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Natog *Travellogue*

Osun, Haven of Intellectual Pilgrims: A Historical and Cultural Tour of Osogbo

Introduction

The four-letter word OSUN stands for diverse things in the trado-cultural history of the Yoruba people. It represents trade and industry (Osogbo, its capital is one of the oldest trading posts in pre-colonial Nigeria); it also represents art and culture (being the home of the highest plastic and fine artists' conglomerate in modern-day Nigeria), one of the oldest sobriquets of Osogbo is ilu aro (i.e. home of the tye-and-dye culture). To say "Osun" is also to honour the first group of German artists and intellectuals that made Osogbo their headquarters. German writer/artists like the great Ulli Beier, co-founder of the Black Orpheus literary group; his erstwhile fine-artist wife Susanne Wenger (better known today as Adunni Olorisa, the Yeye-Osun of Osogbo) and even the Jahnheinz Jahn of *Das junge Afrika* cohabited with some of the greatest exponents of Nigerian arts and culture, like the late Duro Ladipo of the Sango, Oba-Koso fame and the world-renowned artist Jimoh Buraimoh, as well as the contemporary Great Prince of Ifa heritage, Chief Priest Ifayemi Elebuibon and a host of others.

However, the greatest and oldest of all the Osogbo artists has always been and still remains the Osun-Iyalode herself. Osun has been the oldest source of inspiration for generations of artists who chose the luxuriant banks of her healing, silvestery and magical waters for

[1] NATOG members who participated in the Year 2000 NATOG Conference had the opportunity of touring the Osogbo metropolis.

To spite her conceited colleagues, Osun was said to have colluded with the womenfolk in *Ode isalaye* (Earth) to found the Ìyà mi cult, which is the powerful cult of witches, capable of provoking chaos in the chauvinistic world of the males, who, in any case, were not treating their women any better because they had taken so well after their deity-tutors (likes Sango, who never could resist an opportunity to give any of his wives a good beating). Thus came the first women's liberation movement to be recorded in world history. With the women cult of Ìyà mi (note the semantic play on intonation *ìyà* pronounced with the low tone-marks on the two vowels) meaning *suffering*, *punishment* or *torture*, that is to say that women in this cult will suppress their natural protective functions of 'ìyá' – mother (pronounced with a low tone on the 'i' and a high tone on the 'a') and vest themselves with the powers of the *algoz* (the punisher, the torturer), the menfolk and their deity-tutors started to witness an unpalatable turn of events in their chauvinistic world with the women witches challenging their authorities and thwarting their plans and projects. The Ìyà mi cult soon made the women to become a feared and dreaded lot in the society.

Osun: Her Worship, her Powers[7]...

Out of the awe and fear of the menfolk for the notoriety of the witches under the powerful influence of the goddess Osun, came the praise names given to members of this cult. The men now hail them in the following manner:

Iya mi osoronga[8]
A t'apa j'ori
A t'edo j'okan
A j'ora, j'ororo

[7] Title of an ethnological film on the Osun Cult, produced by an American lady Iyasola Osuntoki Mojisola.

[8] Osoronga is an onomatopoetic praise-name evoking the power of witches to transform themselves into mystical evil birds.

Emo[9] *lolo abe opo*
Abeje eru, olokiki oru ... etc. etc.

Fearful, bird-like ones capable of eating up
a whole being without letting fall a single drop of blood,
evil ones that assume the images of innocent,
defenseless beings,
inclement ones who bring wails of agony
in the dead of night etc..

It must be pointed out here that some of the most feared powers of these witches include that of transmutation and translocation which make it possible for them to cover incredible distances in the flash of an eye having transformed themselves into uncanny beings like evil-birds. It is to be noted that the image and concept of the *Hexe*, most common in the German tradition in the depictions of an old female witch, with bird-like features, mounted on a broomstick is not unrelated to this power of transmutation and translocation for which the Yoruba witches are known and feared. The Yoruba witch finds it most convenient to transform herself into a ragged, tattered and repulsive-looking, frail old woman – just like the German *Hexe* – all the more to evoke and provoke the antipathy of men and thus have an excuse for having to punish them with her mystical powers.

In this, the v(h)exed image of Osun and her earthly acolytes of the Ìyà mi cult lends credence to the myth of (Osun) *Iemanjá*, popularly celebrated in the Northeastern part of Brazil as the *mãe d'água* (mother of the oceans), who is a goddess feared and adored at the same time by the riverine peoples of that bay because, one minute, she could be as gentle as a mother, and the other as terrible as a rape victim seeking for revenge. The myth goes that Iemanjá once had a son by the god *Aganjú*, deity of the solid earth. The son, *Orungã*, became the god of the firmaments, ruling between the earth and the sky, without a fixed root in either. Orungã however had an *Oedipian* obsession for his own mother whose beautiful body he couldn't resist. He ended up raping her. In her flight from the scene of this

[9] Emo is the brown bush mouse.

incestuous affair, Iemanjá's breasts were said to have ruptured. It is believed that it is the fluid from the ruptured breasts of Iemanjá that turned into the deep oceans into whose violent waters she attracts unwary men that she desires to accompany her in her endless wandering in her sub-aquatic domains.[10]

Osun: Capital of Yoruba Contemporary Arts and Culture

Looked at again from the angle of syntax and morphology, the name of Osun lends itself to the interpretation of "primordial origin". The root verb 'sun' means 'to spring up'; 'to trickle out' of the soil. Osun is thus the "one who springs up/trickles out". No true son of Osun can forget this primordial origin of their name, as is made evident by the appellation adopted by the founding fathers of the present Osun state at its inception in 1991, even before the Federal Road Safety Car Registration Scheme made popular the use of state acronyms and appellations, Osun has always been referred to as "The State of the Living Spring".

Colonial records have it that even before the advent of white explorers, traders and administrators, Osogbo, the seat of Osun has always had a hold on travellers and strangers, who always felt an irresistible attraction for the peaceful and serene atmosphere prevalent in the town. Proof of the efficacy of these soothing and secure feelings that brought people in droves to Osogbo can be seen in the fact that, in spite of the town not being one of the principal traditional first-class settlements in the then Yoruba kingdom, its population strength swiftly overtook and surpassed in no time that of most of the principal towns and settlements, like Ile-Ife, Ede, Ilesa. As is the case today, people then could not resist the combination of the serenity of the Osun river and the peaceful atmosphere of the town which continued to maintain its peacefulness even during the turbulent periods of most of the wars of succession and secession fought all over Yorubaland after the fall of the Oyo empire, like the

[10] Cf. Jorge Amado, (1973), pg. 84.

Kiriji War, the Ekitiparapo War, the Ijaye War, the Owu/Ife War. While the other towns were losing their population to wars and slavery in the 17th and 18th Centuries, Osogbo was receiving a continuous influx of refugees, adventurers, artists, intellectuals, priests and priestesses of the various divinities and other categories of immigrants who needed peace for their arts to survive.

Thus when the first Europeans arrived Osogbo in the 19th Century, they found a town with a very high conglomeration of artists and local intellectuals, a town where the inhabitants were more interested in peace and progress than in war and destruction, a town where the traditional values, lores and religions were most impeccably preserved. And the earliest colonialists rewarded this town with a good number of colonial offices and the infrastructures that go with them. Established as a kind of district headquarters, Osogbo was provided with a major railway line linking the North of the country to Lagos and the Atlantic Coast in the south.

Even though the town had no University of its own, most of the intellectuals attached to the University College of Ibadan in the 1950s and '60s ended up having a 'country home' in Osogbo. And so, local artists like the late Duro Ladipo, Jimoh Buraimoh, Oyin Adejobi (all of blessed memory), and even contemporary artists and local intellectuals like High-Priest Ifayemi Elebu-Ibon, the Awise of Osogboland had the opportunity of interacting and rubbing minds with great foreign intellectuals, africanists like the soundest of all sound "African Kulturkritiker"[11] – Jahnheinz Jahn of *Das junge Afrika*, Ulli Beier, alias Sangodare Akanji of the Black Orpheus literary fame, alias Obotunde Ijimere (of the Imprisonment-of-Obatala [12] saga) and Susanne Wenger (Adunni Olorisa) and a host of others.

Without any gainsaying, Osogbo has been in the lead in the exportation of Nigerian (Yoruba) Arts and Culture, having produced

[11] Cf Willfried F. Feuser, (1992), pg. 18-19.

[12] Title of a play purportedly written by Ulli Beier under the humorous pseudonym " Obotunde Ijimere."

most of the greatest Dramatists and Fine artists groups like the Ori Olokun Cultural Group, the Isembaye Ensemble, the Duro Ladipo Drama Group and its world-famous Oba Koso and Moremi plays and films, Chief Priest Ifayemi Elebuibon and his popular traditional morality drama – "Ifa Olokun Asorodayo". If ever there will be a Nigerian version of the Festival of films like the European Films Festival of Cannes, Osogbo will not have any rival contenders as the Cannes of Nigeria. It is a known fact today that most of the greatest exponents of the Yoruba culture in the contemporary scene of Nigerian arts and culture had their debuts in Osogbo. Mention must be made here of the Ojo/Duro Ladipo, the Ogunmola and the Ogunsola families who have given a good number of brilliant artists to the Nigerian stage and screen. Even great contemporary musicians like the Afro maestro, King Sunny Ade is proud of his early days in Osogbo under the tutelage of the great Alawada (Jester) Moses Adejumo alias Lamidi Baba Sala. Anybody that watches the processions of the world-famous Osun Osogbo annual festival and carnival in August will agree with me that Osogbo has much to offer the world in terms of world patrimonies of festivals, carnivals and arts and culture. The feeling is unmistakably captured as adepts of the Osun cult flock in from far away places like Cuba, Argentina, Brazil and the United States of America to offer oblations and sacrifices to the great Osun deity, intoning in their different languages and dialects the famous litany of the Yeye Osun, to the joyous accompaniment of her favourite bata ensemble and aro (brass instruments) accompaniments:

Ba mi se, yeye mi o!
Olu-odo ore Yeye Osun o
Olomoyoyo, wa ba mi se!...

Come to my aid, O my mother!
Queen of the depths,
All hail, the Yeye Osun
Thou who art the mother of multitudes
Come to my aid!...

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