

# Legends of Our Common Heritage 3

## The Long and Rugged Journey of Bottle Dance in Mankon

In the movie, "The Gods Must Be Crazy," an empty bottle of coke dropped by chance from the heavens unto a Kalahari village quickly becomes a versatile implement for a variety of chores in the village. However, the villagers soon start quarrelling and fighting over the use of the mysterious tool. In order to rid the village of this catalyst of disorder, the village elders commission one of theirs to take the bottle to the "ends of the world" and drop it into the ocean.

In Elechi Amadi's epic novel, "The Concubine," Ihioma is such a beautiful and well-mannered lady that she is the dream woman to every man in the tribe. Unfortunately, she is a deity and wife of the sea god. Anyone who falls in love with her is bound to die. The history of Bottle Dance in Mankon is akin to, and also different from, the above synopses.

Bottle Dance was introduced in Mankon by locals who frequented the coastal regions of Cameroon. The main instruments were a bamboo xylophone (Ndenge), and an empty bottle. Two slim and short metal rods such as table spoons, forks or nails were used to beat a musical note on the bottle. The musicians were the xylophonist and the conductor who, simultaneously, was the bottle player. The music proper was made up of a variety of categories. There was "Fox Trot" which resembles present day Salsa, "Jive" which is the Rock N Roll version and a host of others. These main features of Bottle Dance have survived 'til date albeit the numerous challenges that have marked the path of the music. The bleakest point of Bottle Dance came in the early 1970s. At that time, weddings, funerals, "Njangis" and dance halls where Bottle Dance was played had become arenas for shameless flirtations and elopements sometimes between married people. But it is understandable considering the manner in which the music is danced.

One of the characteristics of Bottle Dance is that it is bisexual. There is no "bone to bone." This bisexual nature creates and consolidates romance between the dancers. Imagine having the chest of a woman you admire (and vice versa) resting and rubbing against yours for half an hour! Think about the sensations that will be generated when you execute such instructions as "kiss your lady" and "chest brake." Today, just as it was in those early days, dancers prefer partners who master the steps and the instructions. Female dancers with heavy "behinds" and impressive chests are highly solicited for these bodily features provide stamina as the man "enjoys his motor car" all over the floor. Ladies have a chance to pick out their men in "ladies engage." Here, men are instructed to line up on the dance floor and each woman, after deciding which man she wants to dance with, comes up, curtsies to and stands behind him. Women usually rush toward the handsome and talented dancers, leaving some of the men uncomfortably

stranded on the floor without partners. Unfortunately, these untalented dancers are usually the strongest men in the village. It is said that when men were still men in the village, these strong but unsolicited dancers always closed the occasion with a free for all fight in which they tried to recapture their ladies who had fallen for the fine dancers. But guess what? The weaker but admired dancers came up with a trick to counter the situation. Instead of engaging their adversaries, they rather launched for the Tili Lamp (which was usually the only source of light) and blew it out, thereby plunging the entire hall in total darkness. The fight would become a veritable melee in which punches flew randomly. Some of the men even punched the same women they were trying to win back. Seizing this opportunity, the gifted dancers sneaked away with their paramours under the cover of darkness.

To check this situation, the Fon of Mankon, HRH S.A.N. Angwafo III in his capacity as the custodian of our culture and the overseer of social peace and harmony in the village, issued a Royal Edict banning Bottle Dance in the Fondom. He personally supervised the execution of the ban by going about the village seizing the guitars of recalcitrant musicians. Pioneer musicians such as Aaron Fru Maghah, Pa Sam Tsi Mandere and Adeh Festus of Alamankon, Paul Nkwenti of Ndzimafor, Nfor Mafum of Ntaturu and Joseph Mumbari of Ntankah can tell you more about this. Fortunately, after a decade of appeals to and appeasement of the Fon, and promises of good conduct, the ban was lifted in the early 1980s and Bottle Dance sprang back to life.

This time, it was more "modern" with string guitars, microphones, pianos and amplifiers spicing things up. It wasn't long before the talented Rick Nguti (Ngia Richard) distinguished himself as the most popular Bottle Dance musician accompanied by the best conductors, Tisong and Sonel. Rick Nguti is credited, ceterus paribus, for having lifted Bottle Dance from the abyss of back street events to the heights of club music. He was the first artist to launch a Bottle Dance album, "Nizoh Ni Togo," otherwise, "Marriage In Togo" in the modern Bamenda Congress Hall and also the first to have had a Bottle Dance clip shown on the famed "Tam Tam Weekend" TV program in Cameroon. Do our hearts not still thump when we remember his children doing the "Fox Trot" in that clip? Nevertheless, Rick Nguti has not monopolized the fame of Bottle Dance. Another son of Mankon, John Minang, has added other dimensions to the music. His Makonge and Mbaghlum tunes made the Bottle Dance repertoire even richer. His Mbaghlum album remains the true melting pot of North West culture as all the tribes of the province and beyond identify with it. Thanks to this album, John Minang was crowned North West artist of the year for two years consecutively. The multi-talented artist is currently trying his hand in the cinematographic industry as he recently starred in a movie entitled "Ghost Son."

Today, many other tribes such as those in Upper Ngemba have joined in Bottle Dance compositions. It can safely be speculated that if the popularity of Bottle Dance and the finesse of its compositions continue to improve at the current rate, it won't be long before this genre will find itself on the same pedestal with Makossa, Bikutsi, Soukous, Coupe Decale and you name it.

At this point, permit me to allude to what renowned Russian scientist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky said in 1896, "The earth is the cradle of man, but man can not live in the cradle forever." In Mankon, the above philosophy is contained in the proverbial saying that a stone should never be placed on a child's head, "in order not to thwart the child's growth." Our fore fathers and fathers made Mankon the birth place of Bottle Dance. Our contemporaries modernized it. It is now our responsibility to spread it to other cultures and parts of the world so that it should not "live in the cradle for ever."

The August 2006 MACUDA Convention in Minnesota will offer an opportunity for Mankon people to conquer new grounds for Bottle Dance. The Cultural Night will be animated by no other than Rick Nguti himself. There will also be a Bottle Dance competition during which the sons and daughters of the "Giant Tail" will prove to the world that Bottle Dance is their thing.

Before I take my leave, here is the "Njalah" of the week:

Lu' Nkuah?

"I am silent when alive and talkative when dead." What am I?

A part on the backs of those who proposed answers to the last Njalah. Unfortunately, "Ni ning'eh ning'eh," otherwise, "shadow," was close to, but not the right answer. As tradition holds it, I will only give the right answer after being crowned with a "nfor." So pls, propose my "nfor" quickly. Thanks and may the gods of our land hold the torch so we shall never know darkness.

N/B: LEGENDS OF OUR COMMON HERITAGE is a literary corner which seeks to remind us of who we are, where we come from, and where we are heading. To keep the corner alive, everybody's participation is encouraged.  
Munyong-Abieri

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