

## THE AKU-AHWA AND AKU-MAGA POST-BURIAL RITES OF THE JUKUN PEOPLES OF NORTHERN NIGERIA.

by

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The records of the Jukun peoples of Northern Nigeria are as vague as those of most Nigerian tribes with the exception, perhaps, of the Fulani and the Hausa. It is thought that in the mid-fifteenth century they occupied the whole of the north-eastern corner of Nigeria and according to Fulani records they had gained the whole of the north two centuries later. One hundred years of glorious rule ended when they were defeated by the Fulani. Now they are only some 25,000 strong and they have been pushed back to the little triangular area round the banks of the Benue, Katsina and Donga rivers.

Anthropologists suspect that the Jukun originally came from the Sudan and the greatest authority on the tribe, C. K. Meek, has called his major work about them "A Sudanese Kingdom".

The Jukun religion is based on the divine right of kingship, their king being referred to as "*Aku*", meaning "Souls of the Dead", while Sir Wallis Budge quotes the names "*Kbu*" or "*Aaku*" given to the ancient Egyptian beatified souls. Another fact in our search for proof of this ancestry is the importance that is laid on the sun. Although it cannot be said that, like the Pharaohs, the king is the only son of the sun god, it is certainly true to say that the Jukun "*Aku*" is indeed the son of *one* of the gods. The most important of the gods is still the sun god and thus . . .? However, whether proven or not, it is interesting that in spite of centuries of mingling with the semi-Bantu people of the Middle Belt the Jukun have retained many characteristics which justify anthropological suspicions.

A Jukun, whether high or low, dies by the action of "*Aki*", the spirit of death. The manner of his death depends on the cult to which he belongs; a man may join several cults but generally he will be appointed to that of his family. The "*Aku Abwa*" and "*Aku Maga*" cults hold dances for communing with the dead conceived on a grand scale . . . and here we come back again to our belief that these people came from the Sudan, for in Sir Wallis Budge's 'Book of the Dead' he writes ". . . thus the living enjoyed communion with many of them (the souls of the dead) at every shrine during the celebration of every great festival."

"*Aku Abwa*" means "God of the Above" and the ceremony involves the taking of the dead body to *Kindo* or "The Unknown". After death a Jukun body is washed and shaved, its innards removed, all orifices blocked and its eyes, mouth and chest bound with cloth; it is sewn up, and after it has been placed in a grave, word is sent for the owner of the cult *Aku Aska* which attends to the 'removal'. He arrives to inspect the body, wearing his red *riga* (traditional Northern Nigerian robe) and necklace of palm fibres. Then with an almost completely percussive band he leads the procession to the shrine in the bush where food and beer is offered so that the dead man may return and tell his relatives why he died, and that he may also hear any confessions that the women of his household have to make. This may possibly be equivalent to the Egyptian 'releasing of the mouth cloth'.

Twelve days after the visitation, the *Aku Abwa* ceremony starts. According to Meek the time varies up to twenty days after the actual death.

Three separate brews of beer are made (one being for the king, as he is head of the *Aku Abwa* cult). When the beer is ready the head of the dead man's household collects relatives and friends and shows them the feast he has ready. They all proceed, accompanied by the band, to the shrine of *Abwa*, where they sacrifice goats and chickens, and the head of the household chants:

"I have brought chickens, goats and beer for my brother now that he is with you. He is coming today to tell us how he died".

The procession makes its way to the shrine of *Aksi*, the keeper of the *Kindo* gates, where it pays homage. The only shrines I have seen are piles of brown egg-shaped stones representing the souls of the dead gone by, but I understand this varies from family to family and from village to village. They then retire until the sun goes down and the head of the household sends word to fetch the drummers and the owners of the buffalo horns who collect outside the town.

The bandmaster pours offerings of beer on the ground in front of each horn, and the leader of the *Aku Abwa*, wearing palm fronds and a wooden mask studded with red berries, leads the procession through the village, dancing and chanting through the buffalo horns:

"My house has fallen. I have become one of the old and toothless."

The dance becomes more frenzied as they approach the nearest high trees to the village (the *Jukun* regard high trees as meeting grounds for ghosts), and from here they dance to the grave where the leader calls the dead man's name three times, finally getting the answer:

"Yes, yes, I have joined the old and toothless."

The impersonated ghost of the dead man leads the procession in a dance to the huts of his family where all the women are hiding (to see a ghost is believed by the women to cause instant death). He knocks at the first hut saying:

"You must bandage my head and chest".

A hand passes a cloth through the door. He then dances to the next hut, saying:

"I shake with cold".

A larger cloth is handed out. After this the reason for his death speaks from his 'soul'. At this point, if the man was murdered and his relatives know the culprit, they will announce his name. If, however, no murder was committed then all know that he was punished for offending a god.

The dance then continues for an hour or so, after which the dancers drink beer and palm wine until just before dawn when the final song is sung:

"We are the *Aku Abwa* and if anyone should see us they will die".

An afternoon of weeping follows and as evening falls the elders of the family again assemble. The leader of the band once again offers beer to the buffalo horns; once again the 'dead men's' voices ring out, this time accompanied by the shaking of the iron rings which are attached to the buffalo horns. The dance starts with the gourd rattles and the arrival of the women calling for the dead man. The *Aku Abwa* dancers take this as the signal to leave. (In Sir J. Gardiner Wilkinson's "The Manners and Customs of Ancient Egypt" v.I he refers to the use of sistrums by the women at funerals to frighten away evil spirits.)

Finally, as the sun sets, the *Aku Abwa* dancers appear again, and with the impersonated ghost of the dead man leading them they go to the huts of his discarded women. He calls to them asking if they sinned, until finally, happy in his own 'soul', he says he must return to *Kindo*. The leaders of the *Aku Abwa* depart carrying the soul safely with them.

In the *Aku Maga* cult a week after a man's death his relatives make a mock body which includes a lock of his hair and some of his nail clippings. They carry it to an open space in the village where relatives and friends gather. The senior member of the household wails that he does not know how the man died, and it is at this point that the owner of the *Aku Maga* cult is fetched. He appears in his costume of palm fronds with its wooden mask worn over a white *riga*, on stilts, calling as he stalks along

"*Ebe ebe a ke tsa ri?*" (Dear me, dear me, what has happened?).

He then walks over to the corpse, snorts and prods it with his stick (*Aku Maga*—God of the High Stick; maga—stick). As it does not move he knows that death has come to his house again, and this prompts him to sing a solo telling the dead man that if he is guiltless he will go safely to *Kindo*. As the solo dies away the 'ghost dancers' enter also wearing palm fronds and masks, singing:

"*Wi ji hwa-me*" (Oh dear, land of Ama; Ama—earth deity.)

*Aku Maga* descends from his stilts and tells them about the dying. They break into a frenzied dance hitting the walls of the surrounding huts as they go—driving the spirit of the dead man to *Kindo*. The women hide in their huts until one by one the 'ghosts' disappear into the bush, and as the band starts, the gourd rattles of the mourning women chase away the evil spirits, and the women emerge and dance jerkily to the rhythms on the drums. This dancing lasts until the following morning, and as the women take a final farewell of the body, *Aku Maga* starts a procession to carry the mock body out to its bush burial.

Friends of the dead man rush out demanding a ransom, but being over-ruled by 'the power of the spirit', the procession passes the grave with musical bouquets to *Kindo*, the home of the god of death.

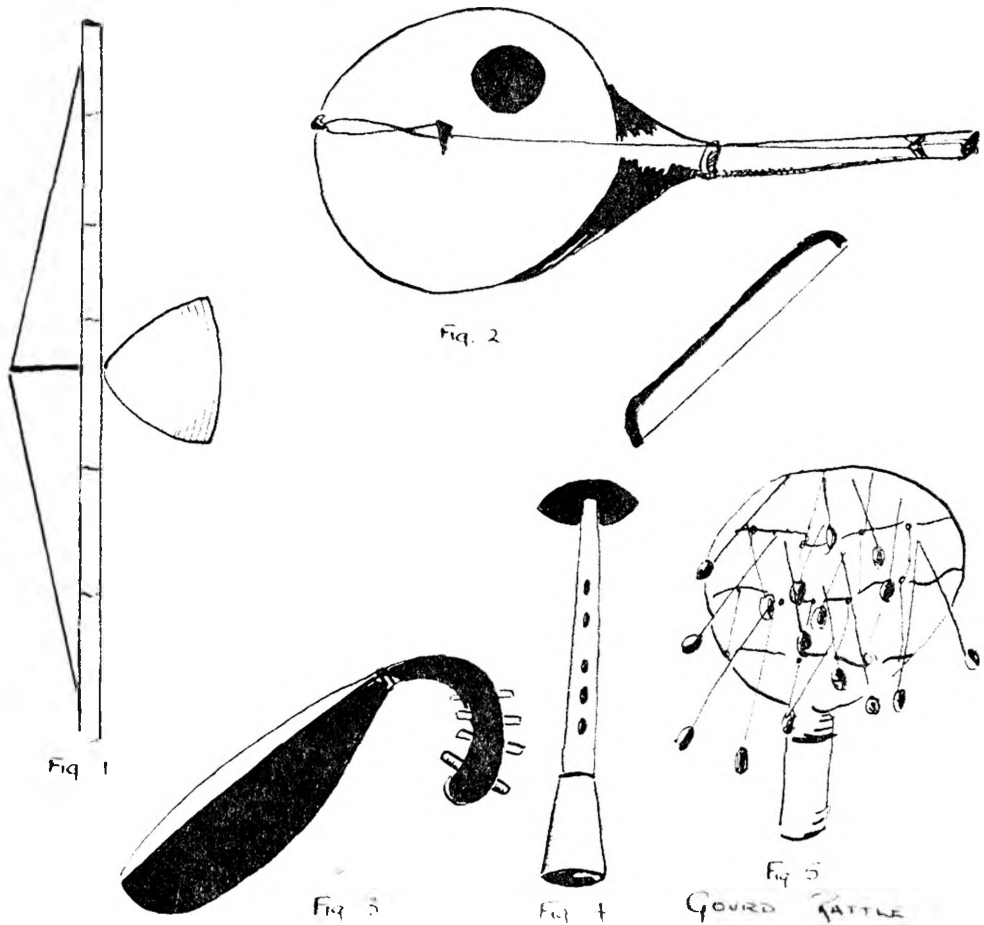
The Jukun are not a great musical people but they take immense pride in the music connected with their rites. I list below those instruments I have seen.

#### *Chordophones.*

A vertical arched harp with three strings taken over a central bridge on a half calabash resonator which is held tightly against the shoulder and chest. (Fig. 1.) The player can alter the tone by altering the position of the resonator to the body.

A one stringed fiddle, about the size of a viola, with a half calabash resonator covered with skin in which there is a circular aperture of approximately 2 inches. (Fig. 2) It is played with an arched bow, or plucked.

An angular harp with a closed skin sack and an opening approximately 1 inch. (Fig. 3) It is slung across the shoulder and plucked with the right hand. It looks a little like the Egyptian shoulder harp but the resonator is not made of wood and it has no rest at the base.



*Idiophones.*

A conical calabash closed at one end and open at the other, struck with the thumb and fingers of the left hand and producing an intermittent constant-pitch percussive addition to the drum set. It is called *shintu*.

Gourd rattles with a loose covering of strings, nuts and small stones. (Fig. 5).

*Aerophones.*

Open vertical flutes in sets of two or three.

Double reed pipes, 3 or 5 holes, very much like the Egyptian oboe. (Fig. 4). Always used in pairs.

*Mirliton.*

Buffalo horns, similar to those of the Yoruba, used for producing muffled voices.

*Membranophones.*

Tree trunk drum, gourd drum, frame drum and double headed hourglass drum (used for controlling the dancers).