

***AKOBIE*: AN ASPECT OF CHILDHOOD RITUAL, INDIGENOUS EDUCATION
AND SOCIALIZATION IN BENIN KINGDOM**

BY

OSAISONOR GODFREY, EKHATOR

Institute for Benin Studies, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Among the Benin people of southern Nigeria today, some aspects of their cultural heritage are going into extinction just as the future generation is being westernized. This essay is a study of an aspect of childhood culture in Benin that involves children's imitation, play, and childhood ritual. It examines the socio-cultural significance of a ritual called Akobie that takes its name from a figurine created for the ritual but that has come to refer to all activities involved in the imitation of ancestral ritual by Benin children. It shows how Akobie as a childhood ritual assists in the socialization of children, their acquisition of indigenous knowledge, and the inter-generational transmission and preservation of cultural values in the pre-colonial and colonial Benin kingdom. The essay examines Akobie, an aspect of African traditional childhood culture that deserves to be documented, as a contribution to children's history and folk culture in the Benin kingdom, and childhood studies in general.

KEYWORDS

Benin, Akobie, Ritual, Children, Imitation, Socialization

INTRODUCTION

Benin-Edo people constitute an African people renowned for the tenacity of their rich cultural heritage. However, some aspects of Benin's heritage are almost extinct as a result of the pervasive influence of Judeo-Christian beliefs and Westernization. Most affected by this process of extinction are cultural practices performed traditionally during childhood. Today, these are often replaced by western childhood practices, particularly cartoons and television,¹ which have become the norm even in the rural communities, ostensibly the bastions of cultural traditions. Children in Benin society are no longer able to recite traditional rhymes, recount stories and mythologies of great ancestors, engage in traditional games and sports and dance forms such as *Ekpo*, *Agada*, *Ago*, *Ibota Oviantoi*, *Oyi no'rie ukpon*, *Tube e ho*, *Ekpen gha mu ewe vbe utezi*, or *Agha kpolo nogie mwan*.² Many such cultural practices and traditions are undocumented and within some years may be completely forgotten.³ As has been noted by Usuanlele, regarding children's masquerade play, "existing studies of the practice and institution of masquerades in Benin kingdom are silent on the role of children and as a result their histories are all but unknown."⁴

Apart from the fact that children engage less and less in traditional art forms, games, and sports, the dearth of documentation makes it that much more difficult to teach them these aspects of their traditions.⁵ Today, in the city, most children are confined within their walled homes or locked flats/apartments, and so are prevented from interacting with other children in the

¹ D.G. Singer, J.L. Singer, H. D'Agostino, and R. DeLong, "Children's Pastimes and Play in Sixteen Nations: Is Free Play Declining?" *America Journal of Play* (Winter 2009): 289 accessed June 10, 2016, www.journalofplay.org.

² The Ekpo masquerade performance by children is discussed in U. Usuanlele, "Children's Masquerade: Performance and Creativity in Benin City," in *Children and Childhood in Colonial Nigeria Histories*, ed, Saheed Aderinto (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 77-95 and Dan Ben-Amos describes Ibota in *Sweet Words/Story Telling Events in Benin* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1975)

³ Some of Benin traditional games and rhymes that are documented, leaving out such childhood activities as *Akobie*, may be found in G.N.I. Enobakhare, *Some Edo Number Games, Geero Series on Edo Culture 1* (Benin City: Samartco Designers, 1982); I. Osemwegie, *Poems in Bini* (Benin City: Fortune and Temperance Publishing Ltd., 2003); G.O. Obazee, I. Erhahon, S.O. Izeke, P. Ohonbamu, E.M. Omoregbe, and U. Usuanlele eds., *Aisikoko Ekbara Oghe Edo (A Collection of Edo Poems)* (Abuja: National Council for Arts and Culture, 1997); Evbinma, O., *Kokoye* (Benin: PAG-AD Print, 1976)

⁴ Usuanlele, "Children's Masquerade," 77.

⁵ The only known documentation is Jacob U. Egharevba, *Benin Games and Sports* (Sapele: Central Press, 1951) and, recently, a few videos of Edo children's rhymes.

neighborhood. Children in Benin now see only their nuclear families, siblings, and biological parents, whereas the tradition in the ancient Benin kingdom was different.⁶ Moreover, ancestor and Olokun worship are no longer as common as they used to be in either the city or the rural areas of the Benin kingdom. At one time, it could be asserted that every household had an Olokun shrine as pointed out by artist Norma Rosen and anthropologist Joseph Nevadomsky.⁷ The absence of ancestor and Olokun altars today could be, according to a local Benin historian, Ekhuagosa Aisien, “a result of the quiet fading away of ‘ancestor-worship’ in the land as most Edos are becoming Christians.”⁸ Thus, childhood pastime activities in the Benin kingdom today are a far cry from what they were in the past. In addition, most elders – Christian parents in particular - have relegated such childhood rituals as Akobie to old ways and traditional religion, discarding them. Most children in the Benin kingdom, as well as in other African societies, have been indoctrinated against African traditional religion,⁹ and a discussion with a group of children at Ugoneki town reinforced this, revealing that some of them interpreted certain traditional activities as idolatrous.¹⁰ Thus, the need to study and document the remembered aspects of African childhood ritual is ever more urgent.

⁶ For a description of Benin village life see R.E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, ed. Peter Morton-Williams (London: International African Institute, 1973) 149-209

⁷ Joseph Nevadomsky, “Religious Symbolism in the Benin Kingdom,” in *Divine Inspiration from Benin to Bahia*, ed. Phyllis Galembo (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993) 19-32 and Norma Rosen, “The Art of Edo Ritual,” in *Divine Inspiration from Benin to Bahia*, ed. Phyllis Galembo (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993) 33.

⁸ E. Aisien, *Christianity and Edo State: Impact of Christianity on Our Culture in Edo State* (Benin City: Aisien Publishers, 2002) 22.

⁹ A. Boakye-Boaten, “Changes in the Concept of Childhood: Implications on Children in Ghana” in *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi: The Journal of International Social Research* 3,10 (Winter 2010) 104-115. Accessed on November 9, 2016.

¹⁰ B. O. J. Omotseye and K. O. Emeriewen, “An Appraisal of Religious Art and Symbolic Belief in the Traditional African Context,” *African Research Review: An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal*, *Ethiopia*, 4, 2 (April, 2010) 529-544, accessed April 13, 2016, www.afrevjo.com. During this study, the children I discussed with and observed taking part in afternoon pastime activities did not render any traditional song that praised an ancestor or deity such as Olokun. Nor did they mold figurines such as Akobie. Instead they used toys. Some of them said that offering libations to inanimate objects was tantamount to idol worship

Fig. 1: A Group of Children Engaging in Modern Pastime Activities



Source: Ugoneki Town, Benin kingdom. These children are engaged in pastime activities, but without any figurine representing an ancestor or Olokun. Photo by Ekhaton Osaisonor Godfrey, 28th May, 2016

It is with this in mind that the childhood cultural ritual *Akobię*, a creative art form that entails an imitation performance of religious rituals, is studied and documented in this essay. It involves the act of mimicking adults and family life. As an activity, *Akobię* differs from *Ibota*, a combination of moonlight plays and storytelling that includes adults. Folklorist Dan Ben-Amos describes *Ibota* as “an evening relaxation (pastime) among family members, wherein age long nourished family and ethnic traditions are transmitted from generation to generation in ritual songs, proverbs, and narratives.”¹¹ However, *Akobię* is/was exclusively a childhood affair and adults have no role in it.

This study focuses on the phenomenon of *Akobię* as imitation of religious ritual and as creative art production and performance by children. It is, therefore, the view of this article, that *Akobię* was part of the traditional education and socialization that children underwent in pre-colonial and colonial Benin. In the absence of any written documentation on *Akobię*, this study relied on oral interviews to trace its origins, document the practices, and establish its functions in Benin children’s lives. The article is divided into five sections; the first section is the introduction. The second section examines the place and value of children in Benin culture. This is followed by a discussion of the origin and meaning of *Akobię*, and a description of its creative production and performance. The fourth section shows the significance of *Akobię* as an aspect of socialization and education, and the final section is the conclusion. The fulcrum of this paper is the interaction between African cultural practices, childhood, and indigenous education.

¹¹ Dan Ben-Amos, *Sweet Words*, 21.

CHILDREN IN BENIN CULTURE

The Benin (Bini)¹² people are one of the eleven¹³ Edo-speaking people of the Kwa group of the Niger-Congo language family. The Benin people founded the Benin Empire with its capital at Benin City. The boundaries of the pre-colonial empire were fluid and, west to east, stretched from parts of eastern Yorubaland to western Igboland on the banks of the River Niger. North to south, it spanned the Northern Edo territories of the Kukuruku hills to the Atlantic coast and the western Niger Delta in the South and Southeast. This territory was under the authority of the Oba of Benin until 1897.

The Benin kingdom is an archetypal example of an ancient African empire, kingdom, and state.¹⁴ Benin City, a center coterminous with the Benin kingdom, is known by the name Edo. The people of Benin speak a language called Edo locally, Benin by other Nigerians, which is the language of the city and kingdom.¹⁵ The people who speak the Edo dialect of the capital-Benin City currently occupy the seven Local Government Areas in Edo Southern Senatorial District of Edo State, Nigeria.¹⁶

Among the people of Nigeria, and Africans in general, procreation is critical to family union – whether the nuclear or the extended family. According to Ugandan philosopher P. Kaboha, “bearing children (or having them) was seen as a special blessing of God. Conversely,

¹² The word or name ‘Bini’ has been put into disuse through a press release from the palace of the Oba of Benin, Ref. No: BTC.A66/VOL.IV.262 dated 28th August, 2006, by the Benin Traditional Council.

¹³ R.E. Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria* (London: International African Institute, 1970), 14. The people that speak Edo Languages are Benin, Ishan, Ivbiesakon, Akoko, Owan, Isoko, and Urhobo people. These made up the former Midwest Region (old Bendel State of Nigeria).

¹⁴ Stride and Ifeka described and discussed this great empire at the peak of its golden age c.1450-1550 AD in historical perspective in G.T. Stride and C. Ifeka, *Peoples and Empires of West Africa: West Africa in History 1000-1800AD* (Lagos: Thomas Nelson (Nig) Ltd, 1971), 306. Also, Bradbury (1970 and 1973) through his ethnographic studies has given a vivid picture of the Benin kingdom with a specific focus on the socio-cultural and political organization and structure before 1897. Furthermore, Benin according to Igbafe has three definitions, namely the Benin Empire, Benin Kingdom and Benin City. Igbafe has dutifully analyzed the basic economic and political development that characterized Benin City (the core of the Kingdom) during the colonial era, that is, after 1897 see Philip A. Igbafe, Preface to *Benin under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom 1897-1938* (London, Longman Group Limited, 1979) xi. These authors thus studied Benin in all three facets – as an Empire, a Kingdom and City.

¹⁵ Bradbury, *Benin Kingdom*, 14.

¹⁶ Ivie Uwa-Igbinoba, *Aspects of Edo Greetings: Uniqueness and Significance* (Benin City: Ivie Cultural Organisation, 2014).

miscarriage was seen as a curse and deliberate abortion was an abomination unknown.”¹⁷ In the Benin kingdom, the family is an important socio-political unit. Family structure in Benin can be broadly categorized into two: “the nuclear or compound family, led by the father (*erha*); the other is the extended family, led by the family head (*Okaegbe*).”¹⁸ The genesis of each family is the union between a man and woman/women (as husband and wife/wives). Benin people are patrilineal in the kinship, succession, and hereditary systems. Hence, the children from every family/union, either nuclear or extended, were important for the continuity of the family lineage.¹⁹ The Benin people, therefore, attached great importance to child bearing and upbringing. At the levels of family unit, community/village and in Benin at large, just as Basden found among the neighboring Igbo, children were invaluable, “priceless possessions and no man can have too many; the more he has the more he was respected and envied by all.”

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The high value attached to children is best expressed in the following Edo philosophical sayings which are also used as personal names:

Ọmọ ọ rẹ ya buu ogbẹ nẹ ẹ de (a child is the foundation of the family that never falls)

Ọmọ ọ rẹ ẹgbẹ (a child is the family)

Ọmọ a ya khin ẹ ẹkpẹn nẹ de (a child makes one the invincible Leopard)

Ọmọ ọ sẹ ẹfe (a child is more than wealth)

Ọmọ ọ sẹ igbo (a child is superior to money)

Ọmọ a ya hin usi (a child is the cause of affluence)

Ọmọ ọ rẹ isi ẹfe (The child is the source of wealth)

Ai ghi yi igbo de ọmọ, ẹse ọhẹ nọ obo osa ọ kere (You do not buy a child with money; it is a free gift from God)²¹

¹⁷ P. Kaboha, “African Metaphysical Heritage and Contemporary Life: A Study of African Contributions to Contemporary Life,” *The foundations of social life: Ugandan philosophical studies, I* (1992): 55-64. [Http://www.crvp.org/publications/Series-II/2-Contents.pdf](http://www.crvp.org/publications/Series-II/2-Contents.pdf), accessed 04 January, 2014.

¹⁸ O. G. Ekhaton, “A History of Ugoniyekikpoba Chiefdom up to 2000AD” (MA thesis, University of Ibadan, 2013) 35.

¹⁹ Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, 213-250.

²⁰ G.T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (Lagos: University Publishing Co., 1983) 64

²¹ Ivie Erhahon, *Edo Proverbs and figures of Speech* (Benin City: Uniben Press, 1998) 82

It is no surprise, then, that the Benin people say that *Ovbokha I maa, ne ẹ mweẹ ọre yaẹ re rẹre* meaning “to refer to any child as a ‘bad child’ is a deception in the eyes of the childless”²² According to Bradbury, “To die childless . . . , is the most dreaded fate, and when one asks: why do you want many children? The reply is often: ‘so that they may bury me well.’”²³ Most often children were nurtured with love and discipline by all the older members of a family and community. If a child was in danger in the absence of his/her parents, any adult around ran to the rescue, because Benin people believe that *Omọ ọ ghe agbọn hia ẹre nọ* meaning “every child belongs to everyone in the community.”

The children were regarded as the future of the society and this was expressed in the maxim *Okherẹ ọ khiẹn Ologan* meaning “the small palm sapling becomes the tall palm tree.” As a result, they were educated in valuable skills and socialized into the social values and norms of the society. The education and socialization of children in Benin was largely informal. It took the form of encouraging the children’s observation and participation in most activities. In this way, the children were involved in a process of learning by doing.

Benin people are a very religious people whose homes were abodes of numerous altars erected to deities and ancestors requiring regular ritual activity. Children were born and raised in this religious ritual environment. The children took part as observers, helpers, and producers during religious ceremonies and participated in the important role of saying *Ise* meaning “Amen” and providing a chorus to the prayers, chants, music (playing instruments, clapping, singing and dancing) as well as partaking of the ritual meals served at the altars. One frequent religious ritual that children participated in was *Erinmwin-Erha* and *Erinmwin-Iye* ancestral worship of deceased father and deceased mother and occasional *Eho* - annual festival of family ancestor worship.

Erinmwin-Erha ritual is the regular offering of sacrifice occasioned by birth, marriage, sickness, or quarrels requiring atonement/cleansing of taboos at the *Aro-erha* (father’s altar). *Eho* is an annual festival of sacrifice to the ancestors. Ake Norborg described *Eho* as “an annual festival at which all the patrilineal descendants of *erha* and their wives kneel one-by-one before the altar, present kola nuts and other offerings, and pray for their well-being and that of their

²² Erhahon, *Edo Proverbs*, 227.

²³ Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, 213.

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families.”²⁴ In Benin, every family member had to visit the *Igiogbe* -lineage homestead annually for a festival of collective worship and to pay homage to a “common ancestors for common purpose.”²⁵ The worship of Olokun -divinity of prosperity, health and child bearing should be included as it also entailed feasting, music, and children’s participation. Olokun is believed by the Benin people to mean “owner of the ocean.” According to Nevadomsky “the ocean’s beneficial qualities provide a host of symbols of prosperity, happiness and fertility.”²⁶

After observing and participating in these ritual and festivals, it was not unusual for the children to organize and engage in the imitation of the rituals they had seen performed by adults. This pastime performance was called Akobię. It could be asserted that this performance was one of the reasons children were not initiated into ritual cults in the Benin kingdom, because in their innocence, they might reveal religious secrets. The Benin people also believe that *Ovbokhan ę ta ohoghe* “children do not tell lies.” Or a euphemism for children cannot keep secrets. Hence, children were not initiated into *Ovia*, *Okhuaihe Ebomisi*, or other religious organizations until they were teen-agers because they might, in their innocence, reveal restricted knowledge.

ORIGIN AND MEANING OF AKOBIĘ

The term “Akobię” has three uses highlighted in this article. It is the name of a figurine, a symbolic expression of being raised together, and a description of childhood ritual. According to the *Encyclopedia of Edo Culture*, “Akobię is an idol in human shape built of mud to attract many children to a home.”²⁷ Melzian defined “Akobię” as “an idol in human shape built of mud for children in the women’s apartment, who also offer sacrifice to Akobię and dance.”²⁸ Akobię is also described as a figurine(s) molded by or to attract the children in a neighborhood. This might be found in a corner of the women’s apartment where children often stay and store their figurines after recreational performance. Akobię is also a description of childhood ritual

²⁴ Ake Norborg, *The Musical Instruments of The Edo Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria* (Stockholm: Jesperen Offset APC, 1992) 16.

²⁵ Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, 227; Rebecca Agheyisi, *An Edo-English Dictionary* (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 1986) 25; and P.M. Ayeni, A. Akanigha, and A.J. Uwaifo. (eds.), *Festivals of Bendel State, Nigeria* (Benin City, Ministry of Home Affairs and Information, 1975) 45.

²⁶ Nevadomsky, *Religious Symbolism in the Benin Kingdom*, 24

²⁷ L.O. Enobakhare, *Encyclopaedia of Edo Culture* (Benin City: Edorodion Ventures, 2008) 12.

²⁸ Hans Melzian, *A Concise Dictionary of the Bini Language of Southern Nigeria*. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd, 1937) 6.

performance imitating ancestor worship. This is why the elders refer to it as “the beginning of imitation by children.”²⁹ Literally, “akobię” means “we were born and raised together.”³⁰ Akobie is more of an abbreviation for the idea *a ko bię ọmọ*, meaning literally “we collectively bear a child” but more a way that a child is born and raised not only by the biological parents, but by all parents in the community. This is expressed in the Benin maxims *orhiọn ọkpa ghi bię ọmọ* (one person does not bear and raise a child) and *akobię ima hia*, (we were born and raised together).

Fig. 2: An Akobię Figurine



Source: Freshly (still wet) molded Akobię from mud (laterite) and decorated with cowries to signify wealth by Madam Ikhuoedo Margaret at Ugoneki town, Benin kingdom. Photo by Ekheorutomwen Gabriel, 7th October, 2016

²⁹ Chief Osayomwabo Osemwegie Ero, the *Edobayoghae* of Benin Kingdom. Personal interview with the author in his residence at Uwasota Road, Egor LGA, Edo State, 28th November, 2013.

³⁰ Pa Felix Aighimien, a farmer about 78years old, Personal interview with the author in his residence at Evbuarue village, 23rd November, 2013.

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To understand the definitions of “akobie,” it is necessary to look at its history. The origin of the ritual practice called Akobie in Benin can be traced to Ababa. This childhood pastime probably started long ago during the reign of the Ogiso kings. Ababa was an intentional activity or performance imitating reality and conceived with metaphysical ideas. The little that is known about Ababa is derived from a Benin folktale.

According to the legend, “there was once an orphan, a young and beautiful damsel in Igodomigodo (Benin kingdom), called Ababa. She had a brass necklace (*ivie eronmwon*) that could not be removed from her neck. So it happened that the only child of the King (Ogiso) took ill. When they consulted an oracle, the gods requested that a brass necklace be placed on the child’s neck. The only available necklace in the domain at that moment was on Ababa’s neck and to get it she would have to be killed. Ababa agreed to lay down her life, but requested that all the children born in the land remember her annually. The king agreed. After the king’s child recovered, the promise made to Ababa was neglected and forgotten. Later, many children took ill in the land and the oracle revealed that Ababa’s *Ehi* (guardian spirit) was angry. To appease Ababa’s *Ehi* and avert the evil it had brought on the community, children were gathered together to perform a feast in honor of Ababa.”³¹ This veneration known as Eho or Ema Ababa was performed by children during playtime in the afternoon.

Akobie was a representation of the beautiful Ababa who had been sacrificed to save the child of the king. Children made this figurine for their Eho Ababa in the likeness of images found in their parents’ ancestor altars or Olokun shrines. This children’s figurine and its festival became attributed to childhood “afternoon playtime” activities. So, it was in remembrance of Ababa that children often came together, organized, and imitated the performance of cultural activities called Akobie in Benin.

AKOBIE: A CHILDHOOD RITUAL PERFORMANCE

As a result of close observation and participation in ancestor and deity worship, children created their own shrines or altars for the imitation of different rituals during their afternoon playtime. They created a raised dais against a wall and placed on it some sticks to represent the *ukhure* -rattle staves representing departed ancestors). They prepared food as did their parents, and offered it to Akobie. Also they sculpted images resembling the figurines that adorned their

³¹ Pa Ekhaton Joseph Obogie, a farmer about 65years old, Personal interview by the author in his residence at Ugoneki village, 28 November, 2013.

parents' shrines. This activity (Akobię ritual) was performed by children in a neighborhood who came together after completing their afternoon chores or while their parents were at the farm. The children started this ritual by organizing themselves into different groups depending on the role a child played. They gathered as did the elders, chanted incantations, made propitiations, sang and danced. In all this, they were imitating or mimicking their parents. Thus Akobię emerges as an imitation of ancestral rituals and veneration of deities in the Benin kingdom.

Akobię starts with the creation of an altar adorned with figures molded by as many children who possessed the ability to sculpt nice, strong images. The Akobię are human figurines, either male or female, molded of red mud (laterite) by children and left outside to dry in the sun. Apart from creating the shrine, they constructed tiny mud houses roofed with cocoyam leaves, used because of their conical shape when upside down. Just as the shrines were painted with white chalk or mud mixed with water, the houses constructed by the children were painted, if properly dried. This was affirmed by Pa Aighimien, who stated "when we were children, we would build mud houses, which served as alternative cover for the Akobię and kept them around the women's *Eghodo* –courtyard in the house" ³²

Children, irrespective of their sex, within a particular age grade (1-7years known as *Omọ Orhue* and 7-14years known as *Evbo rhe evbo* or *Evbin rho Oba evbo*) came together and contributed food items for cooking. Most of these food items--palm oil, yam, cassava flour, and spices were collected from their respective homes with or without the consent of their parents. These food stuffs were not collected from the main food bank in the home, but from leftover or used items. Where edible vegetables were not available, any leaves of choice from the surrounding bush or garden were sliced and used with snails that were foraged from the bush to serve as meat. In addition cut off yam parts were prepared, the children using broken pieces of pots and pounding on any cup-like object with a carved stick as the pestle. Some Benin elites did give their children the real food items and meat (mostly goat) for Akobię play.³³ When the food was ready, the children served it to the figurines as sacrifice in imitation of ritual sacrifice of food

³² Pa Felix Aighimien, 23rd November, 2013.

³³ Bokisso N Throne News "Princess Mrs. Elizabeth Olowu in her own words" Saturday, June 13, 2009. <https://bokissonthrone.blogspot.ca/2009/06/elizabeth-olowu-in-her-own.html> - Viewed 25th August 2016

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to deities. The prepared food was not eaten by the children, but they imitated the eating of food and drinking of wine as was done during Eho festival.

Fig. 3: An Akobiẹ with Rattle Sticks Imitating a Shrine for Ancestor Worship



Source: Akobiẹ molded by Madam Ikhuoedo Margaret at Ugoneki town, Benin kingdom. Photo by Gabriel Ekheorutomwen, 7th October, 2016.

Before performing the mock rituals and sharing the food, each group leader would stand in the position of the *erha* (father), *oikaigbe* (family head), or *ohen* (chief priest), to take the lead in performing the ritual of venerating the ancestor deities by offering them food. They offered prayers for themselves, as children, their parents, and the community, while others responded saying, “Isẹ (Amen).”³⁴ Pa Aghimien added that after the food had been prepared and offered at the altar to the Akobiẹ as ancestors, the female children would take a ration and feed the Akobiẹ, which they carry as their babies. These would be accompanied by praises sung to the Akobiẹ:

Akobiẹ mwe, oyoo doo (Praise my Akobiẹ)

Ta Akobiẹ ima ya, oyoo doo (Praise, we were born and raised by all)

³⁴ Pa Felix Aghimien, 23rd November, 2013.

*Akobie nu yuwa giomwa (Akobie come and bring us prosperity)*³⁵

The song would also be accompanied by dancing and playing of musical instruments brought from their homes. The most important of these instruments were the *Ema Olokun* or *Ema Ogun* -small wooden drums with skin cover, *Ukuse* -gourd rattles, *Egogo*- metal gong and *Eroro* - brass clapper bells and *Elubase* (a rattling armband worn mostly by children).³⁶ Some of these instruments used by the children would be constructed and improvised if a child was not permitted to take a particular instrument from home. Playing these musical instruments requires some skill, and those children able to produce the most rhythmic sounds, like adults, were envied by all for their dexterity.³⁷

Akobie was viewed by parents as a childhood pastime that promoted group activities and created a sense of belonging in children. Therefore, when children were seen gathering and preparing to mimic the elders, it was said that they were celebrating an imitation feast - *wa* or *ihan khian ko* or *ku Akobie* meaning you are about to celebrate Akobie.³⁸ When children performed the ritual as a pastime activity, it was said that *wa gha ko Akobie* (you are installing or instituting “Akobie, just as elders do for the *erha* ancestor”).³⁹ Since this was imitation and not real ancestor worship, the Benin people describe the entire activity as Akobie, as a make-believe form of worship or festival.

³⁵ Pa Felix Aighimien, 23rd November, 2013

³⁶Norborg, *The Musical Instruments of The Edo*, 160-161.

³⁷ There is a folk story in Benin kingdom about the king's skilled drummer (*Okpokhae n' mwe Oba*) and the little child that observed his drumming for the monarch during royal festivals. The drummer sent a message to the king that he was dead because he sought to prove his importance to the kingdom since no other person could drum like him. When it became time for the Oba to perform his annual royal festival, the child who had often stood beside him to observe him drumming picked up the drums and performed better than the great drummer. This shows that children can learn by observation and imitation to become greater than the adults they mimic.

³⁸ Veronica Ohen Olokun Uhunagho, traditional physician and priestess about 70years old. Personal interview with author in her residence at Okha Village (Okha IV Upper Sokponba Road), 21st November, 2013.

³⁹ Mr Isaac Ozigue Ekhaton, a farmer about 55years old. Personal interview with author in his residence at Evbuarue village, 23rd November, 2013

Fig. 4: An AkobiẸ that has been used for Children’s Pastime. The Sacrifice offered by the Children can be seen in front of the Figurine



Source: AkobiẸ molded by Madam Ikhuoedo Margaret at Ugoneki town, Benin kingdom. Photo by Gabriel Ekheorutomwen, 7 October, 2016

AkobiẸ was not equivalent to the traditional ancestor worship or propitiation for which Benin people are renowned. It was neither a prototype nor a real religious act. It was a role play performance that imitated traditional ancestor ritual and was attractive to children.⁴⁰ This childhood activity was important to the elders who sought to determine the children with exceptional leadership qualities and creative skill who could preserve family traditions or craft skills in the case of guilds. This was expressed in an adage(*agha k’akobie, ere a na rhen omo no gha ru ne erha ru ne iye*⁴¹ meaning when AkobiẸ is being performed that is when you know

⁴⁰ Ohen Olokun Veronica Uhunagho, 21st November, 2013

⁴¹ Mr Isaac Ozigue Ekhaton, 23rd November, 2013

the child who will venerate his or her ancestors. Thus, in Benin, it is said that “it was at childhood, that Akobie was instituted” (*agha rh’ovbokhan e na k’akobie*).⁴²

It is important to note that though elders in the Benin kingdom allowed children to play and perform Akobie (ancestor and Olokun) worship in pre-colonial and colonial times, children were not allowed to imitate all ritual practices. For instance, children were not allowed to mimic rituals involving rites of passage (burial ceremonies), imitate activities of cult initiation, or widowhood rites. If they tried to imitate such adult ritual practices, they were immediately reprimanded and sent home or reported to their parents.

AKOBIE: A COMMON CHILDHOOD IMITATION OF OLOKUN RITUALS

Olokun in Benin cosmology is one of the children (a son) of *Osanobua* -the Supreme Being, creator of the universe who is blessed with the greatest of riches, and children are a major component of this. Olokun is the god of wealth, who dwells in the sea or ocean and is responsible for all forms of fertility and prosperity in the land.⁴³ The connection between Olokun and Akobie is children, and children are central to Olokun worship because the Benin people regard children as the greatest form of wealth. The primacy of children in the eyes of Benin parents is reflected in the dictum and names *Ọmọ ọ re efe* - child is wealth and *Ọmọ ọ sẹ efe* meaning a child is greater than wealth. Bradbury confirms the importance of children to Olokun worship, saying:

Olokun ... is “the bringer of children.” This is consistent with the Edo conception of the universe. They envisage the land as being surrounded by water into which all rivers flow. The path to *erivi* (sic) lies through or across this water and it is the way that human souls pass on their way to be born or after death. Olokun is worshipped as a “god of wealth.”⁴⁴

The classic prayer during Olokun worship expresses the desire of the people not to lose their children, since this is comparable to losing wealth:

⁴² Mr Isaac Ozigue Ekhaton, 23rd November, 2013

⁴³ J.U. Egharevba, *Some Stories of Ancient Benin* (Benin City: Fortune and Temperance Publishers, 1951) 195; and Ekhaton, *History of Ugoniyekikpoba*, 23.

⁴⁴ Bradbury, *Benin Kingdom*, 53.

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Omọ ghi wu Aza - knife-blade handle iron clapper bell, do not lose a child

Omọ ghi wu Eroro -conical shaped iron clapper bell, do not lose a child

Olokun ghẹ gie omọ wu mwẹn -Olokun do not let me lose a child.⁴⁵

The worshippers, who hold Olokun in awe, appeal to Olokun to protect their children, while they render supplication to this great giver of wealth. Children were committed to him for protection, since he is the giver of children, but he could also take them at will. Thus, Olokun was not like any other deity with regard to prosperity or good fortune and affluence. When offerings were made to Olokun, an earthenware pot containing water and white chalk powder, rolls of chalk, cowries, miniature Ada -swords and Eḅen-scimitars (symbols of royal authority in Edo culture), kola nuts and coconuts were used.⁴⁶

Because of the conceptual relationship between Olokun and children in Benin cosmology, children were allowed to mimic Olokun worship. Imitation of Olokun ritual was very common during pastime play because the Olokun image could be likened to Akobie. Children raised in homes where Olokun was worshipped were believed to be better at the activities of Akobie because they got more involved in this practice both in molding the Olokun figurines, and in performing the songs and dances for Olokun worship. The children would position the Akobie on altars/shrines to represent the Olokun deity. The shrine and the figurines were all painted with native white chalk mixed with water. During the pastime, the boys acted as drummers or elders and the girls played the roles of Olokun priestesses. Some also played the roles of devotees, who sought special favors through their propitiation of this divinity of the sea, fertility, and wealth. One of the songs sung to accompany the imitation Olokun ritual performance was:

Olokun ẹ oo

Olokun oyọọ

Akobie omọ nọ yuwa rre

Translation:

⁴⁵ Norma Rosen, "Traditional Uses of Pattern and Decoration in Olokun Worship," *A New Dimension in Benin Studies: Nigerian Review of Arts, Culture and History* 1, 3, ed. Omoruyi Aghama (Benin City: Cultural Publications, 1986) 36; Norborg, *The Musical Instruments of The Edo Speaking Peoples*, 29-33 and 133-136.

⁴⁶ National Archives, Ibadan, File BP 4/3/4, Intelligence Report, Benin Division, p. 113.

Olokun (exclamation)

Praise *Olokun*

A child is raised by all to bring prosperity

Children also mimicked Olokun devotees. According to Madam Ayemien, some made figurines (*Akobie*), both in male and female form; others played the roles of Olokun priest or priestess, *Obo iro* -a diviner of human affairs⁴⁷ or traditional birth attendant. Some female children would perform the ritual by carrying the effigy on their stomach like pregnant women while they rendered some incantations and offered sacrifices or prayers. They would then carry the image on their backs like a baby and repeat the same or other incantations and prayers. However, the most important aspect of this *Akobie* childhood ritual, as stated by Madam Ayemien, was that they imitated nursing mothers, who had prayed during conception that they would deliver their children safely and carry them on their backs. She recalled a song sung by the women devotees of Olokun while she played and performed the imitation religious ritual performance. This song,

Akobie mwe, akobie omọ ooo -My *Akobie*, a child is raised together

Akobie omọ, omọ na ya ku ooo -A child is raised together, a child that is used to play

Omọ zẹ gha ri egie -Having a child makes a parent a dignified personality

Omọ na ya mu uwa ren -It is with a child that one starts prosperity

Akobie mwe, Akobie mwe ooo eee -My *Akobie*, my *Akobie* !!!

Iyeke na ya mu omo vbovbo ooo iyeke eee- It is the back that is used to back a child

Akobie mwe eee- My *Akobie*!!!

Iyeke na ya mu omọ vbovbo ooo iyeke eee-It is the back that is used to back a child

Akobie mwe eee -My *Akobie*!!!

Iyeke na ya mu Omọ vbovbo ooo iyeke eee-It is the back that is used to back a child⁴⁸

This childhood play imitating Olokun ritual teaches the older children to take responsibility for their younger siblings. They imitate parental roles and begin to live up to it in their daily lives.

⁴⁷ Ogie Evinma, *Edo Culture* 1 (Lagos: University of Lagos, 1974) 46.

⁴⁸ Madam Ayemien ne ovbie Ekho N'Iduolu, about 89yearsold. Personal interview with the author in her residence at Avbiamia Town, 16th November, 2013.

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Female children used this medium to win the attention and affinity of infants who were delighted to be carried on the back and danced with by the older children when others sang the song. After playtime, the children would leave their figurines at the women's apartment court (*ekhodo*), where they were kept.

AKOBIẸ: SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILDHOOD SOCIALIZATION

There are two modes of participation in AkobiẸ ritual for children: imitating adult behavior and role playing. Imitation in the AkobiẸ ritual involved intentionally copying adults in a manner either to entertain peers or in “anticipation of the status occupied by the adult being mimicked.”⁴⁹ J.O. Ajayi and B. Owumi have described “imitation” as “the conscious and unconscious, spontaneous or deliberate, perceptual or ideational act of copying an individual by another and as main factor in the process of socialization of the child.”⁵⁰ Similarly, A.N. Meltzoff describes imitation as a “direct and efficient means for the young to pick up the acquired skills and behavior patterns of the adults in their group.”⁵¹ Role play during AkobiẸ was the performance of the functions assigned or delegated, or it could have been the assumption of the most admired character (parental role) by a confident child or the employment of a skill by one as singer, hunter, or drummer. Through these activities, socialization was independently organized in Benin kingdom by the children.

AkobiẸ as an imitation of *ehọ/erha* (ancestor) and Olokun worship can be viewed as part of informal education among the Benin people that taught children traditional values of fraternal care, team work, and collective responsibility. In the performance of AkobiẸ, the children chose roles for themselves or their roles were sometimes assigned by older children. They “became” grandparents, fathers, mothers, priests, priestesses, diviners, children, servants and so on. It was not unusual for the children to imitate adult arguments, quarrels and jokes during this role play. By ascribing roles to themselves and acting them out, they were able to practice parent

⁴⁹ J.O. Ajayi and B. Owumi, “Socialisation and Child Rearing Practices Among Nigerian Ethnic Groups,” *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2, 2 (July 2103) 252. Accessed online on November 9, 2016.

⁵⁰ Ajayi and Owumi, “Socialisation and Child Rearing Practices,” 250-251. Accessed online on November 9, 2016.

⁵¹ A.N. Meltzoff, “Imitation, Objects, Tools, and the Rudiments of Language in Human Ontogeny,” *Human Evolution* 3,1-2 (February 1, 1988) 45-64. Accessed on November 5, 2016: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>

and child care skills observed in their homes. Such experiential learning fostered the acquisition of skills and inculcated positive values.

The sculpting of figurines, engaging in foraging/hunting, cooking, constructing musical instruments, dancing, and singing were ways this culture developed the creative skills of individuals during childhood. Therefore, when children engaged in Akobie, they were engaged in learning creative aspects of their culture through performance. Some became experts and whenever it was time to play Akobie, they were identified and assigned those roles which no other could perform better. Younger children were also taught to imitate the older ones in whatever they were doing. In addition, adults who observed these performances were able to identify their capabilities and utilize them in actual ritual performances, particularly playing musical instruments and molding figurines known as *amaze* (sculpted human figures that are disposed of as ritual sacrifice). Thus, through the Akobie ritual, the child developed him/herself that he/she could be assigned responsibility within the household and community.

One of the focal points of Akobie was the ritual performance. The children learned from this how to venerate ancestral deities. This was an important stage in the socialization process of the child since every adult in Benin-Edo had to act as a priest/priestess to one deity or other at some point during his life. These deities included *Ehi* -personal spirit), *Uhumwunnamure* -head or seat of wisdom and luck, and *Erha/Iye* (ancestors). Not obligatory were divinities such as Olokun, Esu, Ogun, and others. Through participation in Akobie ritual, the children imbibed the essence of collective effort and knowledge of traditional cultural ritual practices. By the time a child reached adulthood, his/her knowledge of Akobie came in handy for the performance of and participation in traditional religious rituals.⁵²

A fascinating aspect of Akobie ritual as a process of socialization is the role playing where each child regards his/her own Akobie as a child, an ancestor (father or mother), or a figurine representing a deity like Olokun. The children form groups to play specific roles and take responsibility for sculpting, hunting, cooking, singing, and dancing. The Benin people believed in this childhood cultural practice because they understood that it engaged children and helped them learn and express parental love through taking on the roles of parents and partaking in child rearing. Different roles attracted children to participate, to pretend they were hunters or

⁵² E. Gable, "Beyond Belief," *Social Anthropology* 10, 1 (2002) 41-56.

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warriors, making bows and arrows from bamboo and palm fronds,⁵³ providing game – rodents and from surrounding bush – to prepare the meal they will use in their mock veneration.⁵⁴ According to R.M. Holmes, “in play, children acquire cultural values, skills, and abilities which are embedded in children’s everyday experience...”⁵⁵ This is shown in the children’s playing the roles of parents and group leaders, drawing on what they observe daily in their respective homes or communities. Parents who observed such creative performance encouraged their wards to learn and perfect their skills for the future, believing that their personal spirit or *ehi* had destined it in the spirit world (*erimwin*).

This childhood play was one of the first stages of indigenous education in Benin. Role play enabled children to acquire knowledge through engagement in practical activities undertaken repeatedly during the ritual. They learned to hew firewood, to forage and hunt, to prepare meals for different occasions, to do handicrafts like molding of clay or mud (sculpting) and dress-making, to sing, dance, and pray. Interactive play fostered team work and a sense of belonging, reinforcing the ideas of fraternal care and collective responsibility developed throughout their lives within the culture’s age grade system. During pastime activities, every child was expected to be actively involved in executing the task of his/her subgroup in preparation for Akobię. The males played the roles of fathers, brothers and sons, while the females acted as wives, sisters and daughters. It should be noted that there could be exceptional cases in who adopted a role depending on the charisma or assertiveness of a child. For instance, very charismatic female children might well take leading roles amidst their male counterparts.

Every society has its own way of transmitting cultural traditions from one generation to another.⁵⁶ In Benin, the involvement of children in traditional rituals, as observers and then as actors, imitating the ceremonies, helped prepare them for future roles and responsibilities. Thus, when performing the imitation worship in Akobię ritual, the children observed all

⁵³ H. Mills, “The Importance of Creative Art in Early Childhood Classroom,” *Texas Child Care Quarterly* 38, 1 (Summer 2014). Accessed on November 5, 2016: www.childcarequarterly.com.

⁵⁴ Chief Osayomwabo Osemwegie Ero, the *Edobayoghae* of Benin Kingdom. Personal interview in his residence at Uwasota Road, Egor LGA, Edo State, 28th November, 2013.

⁵⁵ R.M. Holmes, “Children’s Play and Culture,” *Scholarpedia* 8,6 (2013): 31016, accessed on November 9, 2016, www.scholarpedia.org.

⁵⁶ Singer et al., “Children’s Pastimes and Play,” 283-312.

traditional norms, values and avoided taboos. For instance, in the imitation of ancestor worship, the child recounts his or her genealogical praise names and rhymes. That the Benin people recognize the significance of the acquisition of cultural knowledge through Akobię is clear in the saying “It is when Akobię is being worshipped that one knows the child who will venerate the father/mother’s ancestor” (*Agha ru Akobię, e re a na ren omo no gha ru Erha/Iye*).

Conclusion

This is a straightforward ethnographic study of a disappearing cultural process of childhood learning. It examines the origin of Akobię as told by the Edo, and looks at Akobię as cultural performance that engages children as part of their traditional socialization. Christianity, urbanization, social media, TV, and exposure to new learning experiences are all in some way responsible for Akobię’s disappearing as a feature in Benin’s cultural practices of growing up as asserted on page 3. Akobię tends to be found mostly in rural areas today, though, there too, it is disappearing, though not as rapidly as in the more urban areas.

This study reveals that traditional cultural childhood pastimes were significant in early childhood education before the coming of formal school and structured learning in the Benin kingdom. It demonstrates the need for the documentation of pre-colonial childhood pastimes in Africa as a part of the emerging genre of childhood history in African studies. It focuses on Akobię ritual, a childhood pastime among the Benin people. The origin of Akobię is traced to the Ababa myth, and its development traced through the children’s creative performance imitating ancestor worship and Olokun rituals. It makes clear that ritual performances in the Benin kingdom were learned from childhood through observation, imitation, and re-creation of adult roles leading to the preservation of tradition and culture as well as skill acquisition. Finally, it demonstrates a need for further studies on the subject of other childhood rituals in Benin.

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