

Obasinjom Indigenous Preventive Medicines in Mamfe (Manyu) Division of Cameroon, 1922-2017

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Abstract: This paper examines the invaluable role played by the *Obasinjom* cult in preventive medicine among the Ejagham and the Banyang of Manyu Division, South West, Cameroon. The paper argues that in spite of the diminishing role of the *Obasinjom* in the provision of healthcare amidst the incursion of western medicine and Christianity, the *Obasinjom* was resilient in some communities of Manyu Division. The study employs the historical research method in the collection, interpretation, and analysis of the information gotten from primary and secondary sources. Interviews and archival materials were widely utilized to derive eyewitness accounts. The interviews were conducted on one-on-one basis and through focused group discussions. The findings reveal that the survival of the *Obasinjom* in some communities of Manyu from the 1990s was thanks to its ability to handle spiritual and mystical illnesses as well as its entertainment and cultural role in the communities.

Keywords: Obasinjom, Indigenous, Preventive Medicine, Manyu.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous medicine refers to health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plants, animal and mineral based medicine, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises, applied singularly or in combination to treat, diagnose and prevent illnesses or maintain well-being.¹ In many African societies, the tradi-practitioners or healers are the main actors in the domain of indigenous medicine. Among the Ejagham and the Banyang ethnic groups of Manyu division of Cameroon, the cult agencies were also very important actors in the provision of preventive medicine. These cults generally known in Ejagham as *ajom* and in Kenyang as *njoh* were involved in preventive, protective and curative aspect of indigenous medicine. The *ajom* carried out cleansing of individuals and the entire society to prevent psychic persons from inflicting illnesses on people and the entire community.² They produced herbal concoctions and powerful fetish objects to protect and cure persons of ailments. According to Ngambouk Vitalis P., Tabi Chama-James T. and Mathias Fubah A, *njom* is a concept considered by the Manyu people as anything that was used as a shield against physical or spiritual danger.³ It could be

¹ CN Fokunang, V, Ndikum, OY Tabi , RB Jiofack, B Ngameni et al "Traditional Medicine: Past, Present and Future Research and Development Prospects and Integration in the National Health System of Cameroon" in *African Journal of Traditional and Alternative Medicine*, Vol. 8(3),2011,284-295

² Interview with Divine Enownyaket, Kumba, October 19, 2019. He is a Member of the *Obasinjom* Society from Nchang Village

³ Ngambouk Vitalis P., Tabi Chama-James T. and Mathias Fubah A., "Communitarianism and the Obasinjom Mask Performance as Ritual Healing Among the Banyang and Ejagham of Southwest Cameroon" in Alley Parish (ed.), *Focus*

through tribal marks injected into an individual's body (*agbe njom*) and the subsequent application of a concoction comprised of herbs, barks of certain trees and roots onto the wounded surfaces with the aim of protecting the individual. The *agbe njom* served as a vaccine against witchcraft. The *njom* was also in liquid form, *agwoh njom* and was drunk to serve as protection to any individual. The *njom* was also in the form of metals, wood, necklaces worn on the neck, wrist or waist as well as in the form of a bangle, *ebhangne njom* worn on the wrist. They were other *njom* that were for the protection of individual families, *njom ndephenju* and those meant for the protection of the entire village, *njom etek* which was kept at the center of the village. The *Obasinjom* was another *njom* represented in the form of a masked object

The medicine cults were known as *ajom* because they used supernatural method to protect and cure and to identify and persecute witches and evil doers believed to be the main causation of ailments. They also interceded on behalf of the living for the ancestor and the gods to prevent, protect and cure illnesses on individuals and the entire village.⁴ The role of the cult agencies (*ajom*) in Manyu division has been succinctly described by Roschenthaler who states that:

The *ajom* deferred in their methods. Some just protected the community from epidemics and the intentions of malevolent individuals, while some also identified people as witches and thieves, and others also persecuted the culprits, made them ill and could even kill them. These latter cult agencies each specialized to bring and heal specific illnesses. Cult agencies singled out individuals who were involved in immoral consumption.⁵

The *Njom* was mostly concerned with ailments caused by supernatural forces. They were many types of such cult agencies in the Manyu Division of Cameroon, which rendered health services. In fact, between 1998 -2001, there were eighty-nine different cult agencies involved with tradition medicine practices in the Ejagham area alone.⁶ Some of these cult agencies were brought from Nigeria while others from Bamenda grassland region, brought by migrant slaves during the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.⁷ As a result, the Slaves taught their masters the knowledge of these medicines because they wanted to win their confidence so that they could not be resold.⁸ Examples of *ajom* (plural of *njom*) brought into Manyu land were *Ebibume* brought in Boki village of Biakwan.⁹ The *Agbanyang* was also brought by a slave in Adjinkpor and it worked against measles and took care of pregnant women and children. Other cult agencies brought by slaves from the Bamenda grassland include *Okebhone*, *Bigui* and *Moninjom*.¹⁰ In this paper, focus is only on the *Obasinjom* cult because it was considered by the people of Manyu as the most important and the god of medicine.

2. ORIGIN OF OBASINJOM

There are a lot of controversies about the origin of the *obasinjom*. According to Rothensthaler¹¹ and Ngambouk Vitalis, Tabi Chama, James T. and Mathias Fubah *Obasinjom* was a secret society or cult agency that originated from the Ejagham land.¹² These scholars asserts that, the *Obasinjom* mask was acquired from the Okuri people, a small village on the Cameroon-Nigeria frontier.¹³ A man called Obassi Abong was the first to use the *Obasinjom mask*.¹⁴ Etymologically, the

on *Civilizations and Cultures: Rituals Practices, Ethnic and Cultural Aspects and Role in Emotional Healing*(New York: Nova Publishers, 2014),6

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Röschensthaler, *Purchasing Culture: The Dissemination of Association and Cult Agencies in the Cross-River Region*. (London: Free Press, 2007),140

⁶ Ibid.,139

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Chem-Langhëë and E. S. D. Fomin, "Slavery and Slave Trade among the Banyang in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" in *Paideuma: Mitteilunzenzur Kulturkunde*, Bd. 41 (1995), pp. 191-206

⁹ Ibid.,151

¹⁰ Ibid.,151-153

¹¹ Röschensthaler, U.M., *Purchasing Culture: The Dissemination of Association and Cult Agencies in the Cross-River Region*,194

¹² Ngambouk Vitalis P., Tabi Chama-James T. and Mathias Fubah A., "Communitarianism and the Obasinjom Mask Performance as Ritual Healing Among the Banyang and Ejagham of Southwest Cameroon" in Alley Parish (ed.), *Focus on Civilizations and Cultures: Rituals Practices, Ethnic and Cultural Aspects and Role in Emotional Healing*(New York: Nova Publishers, 2014),19

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

word *Obasinjom* comes from two Ejagham words- *Obassi* meaning “God” and “Njom”-means medicine. *Obasinjom*, according to Ruel was a “cult agency of God”.¹⁵ It was regarded as the god of medicine.¹⁶

In the Boki land, the *Obasinjom* was known as *Oso wobokie*, meaning “the god of all cult agencies”.¹⁷ According to some informants, the *Obasinjom* knowledge was divinely revealed to Ata Egbe Obi who became the repository of the association’s wisdom.¹⁸ Oral sources also revealed that, the *Obasinjom* originated against the background of several mishaps that plagued many Ejagham villages.¹⁹ This period was marked by an abundance of witches.²⁰ During this period in Manyu, many people were killed by witches and marriages were ruined as a result of the actions of witches and wizards. Women were rendered sterile and many children were mysteriously killed by witches.²¹ It was also alleged that the witches caused the leopards in the forest which surrounded the Ejagham villages to attack people at their homes in broad daylight. Since the ordeal²² method of handling suspected witches was questionable by many people, God, *Obassi* therefore gave the *Obasinjom* to deter devilish activities of witches.²³ It was also alleged that during the period of the trans-Atlantic Slave trade, the *Obasinjom* was brought in to the Manyu land as a result of malevolence of the slaves. Wealthy members of Banyang and Ejagham ethnic groups owned slaves and were intermediaries in the long-distance trade that linked the Western and eastern or Central Grassfields and the Atlantic Coast of Cameroon with the lower Cross River Basin.²⁴ Among these slaves (*basem*, singular. *nsem*) were notorious kleptomaniacs, murderers and witchcraft suspects as well as debtors.²⁵ Slaves and their descendants were perceived and treated as kinless persons and kleptomaniacs with dangerous psychic powers. It was alleged that the ejaghams brought the *Obasinjom* to neutralize the mystical powers of these slaves.²⁶ Chem-Langhee and E.S.D. Fomin also asserts that the Banyang also borrowed cults such as the *Obasinjom* and *Nfam* from the Ejagham and developed them to ward off the evil spirits and kleptomania of the slaves.²⁷

The people of Upper Kembong therefore acquired the *Obasinjom* from Ekoneman-Ojongarrey for a price of seven slaves.²⁸ The Germans unfortunately confiscated the mask which was thrown into the Cross River.²⁹ This attitude of the German Government was in line with the perception of most European colonialists who regarded anything African as heathen and superstitious.³⁰ It was alleged that the masked later emerged from the water and returned to Upper Kembong.³¹ Therefore the resilience of the *Obasinjom* in some villages of Manyu could be attributed from its mystical powers as testified by its reappearance in Upper Kembong after being thrown in the Cross River.

¹⁵ Ruel, *Leopards and Leaders*, 210

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Röschenhaler, U.M., *Purchasing Culture: The Dissemination of Association and Cult Agencies in the Cross-River Region*, 194

¹⁸ This was drawn from Interviews conducted by Botela Enow Enow with Hans Ako, Leader of Obassinjom, Nfuni, 28, march 1990 and interview with Elias Tanyi, Interpreter of Obassinjom, Kembong, 31 march 1990, in Botela Enow, “Major Traditional Associations of the Ejagham People”

¹⁹ Hans-Joakim Koloss, “Obasinjom Among the Ejagham”, *African Arts*, Vol.18, No.2, February 19985, 63-103

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The ordeal method was the old way of trial by which the witch suspect was forced to prove his or her innocence by eating a fruit called esere. This method according to Ruel in *Leopards and Leaders* caused many untimely deaths.

²³ NAB, *Witchcraft and Cannibalism*, Ossidinge Division, File No. Af70, 1920, 2

²⁴ Ngambouk V. Pemunta, Tabi C. Tabenyang, Mathias F. Alubafi “Communitarianism and the Obasinjom Mask Performance as Ritual Healing among the Bayang and Ejagham of Southwest Cameroon”,

²⁵ *Paideuma*, Bd.41, 192-194

²⁶ Ngambouk V. Pemunta, Tabi C. Tabenyang, Mathias F. Alubafi “Communitarianism and the Obasinjom Mask Performance as Ritual Healing among the Bayang and Ejagham of Southwest Cameroon”,

²⁷ Chem-Langhëë, B, Fomin, E.S.D. (1995). “Slavery and Slave Trade among the Bayang in the nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries”, 196

²⁸ Hans-Joakim, “Obasinjom Among the Ejagham”, 63-103

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Verkijika Fanson, “scientific and Indigenous Medicine in the Bamenda Grassfields, cameroon: Contact. Conflict, Collaboration” Workshop on Public understanding of Science in Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, 22-24th September, 2010, 5

³¹ Ibid.

When news about the existence of *Obasinjom* reached other Ejagham villages, they quickly procured their own lodge by purchase. Due to the news of the remarkable success of the *Obasinjom* in preventive medicine and its successes in fighting against witchcraft in the Ejagham area, other indigenous groups in the cross-river valley like the Banyang and the Anyang people acquired theirs from the Ejagham through purchase. The origin of *Obasinjom* in the Ejagham land cannot be doubted especially because, in all the areas where it was adopted, the Ejagham language was used when it was performing its main task of divination.³² Even where it was sold, its Ejagham trade mark remained. Its identity in terms of name, titles, formal songs and salutations, language of diagnosis and therapy remained the same even in foreign land where it was sold.³³ The *Obasinjom* was even sold out of the Manyu land. It was sold to the Bakweri villages of Bova and Lysoka due to its effectiveness in the prevention and treatment of illnesses.³⁴ In a correspondence letter of February 25, 1969, to the Administrative Secretary of the Bakweri Local Council, Chief E.E, Isume-Nyoki of Bova, affirmed the presence of the *Obasinjom in the village* to care for and protect the inhabitants of the village.³⁵ The *Obasinjom* cult in Manyu was well structured and organized to enhance its task in the domain of medicine.

3. STRUCTURE OF THE OBASINJOM

The *Obasinjom* members were made up of three grades in ascending order in terms of hierarchy: *aboh atemambi*, *ebunjom* and *achi njom*. The *aboh atemambi* also known as *agune njom* were those who carried spears or guns during the *Obassinjom* performances.³⁶ At times *Obasinjom* ordered the *Agune-Njom* to shoot using its spear or gun towards particular spots believed to be hide-outs for witches.³⁷ This action could kill them or merely drive them away, thereby limiting the activities of witches in the society. The *aboh atemambi* also included novices who did the drumming and singing and were not allowed to enter into some areas of the *Obassinjom* secret forest, *eteme njom* which hosted the shrine. They were not also allowed to sit in some reserved areas of the *Obasinjom* house locally known as *nju njom*.³⁸ The novices were not allowed in these sacred places because most of them were usually youths and made up of new entrants and it was believed they could not withstand the temptation of revealing the secret of the cult.³⁹ Members of the *aboh atemambi* rank who violated sacred places in the *eteme njom* could be inflicted with mysterious illnesses. In 2011 for instance, a certain Akono of Besongabang was inflicted with dumbness for stealing dog meat that was specially prepared and kept in the *Obasinjom pot*, *ete njoh* in the *Obasinjom* secret forest.⁴⁰ While the members of the Ekpe society uses the goat in most of their ceremonies, the *Obasinjom* preferred dog because it was believed the dog has a third eye which enables it to see beyond normal.⁴¹ This according to *Obasinjom* members helped to reinforce their powers to carry out the task of divination.⁴²

The next grade, the *enunjom* were diviners who were prepared in the shrine to wear the *Obasinjom* regalia, the black gown called *ngoko njom*. This grade also involved individuals who went to the *Obasinjom* secret forest to collect herbs needed during ritual and healing performances of the *Obasinjom*.

³² Moses Odu Ndep, "An Evaluation of Obassinjom as a Traditional Dramatic Arts of the Ejagham People" (Bachelor of Arts Dissertation, University of Calabar, 1986), 18

³³ Ngambouk V. Pemunta, Tabi C. Tabenyang, Mathias F. Alubafi "Communitarianism and the Obasinjom Mask Performance as Ritual Healing among the Bayang and Ejagham of Southwest Cameroon", 23

³⁴ Ibid, 24

³⁵ NAB File No, Sc/a/1969/2, Native Doctors correspondence Generally

³⁶ Botela Enow Enow, "Traditional Associations of the Ejagham People", 55

³⁷ Ngambouk Vitalis P., Tabi Chama-James T. and Mathias Fubah A., "Communitarianism and the Obasinjom Mask Performance as Ritual Healing Among the Banyang and Ejagham of Southwest Cameroon", 38

³⁸ Malcolm Ruel *Leopards and Leaders: Constitutional Politics Among A Cross River People*. (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group) 1969, Sindiga, Isaac (ed.). *Traditional Medicine in Africa*. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995), 210-211

³⁹ Interview with Divine Enownyaket, Kumba, October 19, 2019. He is a Member of the *Obasinjom* Society from Nchang Village

⁴⁰ Interview with Julius Eyongfong, Besongabang, June 2022. He is a Natable and Member of Ekpe Society

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Interview with Valentine Ebot, Buea, March 23 2023, member of Ekpe society

The third and highest grade was the *achi njom*. Members of this grade were considered as elders and custodians of the *Obasinjom*'s paraphernalia and medicine.⁴³ The head of the *Obasinjom*, the *ebaninjom* who was the main ritual performer was a member of this grade. It was generally believed that only courageous individuals held the position of *ebaninjom*.⁴⁴ The *manjom*, considered as its wife also belonged in this grade. The *manjom* position is held by a young girl of between eight-ten years old and who is a virgin.⁴⁵ Her function was ritual cleansing of the black gown with feathers and offering eggs as food to the *Obasinjom* during its performances.

The organized structure of the *Obasinjom* cult was partly responsible for its survival in some Manyu villages. Its organigram promoted discipline among its members. This made it difficult for its norms to be violated and this enabled the *Obasinjom* to successfully perform its task of preventive healthcare. It was these successes that inspired some people in the Manyu villages to continue relying on the *obasinjom* for their healthcare survival in spite the spread of Christianity and western medicine in the area.

4. ROLE OF OBASINJOM IN PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

In the Manyu area, most often herbalists and other tradi -practitioners dealt with the physical aspects of disease, while the *Obasinjom* managed the spiritual dimension and prevented endemic diseases in the community.⁴⁶ The principal functions of the *Obasinjom* included prevention of endemic diseases, detection of witchcraft, fertility of women, protection of the village from all sorts of pestilence and directed all other minor cults and entertainment.⁴⁷ The *Obasinjom* prevented endemic diseases particularly those with supernatural undertones. Between 1960 and 1980, the Manyu land suffered from endemic diseases and other misfortunes believed to be caused by supernatural forces.⁴⁸ In the 1960s there was an outbreak of cattle disease that killed several cattle and in the 1970s and 1980s there were low rainfall which led to a drop in agricultural production.⁴⁹ These mishaps made life unbearable to the Manyu people and it was the *Obasinjom* that dictated the cause of this mishaps as being supernatural and prescribed treatment. As the overall controller over ritual medicine, the *Obasinjom* normalized the situation when it asked the *Ekpah*, another cult reserved only for women of free born to perform a ritual dance in the night to appease the gods.⁵⁰ The *Ekpah* performed its cleansing ritual at night, during which non-member and all the men were signaled to stay indoors.⁵¹ During the cleansing rituals, the women remained stag naked.⁵²

With regards to witchcraft, the *Obasinjom* also played a major role fighting against witches. It identified witches, chased them, destroyed their abode and protected some villages against malevolence.⁵³ This was because the *Obasinjom* considered witchcraft as the main cause of ailments, as well as an impediment to peace and wellbeing of the community. For this reason the *Obasinjom* considered it a natural duty to attack and destroy them, thus preempting witches from causing harm to persons and the community. The Manyu indigenes had a strong belief in the work and power of the *Obasinjom* especially in detecting and fighting witchcraft. This assertion is confirmed by Ruel who writes "I have met few people...who could be persuaded to doubt the ultimate power of the association to perform what it claims to perform: the discovery and exposure of witchcraft"⁵⁴ The *Obasinjom* usually attacked witches only during the early hours of the morning. This is because it was believed these witches and wizards move back to their abodes after committing their atrocities only during this time and as such could be easily trapped.⁵⁵

⁴³ Interview with Bernard Nsem Etta, Ntenako, September 02 2022. He is the head of *Obasinjom* in Ntenako

⁴⁴ Odu, "Evaluation of *Obasinjom*", 18-19

⁴⁵ NAB, J. M. R Smith, "Report on Local Customs: Keaka and Banyang Tribes, Mamfe Division, Cameroon Province" File No. Af 67,1921

⁴⁶ Interview with Divine Enownyaket, Kumba, October 19, 2019.

⁴⁷ Enow Botela Enow, "Majar Associations of the Ejagham People",59

⁴⁸ Ngambouk Vitalis P., Tabi Chama-James T. and Mathias Fubah A., "Communitarianism and the *Obasinjom* Mask Performance as Ritual Healing Among the Banyang and Ejagham of Southwest Cameroon,38

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.,36-37

⁵¹ Interview with Catherine Agboranyah, Ntenako, May 06, 2022. She is a female Notable of Ntenako

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Odu, "An Evaluation of *Obassinjom* as a Traditional Dramatic Arts of the Ejagham People",32

⁵⁴ Ruel, *Leopards and Leaders*,213

⁵⁵ Interview with Julius Eyongfong

Initially, people who were identified with witchcraft activities were ordered to be brought before the crowd during a dance.⁵⁶ The *Obasinjom* even ordered witches to be dragged out of their homes to the dancing ground for interrogation and appropriate punishment. Those accused were expected to appease the *Obasinjom* by renouncing such practices or else be ostracized from the village.⁵⁷ It was a very severe punishment for anyone to be ostracized in a village because it marked beginning of an unstable life for that person. The people of the receiving village considered and treated him or her as an outcast.⁵⁸ Later on especially from the 1990s the *Obasinjom* simply called names of persons and invited them to personally meet him in the *Obasinjom* house without making any accusation.⁵⁹ This is because they were aware of the legal implication of accusing anybody of witchcraft without any tangible proof.

Apart from detecting witches and exposing them, the *Obasinjom* also destroyed the areas which were believed to be their abode.⁶⁰ In the early 1990s for instance, the Enow family of Besongabang consulted the *Obasinjom* shrine in Kembong due to the persistent mysterious dead of their family members.⁶¹ They offered eggs and palm wine which was used during the divination. During a public performance in the form of a dance, the *Obasinjom* identified an orange tree behind the Enow's family home as an abode of witches, and ordered through the interpreter, *Osame njom*, that it should be cut down.⁶² After cutting down the tree, a clay pot containing human hair, finger nails and pieces of cloths belonging to the death members of Enow's family and those shortlisted for death were found.⁶³ It was established that it was a family member in quest for wealth that was behind the atrocities. After some ritual performances by the *Obasinjom*, the persistent deaths in the Enow family ended.

Apart from families, individuals also consulted the *Obasinjom* for their healthcare needs. This was because they believed it had mystical powers to cure and protect using elements of animals and plants for the preparation of concoction for them.⁶⁴ The *Obasinjom* it was alleged succeeded to restore the fertility of some women who consulted it. During its divination dance performance, the exact causes of the women infertility were made known by the *Obassinjom*. It was generally believed that most often this barrenness was caused by witchcraft and curse. After sending away the evil spirits, the *Obasinjom* prepared and administered some medicinal concoctions to the women and it was alleged the barren women conceived within two months.⁶⁵ In the 1967 for instance, Mbeng Nchenge of Mfuni consulted the *Obasinjom* for a problem of infertility. The family presented the *Obasinjom* with three jugs of palm wine and ten eggs for diagnose and treatment. The thirty-eight years old barren woman became pregnant, a few months after she was administered medicine by the *Obassinjom*.⁶⁶

The *Obasinjom* also carried out immunization against spiritual and witchcraft related diseases especially on children. The black gown, *ngoko njom* was used to give spiritual vaccination to the children. At the end of each year, the children in the villages aged between four and ten years were covered with the gown and some chants were repeated before they were taken out.⁶⁷ Such children were said to have been immunized against witchcraft, ailments or any pestilence. This ritual was very common in villages such as Kembong, Besongabang and in the Ejagham villages of Eyumojock sub division.

⁵⁶ Interview with Divine Enownyaket, Kumba, October 19, 2019

⁵⁷ Botela Enow Enow, "Traditional Associations of the Ejagham People", Maitrise Dissertation, University of Yaounde, 1990, 60

⁵⁸ Interview with Divine Enownyaket, Kumba, October 19, 2019. He is a Member of the *Obasinjom* Society from Nchang Village

⁵⁹ Interview with Valentine Ebot, Buea, April 12, 2023. He is an Elite of Besongabang

⁶⁰ Odu, "An Evaluation of *Obassinjom* as a Traditional Dramatic Arts of the Ejagham People", 32

⁶¹ Ngambouk Vitalis P., Tabi Chama-James T. and Mathias Fubah A., "Communitarianism and the *Obasinjom* Mask Performance as Ritual Healing Among the Banyang and Ejagham of Southwest Cameroon" 37-38

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 38

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Botela Enow Enow, "Traditional Associations of the Ejagham People", Maitrise Dissertation, University of Yaounde, 1990, 60

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 61

The Manyu people relied on the *Obasinjom* because they considered it as their chief traditional healer and the most respectable deity found in almost all the villages.⁶⁸ It was most dreaded and feared and could destroy any witch, wizard and supernatural force that was against the human progress and that is why it was found in almost all Manyu villages. In spite of the invaluable role played by the *Obasinjom* in the Manyu communities, the institution faced several challenges that gradually saw its activities dying in several Manyu villages.

5. DECLINING ROLE OF THE OBASINJOM

The *Obasinjom* cult had faced a lot of challenges from the time it arrived the Ejagham land, during the German and British eras of administration until recently. Even though it survived the challenges during the colonial era, from the 2000s the activities of the *Obasinjom* started disappearing in many Manyu villages unlike before when its dance exhibitions were frequent. It became very rare to witness *Obasinjom* staging a dance in villages like Egbekaw, Besongabang, Nchang, Eyanchang and in many of the Ejagham villages such as Eyumojock, Ewelle and Otu.⁶⁹ Many indigenes of Manyu relied on the *Obasinjom* in one way or the other for their healthcare and welfare needs until recently when its activities were dying in many villages. This was because of the negative legacy left by the colonialists, the proliferation of western healthcare facilities, Christianity and Western education.

The German officials never tolerated the *Obasinjom* to carry out its activities in the Manyu land and took measures to destroy it. When the people of Upper Kembong acquired their *Obasinjom* from Ekoneman-Ojongarrey for a price of seven slaves.⁷⁰ The Germans, unfortunately, confiscated the mask and threw into the Cross River.⁷¹ Fortunately the mask reappeared mystically to upper Kembong.⁷² The British colonial authorities, on their part, deterred the activities of the *obasinjom* in healthcare provision. British established a hospital in Mamfe and appointed doctors Glovers, Gibson and Siegers as Medical Offices (MO)⁷³. This was the first modern hospital that was established in manyu division. They not only established mobile units for vaccination and treatment of these diseases, they also established dispensaries in places like Tinto and Kembong with western trained medical officers and nurses employed to handle illnesses.⁷⁴ They carried out a series of medical campaigns especially against common diseases like small pox, yaws and other common infections. During such campaigns the indigenes of the various villages were usually educated by the Western Medical Officers on the fact that diseases like yaws were not caused by supernatural factors but their mode of living. One of such health campaigns instructed by the District Officer of Mamfe was held in Kendem village in September 21, 1935.⁷⁵ Through these health campaigns many were convinced that their problem could easily be handled by western medicine and not *Obasinjom*. The campaigns destroyed the myth of disease causation by supernatural forces and this encouraged many indigenes to drift towards western medicine for their healthcare survival. In 1935 out of the 52000 people who suffered from yaws in the Mamfe Division, 12,480 cases were treated during that year using Western health facilities.⁷⁶ During the year 1938, 3,338 persons were treated with Sobata injection as against 2,234 in 1937.⁷⁷

The British also organized vaccination campaigns to prevent diseases like small pox. In 1922 there was vaccination campaign in Tali area and this was followed in 1923 by another organised in Nchang, Eyanyang, Mbakang and Aiyukaba. These vaccination campaigns were a challenge to the system of inoculation that was carried out by the *Obasinjom* using the black gown, *ngoko njom*. Even with these healthcare campaigns, many of the villagers usually escaped to the bush for lack of trust in western medicine.⁷⁸ They still held strongly to their traditional system of inoculation against diseases. The British

⁶⁸ Ngambouk Vitalis P., Tabi Chama-James T. and Mathias Fubah A., "Communitarianism and the Obasinjom Mask Performance as Ritual Healing Among the Banyang and Ejagham of Southwest Cameroon", 22

⁶⁹ These villages were very prominent in the *Obasinjom* cult

⁷⁰ Hans-Joakim, "Obasinjom Among the Ejagham", 63-103

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Victor Julius Ngoh, *Cameroon 1884-Present (2018): The History of a People*. (Yaoundé: Design House, 2019), 153

⁷⁴ NAB, File No Sc/a 1942/3, Kembong NA Dispensary, Mamfe Division, 1

⁷⁵ NAB, File No Sc/a(1133)13, Yaws Scheme Mamfe Division, 30

⁷⁶ Ibid., 6

⁷⁷ Ibid., 26

⁷⁸ NAB, File No 3/1923, Sc/a (1923)12, Reported outbreak of small Pox and Other Epidemics Diseases, Divisional Office Mamfe, 56

also encourage the Native Authorities to train their own staff on basic Western healthcare provision. Many indigenes were as such trained as Vaccinators, Dressers and even Nurses to handle some common illnesses. For instance, Benjam Abang was trained and employed to work in Kendem to treat yaws.⁷⁹ With his assistance, 150 inhabitants of Kendem were examined and 21 treated of the disease in 1935.⁸⁰ These measures contributed to make the *Obasinjom* redundant in the provision of healthcare in many Manyu villages.

The early missionaries who came to Manyu campaigned against the *Obasinjom* yet it still survived because of its entertainment and cultural value in the Manyu communities. The early missionaries set out a long crusade against the *Obasinjom* mask which they dubbed “fetishes” and which according to them challenged the ideology and moral standard of Christian integrity.⁸¹ They did not only preach against and condemned the *Obasinjom*, but also connived with the colonial authorities to disrupt its activities. This negative perception by the missionaries influenced the colonial authority in Mamfe to pass a law in 1933 which ordered all villages to relinquish their objects which were sunk in the middle of the Cross River.⁸² The missionaries denounced the practices of the *Obasinjom* in healthcare provision as barbaric and satanic.⁸³ They could not understand how a masked figure could effectively perform divination.

The evening demonstrations of the *Obasinjom* turned most often to conflict with the evening doctrinal classes of the missionaries. Since most often the *Obasinjom* dance took place in the evening, it coincided with evening doctrinal classes, usually organised by the missionaries to gain more Christian converts. Whenever there was an indication that the *Obasinjom* dance was going to be staged, the doctrinal classes were usually deserted by potential converts. This conflict of interest only helped to intensify the hatred for the *Obasinjom* by the Christian missionaries.

In 1952, there was a conflict between the missionaries and the *Obasinjom* in Besongabang. On a certain Sunday of 1952, Sango Meyer, a Swiss missionary resident in Besongabang attempted to wrestle with the masked figure of *Obasinjom*.⁸⁴ He came to conduct a Sunday church service but realised with dismay that the church building was completely empty. But he was soon informed that the *Obasinjom* was staging a dance at the usual ceremonial ground in the village. There were widespread rumours of many people with illnesses in the village due to witchcraft and this attracted the entire villagers to the ceremonial ground. When Sango Meyer went to the ceremonial ground to see what was happening, he was astonished to find many of his Christians watching the *Obasinjom* in display. He angrily seized the ritual trumpet, *erutu* from one of the members and attempted using it to beat up the masked figure but failed because he could neither move forward nor backward as soon as the instrument was in his hands.⁸⁵ News of this incident was later spread by the missionaries to other villages in Manyu, depicting the *Obasinjom* as an evil institution. This incident created fear among some Manyu people and even members of *Obasinjom* who either renounced their membership in to the *Obasinjom* or reduced their participation in its activities.⁸⁶

Moreover, the Christian missions opened different health units that used modern medicine and drugs to handle epidemics. In 1968, the Roman Catholics created the Saint John of God Hospital in Nguti, near Mamfe while the Presbyterians opened the Manyemen Hospital to take care of the health needs of the people in around Manyu division. The health services offered by these religious bodies were greatly appreciated by many indigenes of Manyu due to their reliable and quality services, which at times were charitable. The rapidity with which some common illnesses like sleeping sickness and yellow fever believed to be caused by supernatural force, were treated by these hospitals and health centres using European drugs and other modern facilities, caused many people to refrain from consulting the *Obasinjom* for their health problems.⁸⁷ This caused the *Obasinjom* to be redundant in many villages in Manyu Division.

⁷⁹ NAB, File No Sc/a(1133)13, Yaws Scheme Mamfe Division, 23

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Guy Alexander Thomas, “Why Do We Need the White Man’s God? African Contributions and Responses to the Formation of Christian Movements in Cameroon, 1914-1968” PhD Thesis, Department of History, University of London, 2001, 143

⁸² Ibid., 144

⁸³ Enow Botela Enow, “Major Associations of the Ejagham People”, 64

⁸⁴ Ibid., 65

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Odu, “Evaluation of the Obasinjom”, 41

Other health units that were opened in the study locals include the Baptist Health Centres opened on December 19, 2011 in Ndebaya in Eyumojock and Mamfe Central Sub-division respectively. The Ndebaya Baptist health center was opened thanks to the initiative of an indigene and Hematologists, Dr. Philip Ndum to cater for the health needs of patients from Ekok, Ekonemanawa, Otu, Eyumojock, Mbenyan, Akwen, Mbakem and Ndebaya.⁸⁸ About 150 clients visited the health unit monthly.⁸⁹ The Mamfe Baptist Health Center was opened in September 19, 2013 by an initiative of Dr. Emmanuel Arrey Tambe, a Vitro Retinal Surgeon with the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) Health Services and an indigene of the area.⁹⁰ The creation of these mission health centers together with those established by the government contributed in reducing the dependence on *Obasinjom* in healthcare provision where these conventional health facilities were found. But in some areas like in Babong and Okuri where these healthcare institutions were far, and where the people were imbued with their culture the *Obasinjom* survived.

Pentecostalism is a recent dimension in Christianity that contributed to a decline in the *Obasinjom* activities in healthcare provision in Manyu division. The doctrines of the Pentecostals include: The biblical emphasis on salvation and justification by faith; the doctrine of the second coming of Jesus Christ; the doctrine of the holy spirit that empowers the Christians to live victoriously and to witness effectively and whose gift enables a believer to perform the supernatural; and the stress on divine healing.⁹¹ Pentecostals believe strongly in the baptism of the Holy Spirit that occurred on the day of the Pentecost amongst the early disciples that made them speak in tongues. This is similar with African trade-practitioners who sometimes speak in tongues and coded language only understood by the gods and the ancestors. During divination for instance, the *Obasinjom* usually spoke in coded language which is only interpreted to the public by an interpreter known as *Osame njom*.

The Pentecostals hold that speaking in tongues (glossolalia) is the beginning of a new kind of Christian living that is empowered and graced by gifts of the spirit: discernment of error, power over satanic influences, healing and miracle working abilities and wisdom.⁹² Pentecostals believe physical illnesses are treated through spiritual means. A good number of them prefer praying to physically ill person rather than taking them to the hospital or consulting a tradi-practitioner. They believe anyone can have this spiritual ability to treat illnesses. This is accomplished by the laying of hands on the head of the patient and praying. To strengthen the belief of its followers and win more souls, testimonies from people healed are usually made during crusades and regular church services. Pentecostalism with its faith healing doctrine seemed to provide a strong solution to the problem of ill health amongst many Manyu people, thereby attracting many into these churches. The dependence on *Obasinjom* to many Christian was contradiction to their religious belief.⁹³ This partly explains why many of the indigenous people of Manyu relegated their belief in *Obasinjom* for solutions to their health problems.⁹⁴

In order to break the monopoly of handling spiritual ailments by cults like the *Obasinjom*, the Pentecostal churches from the 1990s resorted to the preaching of spiritual healing through miracles. According to these Pentecostal churches, illnesses occurred to people as a result of punishment caused by an offence committed against God or by an enemy machination through witchcraft powers or other evil devices.⁹⁵ Just like in most African traditional societies, the Pentecostal Christians also belief illnesses or diseases caused by preternatural or supernatural forces are dealt with in a supernatural or spiritual ways only. Therefore, such illnesses ought to be handled spiritually especially through prayers.⁹⁶ Hence many indigenes from the Manyu especially in the 2000s were seen trooping out in their hundreds to attend various miracles and healing church services which they believed could solve their health problems and tribulations. Many of these miracle churches,

⁸⁸Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services, "Ndebaya Baptist HC"., cbchealthservices.org

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Akoko Robert Mbe "New Pentecostalism in the Wake of the Economic Crisis in Cameroon", Nordic Journal of African Studies (Lieden:African Studies Centre), 11(3),2002,359-376

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Interview with Laura Achare in Buea on June 3, 2021. She was a regular Visitor of the Synagogue Church of All Nations of T.B Joshua. she is 43 years old

⁹⁵ Owumi Bernard, Raji Sakiru O. and Aliyu Taofeck Kolawole,"Religious Beliefs and the Utilization of Traditional Medicine Among Members of Pentecostal Churches in Emurin, Ogun State Nigeria" in *African Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.3,No.4,2013, 23-34, available at www.sachajournals.com accessed on 22nd May 2021.

⁹⁶ Ibid

which had branches in some villages and towns of Mamfe owed their origin from neighbouring Nigeria.⁹⁷ They gain converts even from the mainstream churches like the Roman Catholic and the Presbyterian. This claim was confirmed in a meeting of the Association of the Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda in 2013 when Reverend Father John Ambe reiterated that many Catholic Christians were abandoning the faith for Pentecostal churches.⁹⁸

Some of the outstanding Pentecostal churches whose activities negatively affected the functioning of the obasinjom in Manyu were the Synagogue Church of All Nations of Prophet T. B. Joshua, The Omega Fire Ministry of Apostle Johnson Souleman and the Lords Chosen Ministry of Pastor Lazarus Mouka. Through his telecast display of miracle healing and prophecies, via Emmanuel TV, Temitope Balogun Joshua popularly referred as T.B Joshua attracted a lot people all over the world including indigenes from Manyu who depended on the Obasinjom for their healthcare.. Many like Enow Etta travelled to Lagos to seek for solutions to their health problems. Enow Etta left Mamfe and visited the Synagogue Church of All Nations of Prophet T. B Joshua to be treated of his illness.⁹⁹ According to Ferdinand Odi, many of his friends including Enow Etta often travel to Nigeria to meet these prophets because modern and traditional medicine could not handle their illnesses.¹⁰⁰ Odi exclaimed that most of those he met at the border town of Ekok in transit to Nigeria, believed that with prayers, touch and spread of anointing water from the men of God, their health problems could be resolved.¹⁰¹ Whether or not these patients were actually healed of their ailments is a subject of another research, but the bottom line is that these churches dissuaded many people from the use of traditional medicine and cults like *Obasinjom*, as a solution to their health problems. These Pentecostal churches made their converts to see *Obasinjom* of devilish and its activities as ungodly and against the teachings of the christian faith.

Apart from the role of Christianity, the *Obasinjom* role in the provision of healthcare was declining because the institution was later noted for charlatanism. In the Ejagham area for instance, there existed some groups of individuals who had their own fake *Obasinjom* mask pretending to carryout divination and treatment of illnesses.¹⁰² They usually sent their agents secretly to find background information about their patients. This information was usually revealed during their performance, thus creating an impression that it was given to them by the gods or the ancestors.¹⁰³ At times they secretly implanted some items in the compound of their clients and during their performance ,the *Obasinjom* usually ordered that the place be dug ,pretending that the items found were implanted by a witch and was the cause of the predicaments of their client. These charlatan cult agents contributed to the gradual loss of public interest in the activities of the *obasinjom* and as a healthcare provider.

In some of the Banyang and Ejagham villages the *obasinjom* have gone for years without performing a dance not to talk of initiating new members. In these villages, old members of the cult who are mostly aged people meet to eat and drink. In other areas like in Obang and Babong, the *Obasinjom* is still active because of the remoteness of the villages.¹⁰⁴ Its main task of divination is still performed when need arises. The major problem that is increasingly weakening the activities of the cult agencies in providing healthcare services today is the rapid fall in membership because the death old members are not replaced by new ones. Due to their exposure to western ideas, the younger generation see no need to associate themselves to these local health providers. Many of the younger generation are disinterested in *Obasinjom* due to the cultural stigma associated with animism of its being pre- Christian.¹⁰⁵ This stigma portrayed it as superstitious institution made of old people who invoked evil.

⁹⁷ Many of the Pastors of these churches that established in the Mamfe villages were Nigerians and they were branches of churches in Nigeria

⁹⁸ Mark Baretta, "Cameroon: Pentecostal Churches can have a strong Political Say" obtained from baretta.news accessed on 22nd May 2021.

⁹⁹ Interview with Ferdinand Odi, Ekok, Monday 24th May 2021. He is 45 years old.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Interview with Divine Enownyaket, Kumba, October 19, 2019. He is a Member of the Obassinjom Society from Nchang Village

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Odu, "Evaluation of Obasinjom",42

¹⁰⁵ Adeola Oladipupo , " Traditional Medicine Struggle in Nigeria" in New Lines Magazine, December 29,2021 accessed on 10, November 2022 at newlinesmag.com

6. CONCLUSION

In spite of these *Obasinjom* still remained resilient in some Manyu villages and even beyond. Even some Christians still especially as the last resort when all mean of treatment has failed. Examples of such illnesses are bone fracture, yellow fever and malaria.

During important ceremonies like funerals of important personalities, coronation of Chiefs and other important festivals, the *Obasinjom* dance is usually staged for entertainment purpose. For instance, in Kembong, when the Pa Elias Tanyi, a prominent head of the *Obasinjom* cult in Kembong died in 2017, a dance was staged in his honour.¹⁰⁶ In some areas in Manyu especially in central Ejagham, the *Obasinjom* continued to provide healing services to many people who suffered from illnesses believed to be caused by supernatural forces. The indigenes still relied on the *Obasinjom* because they believe illnesses like psychiatric disorder and epilepsy for instance could only be handled spiritually by the *Obasinjom*, a situation which they believed western medicine could not handle.

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¹⁰⁶ Interview with Ashu, Tanyi, aged 46, son of a Leader of Obasinjom, Buea, June 2019

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