

Security Consciousness in Indigenous Nigerian Houses: A Preliminary Survey of Yoruba Ethno-medical Devices

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ABSTRACT This study examines the traditional response of Nigerians, especially residents of the Yoruba ethnic group to incessant attacks on their homesteads by robbers and pilferers. It is a cursory survey of the various ethno-medical devices and fetishes generally prevalent in pre-modern times, but still popular in alternative medical practices against robbery attacks. The devices are grouped according to their forms or presentations and or modes of performance. Sixteen groups of these devices are identified and discussed in relation to their workings or operations, applications, installations and administration. These include Prophecy laden or prophetic words (*Afòse* or *Mápoḥuldà*), disarming or de-fetishing devices (*Gbèṭughbètu*), metal or iron/steel ?dispossession devices (*Agbunrin*), forgetfulness (*Afòral*), procrastinating devices (*Èti*), muscle stiffening devices (*Agbéró*), disappearing devices (*Afèèrì*), the falling game (*Subúsiré*), debilitating devices (*Àlùro* or *àlùwó*), de-envisioning devices (*Isújú*), cut resistors (*Òkígbé*), and bullet proof devices (*Ayeta*), etc. a good number of which is often accompanied by incantations (*Ofò* or *Ìgèdè*). Recommendations are made towards a successful adoption and use of these devices to thwart burglary attempts on properties and physical assaults on persons and homesteads.

INTRODUCTION

The need for security and protection of life and property predates modern architectural and medical practices. The desire for security of life and properties prompted the development of perimeter walls around the shelter of trees and barricades at cave entrances by the early man in prehistoric periods (Buah 1969). As civilization increased and technology advanced, the development of daring weapons, tools, and mechanical and electronic devices rendered ineffective, the security devices that were earlier considered insurmountable. Today, there is not much of physical barriers or anti-burglary devices that can offer adequate burglary resistance to the onslaught of grenades, hack-saw, rock and steel borers, metal smelting, etc. in a civilization and technology age where the Pentagon, the American ingenious security edifice, can be devastated as was recently witnessed in the global world.

Today, in the more developed nations of the World, the responsibility for the security of life and property rests on humans, (security) agencies, in contraptions of participatory administration and social engineering. In these countries, everybody contributes his quota to the security of self and all. Thus, security is achieved through the combined efforts of designated agents (police and other law enforcement agencies) and an alert, forthcoming and conscious citizenry, with

respect for individual and corporate rights; and concern for orderly nation-states.

Not so with the less developed nations of the world, where most citizens and leaders alike, crave for self, in corruption-ridden, social, political and economic lifestyles. In Nigeria specifically, the human, society and law enforcement agencies- oriented security contraption that thrives in the civilized nations has not met the security needs of the citizens. The police and other law enforcement agencies have shown little sincerity and patriotism to make the nations security system work. What with seeming connivance of police rankers with robbers, traffic offenders and druggists in exchange for monetary gratifications on highways! (Microsoft library 2007a, 2007b) It is not an aberration that the immediate past Inspector General of Police (IG), the nations highest police boss was jailed for gross corrupt practices. The 18-count charges boarder on extortion, defrauding, misappropriation, swindle, sheeting and diversion of funds – all of which tamper with the right of individuals and economic security of the state.

The spate of burglaries, assassinations for political power and other violent crimes has been unsettling in recent times; to the extent that the individuals – politicians and well-meaning citizens seek personal protection from alternative security sources. The most popular of these is the indigenous or traditional medical sources which may differ across the tribes but are pecu-

liar to each of the over 250 cultural and ethnic groupings in Nigeria (Saad et al. 1996; Fatiregun 1999; Microsoft library 2007a). This study is a preliminary survey of the security devices in indigenous house of this ethnic group, the Yoruba, occupying the southwestern sub-region of Nigeria and constituting one of the three dominant tribes in the country. Its language (Yoruba) is considered one of the three national languages others being Hausa/Fulani and Igbo. Thus, the study of any aspect of the Yoruba culture, like its ethno-medicine, is regarded by the Nigerian constitution as the study of the Nigerian nation (FGN 1979).

Studies into indigenous technologies of nations and sub-regions have not only contributed immensely to modern technological know-how in the past, it has improved the lot of man in many respects. In medical field for instance, acupuncture, a medical fit of modern times was inherited and developed from Chinese indigenous practices. So has the Chinese housing style and their tatamin modules added an impetus to world housing architecture. In landscape architecture, Japan has contributed to the world, the beautiful, cool, serene and pleasant housing environment through their garden houses.

Today, the world in general and particularly, the tropics relish in the concept of courtyard architecture which were African solution to their peculiarly hot tropical climate (Ogunniyi 1996; Fatiregun 1999).

A cursory look at the history of modern architecture has more to offer to the world on the importance of tapping and building on nature's ingenuities. Every stage of development from the Greeks through to the Romans, classics, etc and to modern and post modern architecture did not only learn, but adopted something worthwhile from its immediate predecessors. A study of the Yoruba Indigenous security devices may reveal certain potentials in the indigenous technology adaptable to modern use. Thus, the study seeks to know the followings among others.

What ranges of security devices were available in the Yoruba indigenous homes? How do they satisfy users' requirements while helping at the same time to rid society of burglary and assassination crimes? What are the merits and demerits of these methods? What recommendations are plausible towards the adoption or possible incorporation of these devices into modern building designs, dresses, ingestible, etc. Simi-

lar studies can be made into indigenous security devices of other dominant tribes in the country. Information from such studies can lend, substantially, to the Federal Governments effort at resuscitating alternative (indigenous) Medicare in particular and home grown technology in general.

THE NATURE OF YORUBA MEDICINE

It is important to grasp the principles and workings of the Yoruba medical practice as a prelude to understanding the working of the different anti-burglary devices.

The form and practice of holistic Yoruba medicine is predicated on three firm, mutually related and dependent bases, which may be referred to as three legs of a stable tripod.

The first is the '*Oogun*' (the drug or herb product) which is prepared and or administered by the *Onisegun* (or Pharmacist). The *Onisegun* handles ailments or diseases resulting from physical infections, injuries, physical defects, dysfunctional body mechanisms that are of natural causes like cuts, burns and aches.

The second is the *Babalawo* (or medicine man) who makes spiritual consultation before administering medicine. The *Babalawo* plays a dual role in ethno-medicine; he is often vast in the knowledge of herbs and drugs. Secondly, he is spiritually attuned to the *Ifa* oracle who reveals causes of ailments that are not natural or physically induced; or which result from spiritual attack by witches, sorcerers etc. In addition, he is knowledgeable in the potency of words and thus able to chant incantations as appropriate to occasions to achieve desirable spiritual tasks.

The third, definitely not the least, is the *Ifa* oracle: the spiritual deity, the custodian of wisdom and spiritual knowledge consulted by the *Babalawo* for appropriate diagnosis and remedial rituals or and sacrifices. The *Ifa* links the *Babalawo* to the spiritual world.

YORUBA INDIGENOUS ANTI-BURGLARY DEVICES (YIAD)

Yoruba Indigenous Anti-burglary Devices (YIAD) occur in different forms, shapes and sizes. They are also mounted or administered in a variety of ways with some requiring that the user chants some incantations (*Ofo* or *Ogede*), to

achieve the desired potency. They can be hung in any part of the house (*Asoko*); buried, usually at the entrance (*Arinmole*); concealed (in ceilings, furniture, under carpets, etc.); eaten or swallowed (*Ajesara, Atola or Atoje*); incised into blood circulation (*Singbere*); attached to or sewn to a popular dress; etc. Any of the above attributes can be adopted for the classification of Yoruba Indigenous Anti-burglary Devices (YIAD).

In this study, however, 16 devices are listed according to their mode of operation, how they apprehend the intruder or protect the user and or his property from criminal assault. They are listed alphabetically and discussed briefly below; with the understanding that the detailed study of the composition, form, working and the accompanying potent wordings or incantations cannot be done within the scope of this paper. Each of the devices has enough scope on its own, for an in-depth, independent study when and if so desired.

- i) *Afeeri* (Disappearance Charm): When this device is planted on an object, a property, or an individual, the object becomes invisible to the intruder or assailant. For use on a large number of items, the items are tied together in a bundle and the *Afeeri* is planted in it. The entire bundle is rendered invisible and thus, cannot be stolen. *Afeeri* can be used in the face of direct attack. The user, who has it on the body chants the appropriate incantations and the attacker is disillusioned; his object of attack becomes instantly invisible to the attackers.
- ii) *Afinna* (Route-or Path-poisoning): This device can consist of a few grams of powdery substance, an incense, a reed, broomstick or other similar but potent objects that may escape the notice of passers by. The device may be placed across a doorway, or a path through which the suspected intruder is expected to enter the apartment. As soon as the intruder steps over or walks across this device, the intruder is incapacitated in one form or the other – mentally, physically or psychologically disoriented. He can no longer fulfill his criminal mission; and may be loitering around the scene of the intended crime until day break, or he is apprehended.
- iii) *Aforan* (Induces Oversight): This device inflicts a forgetful mind on the criminal. Inspite

of an elaborate preparation and plan, the criminal forgets to carry out the mission of his intention, come the appointed time of the crime. He may never remember again for a long time after; and if he ever remembers at any future date, the device, if it is still in place will continue to cast the spell of memory loss on the prospective criminal.

- iv) *Afose* (Incontrovertible Order): This device can be acquired by the user in one or more ways. For temporary acquisition, the user sticks out his tongue and tastes a medicinal preparation earlier stuffed into a small horn or the shell of a small snail. He chants the requisite incantations and thereafter gives his orders to the criminals. The user may order the criminal to lie prostrate, keep laughing, crying, hopping, etc until day breaks and the criminal is either apprehended or user annuls the effect of the device. Should the user want to take laws into his hands, he may command the criminals to go in search of a lake and jump into it! For a permanent acquisition of this device, the user incises some small cuts (specified numbers) on the tip of his tongue and rubs the medicine on the cut surfaces to allow the powdery medicine enter his blood circulation.
- v) *Agbero* (Muscle Stiffener): *Agbero* discontinues the criminals process of attack or violence on the user. The attacker, often with a cutlass, sword, axe, cudgel or any other dangerous weapon raises up the weapon, but feels a stiffness in his muscles (biceps and triceps) and is unable to land the intended blow on the user. The attacker remains with hand and weapon raised until neighbours mill around to apprehend him or the user (of the device) takes the weapon off the attacker.
- vi) *Agbunrin* (Metal Disarming Device): This device enables the user or resident to accost the intruder or burglar and demand the submission or release of all metallic objects in his (the assailants) possession. The potency of the device mesmerizes the burglar who submits without questions all items of metal – cutlasses, axes, knives, etc., meekly.
- vii) *Aluro* (Debility Charm): *Aluro* or debility charm comes in the form of whip or lash drawn from the leather of specific animals. In addition, the whip is soaked in some liq-

- uid herb extracts that bequeaths the debility potency on the whip. A quick stroke of the whip on the invader renders him (invader) paralyzed all over. The assailant remains a heap of jelly, until the arrival of neighbours. The resident (user) annuls the effect of the whip on the assailant only after the latter's apprehension.
- viii) *Ayelala* (Mump Inducing Charm): *Ayelala* is often placed in a farmland or plantation to forestall loss of farm products (crops, timber, etc) to thieves. *Ayelala* infests thieves and trespassers in its domain with mumps – a disease that causes terrible swelling of all body parts. The trespasser gets no relief until he confesses and returns all items stolen from the farm. *Ayelala* was occasionally installed in some Yoruba indigenous compounds. It is still today, installed in cocoa plantations to forestall cocoa pods thievery.
- ix) *Ayeta* (Bullet Deflector): This device, about the size of a kernel is kept in the pocket, sown into a cap, hat or the edge of a dress. Bullets aimed at the wearer of this charm are automatically diverted or deflected away from the target.
- x) *Areta* (Bullet Proofing Charm): The target of a gun-shot who is mounted with *Areta* or bullet proof does not absorb the bullets. The latter drop off the target like the target is a bullet proof material. Like *Ayeta*, *Areta* is about the size of a nut and is worn or mounted in similar ways.
- xi) *Eti* (Procrastinator): When *Eti* (Procrastinator) is mounted or installed in a premise, burglars never really decide to burgle the place! Rather they keep postponing or putting forward and rescheduling the operation in that domain. Note that *Eti* is different from *Aforan* explained in (iii) above. In the latter, the criminals forget about the domain whereas in the former they keep putting off the operation for another day.
- xii) *Gbalemo* (literally Meaning Keep The House Clean): This device induces in the assailant a compelling mind or wish to keep the surrounding of the targeted house clean. *Gbalemo* is a device that is often hung out in front of the house above the entrance door. It is about the size of an orange to which a small stumpy bunch of local broom is attached. When ensnared, the assailants detach the broom hanging out above the door and take turns in sweeping, untiringly, the surrounding of the targeted house. The sweeping spree continues until they are shame-facedly apprehended at day break.
- xiii) *Gbetugbetu* (Defetishing Charm): *Gbetugbetu* is a charm that induces the assailants to surrender all items in their possession that can be used to harm residents or aid their assault on their target. Unlike *Agbunrin* discussed in (vi) above, which induces the release of all metallic items in possession of the assailants, *Gbetugbetu* compels the release of all dangerous items – metals and non-metals alike; including charms that were intended to aid their operation.
- xiv) *Isuju* (De-visioning or Illusion Charm): This is a burglary device that beclouds or blurs the vision of the assailants of the domain where the charm is mounted or installed. The burglars are unable to make out their ways/routes around the targeted house. Consequently, they feel a sense of affliction and move away from the troubled area. They may regain their normal sight after leaving the *Isuju* domain. However, if they venture another attempt to carry out their operation, they will be afflicted at each attempt.
- xv) *Mafenukeje* (Poisonous Weapon): Literally, *Mafenukeje* translates to a weapon that kills by touching the victim's blood. They consist of metals with sharp edges or points that had been previously rinsed in venoms. It poisons the blood and subsequently kills any victim it touches. This anti-burglary device was not popular even in indigenous homes for certain obvious reasons. The device was a two-way weapon which could be employed by both the intruders and residents. The intruders were often at an advantage with this weapon which they carried along in assailing unsuspecting resident. There was usually no enough time for the residents to get a weapon they had to keep well away from their household. Besides, unless the poisonous weapon is a knife, residents had to get dangerously close to their attackers before they could inflict any cut on them. Consequently, residents prepared other devices that could be permanently put in place constituting no danger to residents, whether thieves strike or not. In other words, the *Mafenukeje* is a better weapon in the hands of burglars than an anti-burglary device. After all, only bur-

glars and other intent criminals go about armed with lethal weapons. Generally, *gbetugbetu*, discussed in (xii) above is an effective antidote to *mafenukeje*.

xvi) *Okigbe* (Anti-matchet): *Okigbe* is a Yoruba charm that provides the human flesh with an unimaginable resistance to the impact of sharp edges, like cutlasses, matchets, axes, knives etc. This device can be in different forms-like an anklet slipped into one of the arms or an oval-shaped, nut-size object, put in the pocket or sewn into a dress. The objective of the *Okigbe* is to prevent a sharp edge from breaking the skin nor entering the flesh; thereby preventing bleeding, the attendant loss of blood and possible death.

xvii) *Mapohunda* or *Mayehun* (Do My Biddings): This device also incorporates the potency of *Afose* (or incontrovertible order) in (iv) above. *Mapohunda* subjects the assailants to the wishes and caprices of the resident employing the device. The criminals or burglars under this spell does the bidding of the resident. It should be noted that *Mapohunda* differs from *Afose* in that the latter is an order given only once whereas *Mapohunda* enables its user to change his wishes/orders as many times as possible. The spell caster can, for instance, bid all the criminals to commence the Falling Game; in which all will be falling down, rising and falling again continually in a playful fashion. He can turn around and bid them to engage in a free for all fight among themselves. Anything that catches his fancy he will tell them to do; and they do so.

DISCUSSIONS

In this study, a conscious attempt has been made to restrict the survey of the Yoruba ethnomedical devices to anti-burglary measures in indigenous compounds, homesteads, plantations and other properties of the Yoruba in Nigeria. Even at that, the list of the devices highlighted is not exhaustible. The variants of these devices among the substantial Yoruba populations that exist in Dahomey, Togo, Brazil and the traces found elsewhere including Mexico is not included in the survey.

In Nigeria, in general and specifically, within the Yoruba enclave of south-western sub-region, indigenous values have been systematically relegated in favour of western, Christian, and Eastern, Islamic values. Thus, it is increasingly diffi-

cult to carry out research on indigenous values within moderate resources of time and money. The fact that custodians of these values are few and widely scattered within the enclave and that fewer still can be relied upon for accurate and honest information does not seem to help the situation. Nevertheless, with determination and a timely spread of research activities into the rural nooks of this enclave, these and other aspects of Yoruba indigenous technology can be harnessed.

In pursuing a research agenda into this branch of indigenous technology, three major resource groups have been identified. The first group consists of elderly traditionalists in the remote, rural settings of the Yoruba enclave. These are people still living the old indigenous lifestyles. They will most likely feel elated to teach "modern teachers and researchers" the indigenous recipe which other modern colleagues have relegated to the primitive past. The second is the group that rekindles hope in the revival of our heritage; even if they are today, regarded as lawless, ungovernable corps. It consists of a couple of unions, touts in the nations transport roads; the National Union of Road Transport Workers and Road Employers Association of Nigeria. These two unions have regularly engaged each other in open battles deploying the anti-burglary devices highlighted in this study as their main operative arms. They have not ceased to amaze the public on the high potency of these seemingly unbelievable fantasies on occasions when they openly repelled anti-riot squad; inspite of the latter's "sophisticated, modern weapons". The third group consists of an equally formidable group; the members of the Odua Peoples Congress (OPC), who until recently, formed a parallel, voluntary security (anti-crime) outfit in an apparent protest against the ineffective nation's security operatives. A substantial number of select individuals from these groups are often at the employment of rich politicians as bodyguards. They are acclaimed as highly knowledgeable in the use of these indigenous devices; with which they, effectively protect their employers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Security problems (of life and properties) are relatively more intractable in the less developed nations of the world. In Nigeria, this is evident in

the prevalence of burglaries (of homes and banks), criminal assaults on roads and streets and the wave of political assassination in previous times. The paper expresses dissatisfaction with the inefficiency of modern security machineries like the police and related agencies, attributing it to the effect of high youth unemployment, low workers wages and corruption in all facets of the economy. Can the police be expected to behave differently in such socio-economic situations? In fact, that the police are also in the bandwagon is evident in the wave of police extortion on the nation's highways and the arrest, in 2004 and imprisonment of the nation's Inspector General of police on sundry corrupt and financial misappropriation.

The paper then makes an introductory survey of the nation's indigenous ethno-medicine on anti-burglary devices, hoping a respite would emerge from this old method, for tackling the nation's security problems.

Three groups have been recommended for fruitful contact in a sincere attempt at researching into these ethno-medical devices. These groups, especially the two nation's transport unions and the Odua Peoples Congress are sincere custodians and thus authorities in these trade-medical devices. Given the potency, of these devices as demonstrated in the incessant clashes between these groups and the orthodox law enforcement agencies, it is apt to recommend the adoption of these indigenous devices for installation in women, plantations, in vehicles and on individual persons for security enhancement.

The *Afinna*, *Ayeta*, *Areta*, *Afeeri*, *Ayelala*, *Eti*, *Aforan* can be installed under the carpets, over ceilings or hidden behind visitors note pads in homes. They can also be installed under foot mats, behind inner rear mirrors, in the ceilings or

attached to seats for the security of automobiles. The devices can also be worn on individual persons – inside pockets, sewn to hats, strapped to wrists or as neckband or kept inside handbags for women. Availability and legislation of these potent devices, built into ornaments in vehicles, and homes; jewelries, necklaces, bracelets and other fashion materials on individuals may reduce crime and assault rates at homes, highways and streets. In Nigeria and other third world countries, where there are strict legislation against possession of firearms by individuals, the recognition of these devices by the government may provide a protective option for law-abiding citizens; against crime-minded individuals who acquire and go about with arms by illegal means.

Sincere determination of governments and research institutes into these devices and a timely spread of research activities into the nooks and crannies of the Yoruba enclave involving leaders of the groups are sure to yield viable results.

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