
Creativity in Traditional Healing and Music in Obudu: An Exploration of the History of Rituals in a Traditional Nigerian Polity

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Abstract

Ability to find remedies for ill health and anxieties caused by the drudgery of life is a feature of all human societies no matter the level of their cultural advancement. Living in their own world undisturbed until 1909 when Western civilization was introduced in the form of a military subjugation and imposition of colonial rule, the people of Obudu in modern Nigeria had not only tamed their environment but also fashioned appropriate remedies for their health problems. This, along with various forms of entertainment to sooth the pains of their anxieties. Health conditions like snake bites, fractures caused by whatever means, abscess, pneumonia and lodgement of bullets in human body among others, were easily cured. In the sphere of entertainment, apart from the different types of dances organized by young girls and boys, there were two special ones, Litung and Iquom isho. The former was essentially a meditative performance that led drummer and dancer to communicate with the supernatural world. Usually performed in the night with hardly, any spectators, it songs were soulful. With new additions, an entirely brand new Litung has been created for public entertainment. Structured and highly communicative both in drumming and dancing Iquom isho was and is usually performed as part of the funeral rites of former members or deceased senior members of society. These complexities in their life style were creative and ritualistic in content, which this paper hopes to explore.

Keywords: *Healing, Medication, Music, Native Doctors and Rituals*

Introduction

All through the ages, and in all human societies, no matter the level of cultural attainment, to stay alive is a very serious undertaking. Man has to struggle to meet his needs for food, clothing and shelter. He necessarily has to be healthy in order to more effectively meet these fundamental needs. In this drudgery of life, man also needs to lighten his soul with music and dancing.

Traditional healers popularly known as native doctors provided medical services. These native doctors were illiterate since they never attended any formal Western educational institution. They were of two types: the itinerant and the stationary. They met all the health needs of their communities, as it was very rare to see people travel far from their abodes to find cure of their sicknesses. They did treat cases ranging from infertility, bone fractures, abscess, epilepsy, and irregular periods to double pneumonia, retrieval of bullets and rheumatism.

Igegeh Apuh had acquired a reputation as an expert in the treatment of abscess and rheumatism. According to Ufanye Atimani Ugah, Igegeh's junior sister, Igegeh inherited his expertise from his father Ugah Apuh. Ugah Apuh was a great hunter.

Atimanu Ugah (2016) narrates that her father

Went on a hunter expedition during which he had an encounter with supernatural beings in which he proved his marksmanship. He was asked to demand anything. He replied that he be given knowledge of herbs to enable him cure his people of their various ailments.

Not only Igegeh was trained in this act of healing. His immediate senior brother, Akwoagiobe Apuh was also a native doctor, but he turned out an unsuccessful native doctor because his medications were not effective because of his disregard of the rules governing the charging of fees. He was over charging his patients.

Upon consultations, Igegeh would go into the bush and collect his medicinal herbs, some of which he would grind into a cream. The others he would put into a pot and boil. Before he puts the pot on fire, he would warn all present not to talk to him. Nor would he allow anybody to get near the fire. While the medication was on fire, the position of the firewoods would not be changed. On cooling, the medication would now be dispensed to patients along with the cream where necessary. The cream was intended to help the abscess concentrate at a point and burst (Ugah, 2016).

Agbebia Dominic Ushie (2016) narrates that

My father, Ushie Ukpoa fell sick. He tried all other medicine men including Igegeh's senior brother to no avail. My father thought he was going to die. He went to Igegeh as the last resort and he was cured to the joy of our family

Generally regarded as not too wise, yet Igegeh made no mistakes when it came to his medical practice. He kept strictly to the rules. Never taking anything above the stipulated fees and quantity of victuals given upon recovery of the patient (Aprih, 2016).

Veronica Ukpomel Akeh (2016) asserts that she became a native doctor very early in life. Akeh states that her mother Ungieundie Abunimye Akpetel was a well known native doctor. It is clear that her mother groomed her. Her range of practice is wide but seem mainly concentrated on female reproduction. Undikeye Felix Izama and his wife Awhuobiwom narrate that they consulted Ubung Christopher Iklaki, an orthodox medical practitioner after a miscarriage. Several months later the wife was still feeling stomach heat. The couple decided in December 2015 to consult Veronica Ukpomel Akeh (Undikeye & Izama, 2016)). The couple was given

three types of liquid medicines to be taken in the morning and evening, one other liquid to be used as eye drops, morning and evening, herbs to squeeze in water and drink morning and evening and some chewing sticks to use morning and evening. (*ibid*)

All these medicines have brought some relief barely two months after starting medication. According to the couple, their "eyes have cleared and the body heat has virtually disappeared" (Undikeye & Izama).

Undikeye & Izama (2016) affirm that late onset of pregnancy is one of the ailments that are easily taken care of by Veronica Ukpomel Akeh. Pointedly, Abaye F. Aweye was

almost driven away from her matrimonial home because she was not getting pregnant. A friend of hers advised her to go and see Veronica Ukpomel Adeh. She did and now is a mother. Grace Ikong was having similar problems in her own marriage. Ikong (2016) asserts

I am here (to see mama) because my stepmother brought me. I being the fourth to be brought here. The first now has three children. I want to have my own children.

The native doctor makes it clear to her patients that her own duty ends with her preparation of the medications and giving directives and that it is God that cures (Adeh, 2016).

Dorathy Akaashe (2016), a housewife in Kakum village recalls that she has collected medication from

Mama before. She delivered four of my seven children. Whenever I saw signs of miscarriage I ran to her and got medication until I delivered. I am happy I know Mama.

For Dorathy Adie, a different circumstance brought her to Veronica Ukpomel Adeh. According to her, she came to the native doctor because of a prolonged period which treatment at a hospital could not stop. Not long after she started taking medication from “mama”, the period not only stopped but also “I do not know how it entered the stomach (I am now pregnant)” (Dorathy Adie, 2016).

Awhuobiwom Juliet Adie, a housewife in Igwo village experienced long intervals between her periods. She had gone to hospital to solve the problem to no avail. The native doctor gave her medication and not long after she got pregnant and the child of that pregnancy – a boy is four years old. Since 2012, her periods have been regular (A. J. Adie, 2016). For Janet Nchor (2016), an Ukpirinyi, Utugrquang housewife, the stoppage of her periods four years after her second son was something she could not believe. The more so after her several visits to the hospitals. Her friends encouraged her to go to the native doctor at Kakum, which advice she accepted and came in August 2015 and consulted Veronica Ukpomel Adeh. According to her, she is now happy because she “now has regular periods” (Nchor 2016). Apparently the medication of the native doctor is working.

Veronica Ukpomel Adeh’s medical expertise is not limited to female fertility and reproduction. She often cures epilepsy too. Mary Akashieah (2016), a housewife in Kakum village narrates that “I came to see Mama because my daughter was falling (epilepsy). She became well after three years of taking mama’s medication. She is now married to a man in Abonlikwu and is going to school”. Udie Ugbe (2016), a native of Bedialikwu Clan, Bedia, recalls

I took one of the sons of Agoye Ukpanmkpong – a nephew – to mama because he was falling down (epilepsy). He took medication for fourteen days and returned to Lagos with some quantity of the medication. It is now about six months and I have not heard any bad news.

It will appear that the native doctor’s medication has cured the son of his ill health.

Ukongyem Sylvia Adeh (2016) notes that people come from Abuja, Lagos and

Calabar “to see my mother”. The steady stream of visitors to the residence of Veronica Ukpomel Adeh will give a visitor an idea of how far her fame has spread. Abu Godwin Undiyaundeye (2016), a medical practitioner argues that he has not referred any patient to a native doctor, but desperate people can go to any length to get whatever they want. So it may well be that some of his patients, apparently unsatisfied with his own handling of their cases, find their way to the native doctor, in an effort to find solutions to their medical problems.

The ultimate source of the healing powers of Veronica Ukpomel Adeh is observe. What of the procedures? These are not complex as far as one could see. On the payment of consultation fee each patient is told items he or she would have to come along with on the next visit. Among these items is a pot. On the appointment day, the patient would provide the needed items and would watch the native doctor prepare and place the medicinal herbs in the pot. The patient would be given instructions on what foods are forbidden, how to cook the medication, cool and take it. Patients are not allowed to take orthodox medication. There is no uniformity in the fees that are charged, as fees are charged according to the type of ailment. Almost all the patients are women. Herbs, roots and barks of trees are the sources of Veronica Ukpomel Adeh’s medication.

Until their subjugation by British colonial forces in 1909, the people of Obudu had their major occupations: farming, hunting and tapping (Udida A. Undiyaundeye, 1982). More often than not, bone fractures were incurred in the course of their engagement in these occupations. There were and still are native doctors who specialize in bone setting, as the occupations of the people have not changed substantially. One of such notable bonesetters is Indobong Anthony Izabi, of Begiatsu village of Begiaka village area, Obudu. Izabi (2016) relates that:

My paternal grandmother was a renounced bonesetter. As a young child, she always sent me to the bush to get herbs for her to prepare her medications. Often she sent me to get one herb at a time and I would go, as many times as the number of herbs she needed. I never grumbled. She drew me closer and groomed me for ten years before she died.

My patients come from both far and near. I deal with not only bone fractures but also all forms of internal injuries and spinal cord matters. In fact, I treated three spinal cord patients from Bebuabie, Bebuagbong and Ukwotung villages (Izabi, 2016).

He narrates that one of the most successful cases he treated was a five days’ old child that sustained shoulder injuries during birth. The child’s fingers of the right hand were joined. He massaged the shoulder into their normal position and separated the fingers with a new razor blade. He went on to narrate that the patients of the child informed him that they were advised to go and seek solution to their baby’s problems at the native doctor’s place (Izabi, 2016). Since he has heard nothing about the child long after the parents return to Lagos, he assumes that all is well with the child.

Ikam Ukebegiang Ushie (2016), a carpenter, narrates that he fell from a rooftop in December 2015 and broke his right hand. He decided to come to this native doctor (Indobong A. Izabi) because he has heard about his skill in such matters. He does not regret that he came because he is getting well. Undiandeye Ukoto Undiandeye (2016) had a motor cycle accident

on July 19, 2015 and was taken to Obudu Clinic. After a few days at the clinic” I decided to leave because I preferred to be treated by a native doctor than undergoing the operation I was being prepared for. I am almost okay now and happy.

Agim Agba Agim (2016) a native of Betukwel village had a car accident in which he sustained a leg fracture. He was brought to Indobong Anthony Izabi and after sixteen days of treatment, he no longer uses clutches and is looking forward to his discharge soon. The case of Agim Igba Agim is very similar to that of Unwanung Ukoto Undiandeye. She was taken to a bonesetter in Bedia village when she had her own accident. She became dissatisfied with the treatment she was given and left to (Indobong Anthony Izabi) the native doctor in Begiatsu, Begiaka She too is almost cured(Undiandeye Ukoto Undiandeye, 2016).

Indobong Anthony Izabi also commands a steady stream of patients some of whom are treated and returned home daily. While others take up residence at the native doctor’s place for the duration of their treatment. They are responsible for their own upkeep. Bone massaging constitutes the main part of the treatment offered by Indobong Anthony Izabi. Often his aides help to pin down the patients during the massaging because of the struggles and wailings of patients. Hot water in which herbs had earlier been put is used during massaging to help dissolve any pool of blood or to prevent abscess. After the massaging, a cream prepared from herbs, roots and barks is rubbed on the affected area. As the condition of the fracture demands, the affected area, most often the leg, arm or hand is bandaged with two short sticks on either side of the part concerned. His grandmother used to tell her patients that she would deal with them in the night and that night the patients would groan until dawn (Udie Ugbe, 2016).

Agba Bewheah, a native of Begiatsu village of Begiaka was an expert in the treatment of abscess and rheumatism. He was an itinerant native doctor. On payment of the consultation fee and provision of other items, he would start treatment. The treatment was in the form of chewing some herbs and spitting them on the affected parts of the body. Fidelis Akunke Apuye (2016) narrates.

In 1959, I suffered rheumatism. I could hardly move my hands and right hand, so my parents sent me to him. He chewed some herbs and spat them on the legs and hand. Immediately I felt I was in hell, in severe excruciating pains. He did this until I was cured.

My parents handled the expenditure part of the matter. However, it is not known why Agba Bewheah did not groom and handed over to a successor as since his death, no member of his family is plying the trade. (Fidelis Akunke Apuye, 2016).

Alo Aweye was famous for the treatment of double pneumonia. Her former patient succinctly recalls.

I was suffering from severe double pneumonia and could not stand or walk erect. Therefore, my mother sent me to her with one penny and a fruit of alligator pepper. When she saw me, she asked me whether my mother gave me one penny and a fruit of alligator pepper for her. I agreed. She then went to the back of her house and came back with a leaf of *kakaabuowah* – a herb. (*ibid*)

Alo Aweye started preparing the medication. She the herb into seven pieces, took the fruit of the alligator pepper and picked seven seeds and warned that I should talk to her immediately she put the seeds of alligator pepper in her mouth. The seeds of alligator pepper were chewed and spat on the seven pieces of the herb. The medication was ready and treatment is about to begin. The treatment consisted of picking one after the other each of the pieces of the herb and touching the affected part and dropping it. The former patient narrates:

I was getting relieved as she was touched me with the pieces of the herb. By the time she touched me the seventh piece, I was completely relieved. As I walked home, I kept looking back wondering what miracle has been performed on me. (*ibid*)

Regrettably, this native doctor died with her expertise – refusing to groom and hand over the practice to any of her daughters. Her refusal apparently had something with the taboos associated with this practice - like absolute fidelity to one's husband - which taboos it is now impossible to observe because of the rampaging influences of Western civilization. Though a tip of an iceberg, the foregoing show clearly that Obudu people were able to deal with the medical problems of their day and lived their normal lives.

In the area of music, it is clear that certain types of dances like Iquong, Ayitaah and Iwali were introduced from outside what was Obudu Local Government Area before 1991 when new local government areas were created. Dances like Ugugah, igel, izih igbili and iquom ukwell have become extinct, leaving only iquom isho, litung and more recently, Angyo isom. Iquom isoh is both a society and a dance. It is not known precisely when iquom isho came into being. According to oral evidence, during the dispersal of Bette Bendi people by the Igenyi, Ugbazi was used to rally Bette people.

Iquom isho has four drums. The first is Kashib popularly referred to as katsukong literally meaning troublemaker – apparently because it is the one that initiates the playing and determines what tract to be danced. The second is a pair of drums called biitem. Biitem and kashib are beaten with sticks. Once kashib starts, biitem follow giving more intensity and variety to the music. Ugbazi finally joins as and it does so, the masquerade starts to dance in unison with its beating. Dexterity of the masquerade is shown when both the masquerade and ugbazi stop at the same time, to the applause of spectators. If they stop differently, spectators also express their disapproval, and blame the one at fault. Biitem would join in the praise. During the dancing, biitem broadcasts the proceedings to the surrounding villages and beyond. A masquerade dances two or more tracks in one outing and three or four masquerade can come in one outing. Depending on the type of ceremony being held, the masquerade would come out in three or seven outings.

Iquom isho usually gives befitting burial ceremonies to its members. It performs at special occasions that affect the whole community e.g. opening of a new school, road network or other such occasions. It is also used in the yearly blessing of cocoyams before they are eaten. A ceremony akin to the New Year festival. No matter the ceremony, the proceedings are started by a sort of group incantation in the form of songs and drumming from which non-members are barred. All the drums are 'talking drums' as each has a different communication to maintain.

Masquerades are dressed in a special way. They wear *adye* (sing *lidye*). Between the waist and below the knees is a wrapper held firmly in place by *Kutaah*. Between the ankles and the knees are *azuzooh* held in place by small strings and tied to the masquerades' legs

with strong strings. The masquerade holds in both hands *biizu* (cactus *alsa*) which is a symbol of purity and truth among Obudu people. There exist appropriate rules and regulations that govern every activity of Iquom *isho*. The breach of which attract ritual cleansing.

Litung or Litong was used principally for divination. One of its greatest drummers was Atiangbe Iwhari. Joseph Akawu Ushie narrates that Atiangbe Iwhai once told us that if he tied a pistle with a black clothe and keep drumming we would see something bad here” (Joseph Akanuo Ushie, 2016).

According to Umatung / Omatong Fredaime Iwhai (2016), leading medicine men often invited Litung drummers to drum in their homes to attract supernatural beings to come and help heal their patients. It is believed that when they come, they always solve whatever medical problems they meet. Drumming Litung/Litong is always accompanied by dancing by supernatural beings. That is why it is not advisable to play Litung far into the night because the supernatural beings would not allow you to stop before dawn. Umatung notes that often when he stopped drumming, Litung would drum on its own and one could hear dancing by invisible beings which situation often make women run into their houses (*ibid*). This is even more so if cleansing, *write* is performed before the drumming starts.

It is clear that there was something mystical about Litung/Litong. Joseph Akanou Ushie (2016) narrates.

My father asked me why I Christian, I am so deeply involved in Litong. I called my senior sister and brother and in their presence informed our father that I am only interested in reviving and modernizing the dance only; with nothing to do with the mysticism associated with Litong as of old.

Our father was satisfied with my explanation. He then gave me his blessing, from which I have no doubt benefited.

Litung itself is a type of drum with five strings that are stroked. “It is very popular in Central Africa though not in the exact form we have it here (*ibid*). Litung has been reformed and modernized. Apart from Litung itself, as an instrument of drumming, *undelib* a drum, *isyo/igyu* and uniform for dancers have been brought in. Songs have also been introduced. All these have transformed Litung into a branch new dance; a new creation with little resemblance to Litung as of old (*ibid*).

Conclusion

Although there were and still are slight differences in the treatment of ill health and entertainment, yet it is clear that there has always been uniformity in the ways Obudu People have always gone about meeting their health needs and soothing their souls.

The people were always close to nature and were in constant communication with the supernatural world from where, it appears, they derived their ability to cure the diseases that afflicted them and their music. All of which are now threatened by modernity.

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