iduwini (Monday & Bou, 1982; Erezene, 2010b, 2015). These people have not been as fortunate as the Kou and are now part of the Egbemo clan in Bayelsa State.

Like many other Nigerian groups (Amadi, 2005), the Kou believe in life-after-death or life beyond the grave (Erezene, 2014). They do not believe that death is the end of life - that the dead lived in another world, Duwei-ama (town of the dead), which they usually pronounce as *Duwama* (Erezene, 2014).

Because of their strong belief in life-after-death, the Kou usually organise elaborate burial ceremonies for the dead. These ceremonies which involve a lot of singing and dancing, eating and drinking etc, are believed to usher the dead into *Duwama*. They are also believed to enable him/her to live a comfortable life there (Erezene, 2014). The spirits of those for whom these elaborate ceremonies were not organised, are often believed to haunt members of their families. In 2017, the dead in Orobiri were said to have collectively expressed their unhappiness about the way in which they were buried. This revelation came shortly after the very elaborate clan burial of the late Pere (King) of the kingdom, His Royal Majesty, Chief Francis Zeizinaghan Ajuju, from February 28 to March 5, 2017. The community had to organise an equally elaborate ceremony to appease the souls of the deceased. As already explained, these ceremonies usually involve a lot of singing and dancing. This article discusses the *adugubai* and *igbu* dances; two types of dances usually performed for some classes of men in Kouland when they die. Before we talk about the dances, however, it is obviously important that we look at the social structure of Kou society.

Social Stratification in Kou Communities

A casual observer may easily dismiss the Kou as a people without social stratification. Among these people, however, age is highly respected. Based on age, the people are roughly divided into three groups, namely, the *okosuabu*, *kalaposi* and *kalaogou* (Erezene, 2010 a&b; 2012).

The *okosuabu* are the elderly men and women of about 60 years and above. They are regarded as the custodians of the customs and traditions of the people, and are looked on to for advice by younger people.

The *kalaposi* are the men and women (especially men) of average ages. They constitute the most vibrant workforce in the communities, and form entertainment groups such as football teams and other social associations and clubs. This group usually identify themselves as the youths in the various communities.

The last group, the *kalaogou*, are the very young people. They are often regarded as naïve and innocent. As a result, they are easily pardoned even when they commit fairly serious offences (Erezene, 2010 a & b, 2012).

In spite of the above divisions, members of the different groups, especially the first two, mix freely and play together. The younger people were just expected to be respectful as they interacted with their elders. Even the traditional rulers and high priests of the clan and important deities of the people did not, practically speaking, occupy highly exalted positions in the past. In fact, until quite recently, many of their so-called pere (paramount rulers) were just the high priests of their clan deities (Erezene, 2010 a&b, 2012). These persons too, to a very large extent, freely related with the ordinary people. It was at death that the social stratification among the people, especially the male folk, become pronounced. As we have tried to explain in this article, the *adugubai* and *igbu* dances are part of the attempts by the Kou to show the unordinariness of the men they are performed for.

The Adugubai Dance

This is a very solemn and gentle dance. It is usually performed by a single dancer (male or female) carefully selected for the purpose (Erezene, 2010 a&b). The songs for the performance are not just the usual songs the people sing during funeral ceremonies, but are specially composed, recounting the exploits of the deceased during his lifetime. It is usually performed in an open playground.

As can be easily imagined, the person selected to perform the adugubai dance is usually a very good dancer. He/she is beautifully adorned with fine and expensive wrapper, shirt/blouse and beads among other things, He/she carries a locally made fishing equipment known as *ado or kana* in his/her bent left elbow as he/she dances to well composed drum beats. Seven seeds of the fruit of the raphia palm (*raphia vinifera or oxytenanthera abyssinica*), locally known as *imgbesu-ikokolo*, are placed at intervals on the ground, and as the dancer dances he/she bends down, as required, to pick the seeds into the *ado or kana* one by one. This is not done in a hurry but according to the drum beats. When this process has been repeated for about three times, other people join the dancer to dance.

The adugubai, as already hinted, is not performed for every man at death but for some special classes of men. These are either the chief/high priests of well recognised and highly revered deities or men who owned slaves. In short, it is only performed for men of great distinction (Fatiede and Vello, oral interviews).

The Igbu Dance

Like the *adugubai*, the *igbu* dance is also only performed for some classes of men when they die. These are first, the chief/high priests of the national (clan) deities of the people, and secondly, those men who had killed a human being, lion, tiger or leopard in their lifetime.

Among the Kou, the animals in the cat family - the lion, tiger, leopard, and the cat itself, are equated with human beings (Erezene, 2010 a&b, 2012). The eagle is also grouped with them though to a lesser degree. A man who killed a lion, tiger or leopard is therefore treated as

THE ADUGUBAI AND IGBU DANCES IN KOU COMMUNITIES BURIAL RITES

a person who has killed a human being. For the women folk, it is forbidden for them to even eat any of these animals, including the cat and the eagle. A woman who killed or ate any of these animals is taken as one that has killed or eaten a human being, which is one of the greatest taboos in Kouland. Such a woman is doomed to die (Erezene, 2010 a&b, 2012). This punishment is said to have been decreed by *Ebiekere*, the national deity of the people. But a Kou man who killed a lion, tiger or leopard, though treated as a person that has killed a human being, only performed some spiritual rites to live on. He is required to sleep in the open playground of the national deity at the headquarters of the people, Orobiri, for seven days. This, among other rituals, are believed to spiritually remove the effects of having killed such an animal from the life (eyes) of the man. At death, he is given a hero's burial. His burial rites include the *igbu* dance. During the dance, the coffin bearing the corpse of the man is carried round the town. Kou men are not sanctioned for eating a lion, tiger, leopard, cat or an eagle.

Unlike the *adugubai* which is a solemn and peaceful dance, the *igbu* is rather a rough and energy-sapping dance. As the corpse of the hero is carried round the town, whatever item that is found outside is destroyed, and any domestic animal that is seen close by is killed. No compensation is made to anybody for the items destroyed or animals killed. The essence of the dance is mainly to demonstrate that the man was a warrior in his lifetime.

According to Mrs Moni Vello (oral interview), before now, the coffin bearing the corpse of the dead hero was not a carpenter - made coffin. It was usually locally woven with sticks, and was called *ikpataka* by the people. Alternatively, the corpse was openly carried on a piece of broken canoe known as *aru-ingbu*

The above details given by Mrs Vello may not have any serious religious or ritual significance, In those days, the Kou like their closest neighbours, the Iduwini and Ogulagha, were good canoe carvers, but were not good carpenters. To get carpenter - made coffins or caskets, therefore, the people had to go to Warri (Iselemo). The transport boats were very slow then, and they plied only according to market arrangements. Most of the markets in the area were twelve - day markets. For people to paddle canoes to Warri and back, took up to two or more days. The people, therefore, had to improvise to bury their dead. It was not only heroes or warriors that were buried in these locally made coffins. Ordinary people (men and women) were also buried in *ikpataka*. The heroes, in their lifetime, had the distinction of carrying eagle feathers on the sides of their caps or hats.

Conclusion

It can be easily seen from our discussion that although the Kou are not a highly stratified people, certain classes of men were accorded some respect. These were the people the *adugubai* and *igbu* dances were performed for when they die.

Another dance performance (in form of masquerade) that shows social status in Kouland among men when they die, is the *agula*. The *agula* dances on stilts. It is the most prestigious masquerade in Kou communities. Like the *adugubai* and *igbu* dances, *agula* does not perform for just any dead man. It only performs for regular or famous *agula* dancers; men whose mothers were of slave origin; or men who married such women; and occasionally for some well-to-do or highly respected men when they die (Erezene, 2014). The only other occasion on which *agula* performs in Kouland is during the worship of Ogoni, a highly revered deity among the people. Ogoni only exists in Amazor and Ogbeintu. It is therefore only in these

two communities among all the Kou settlements that one can witness the performance of this type of *agula* known as *oru-agula* (Erezene, 2014).

It is important to point out, that the *adugubai* and *igbu* dances are not only performed by the Kou, but also by their closest neighbours; the Iduwini and Ogulagha. So is the *agula*.

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