

The Life of Hubert Ogunde

Part One

I have had a very successful career in show business. Although it has been satisfying, my life as a showman has not been very exciting but it hasn't been a dull life either.

I am happy I took to the stage at the time I did. For today, although there aren't many Nigerians in the profession yet, I am beginning to see what great prospects lie ahead for the showman in this country.

Nigerians are great lovers of fun and anyone who has a talent for entertaining others has a bright future in this country.

I was born at Ososa, a little village four miles west of Ijebu Ode in Western Nigeria, in 1916. My mother was a pagan at the time I was born. She was later converted to Christianity.

My father, Jeremiah D. Ogunde, was a pastor at the Baptist Church at Ijebu-Ife, about sixty miles from my home. It is strange how he came to marry a pagan.

My mother's pagan connections had tremendous influence on my early life. Her father was an Ife priest.

In those days singing, drumming and dancing were regular features of Ife festivals. As I had to stay most of the times with my mother, she took me along with her each time she was attending a pagan festival.

My grandfather -- the Ife priest -- also had a special liking for me and wanted me at his side always. I too loved the old man and loved to be at his side when he was performing his Ife ceremonies.

It was by being constantly at the old man's side watching him pouring out his incantations and listening to the songs and drums of the pagans that I first developed interest in juju music and plays.

I started schooling in 1926 at the Baptist School Ife where my father, in addition to being the pastor in charge of the mission, was also the headmaster of the school. He was also the school's organist.

Soon I joined the school's choir. This was my second inspiration in my journey to music.

The church songs of those days were soul-rendering. For me it had its special charm.

Here I was, a youth versed, as I could claim to be then, in juju music and used to the altar of the Ife priest. I had eaten fowls and sheep slaughtered in pagan festivals and enjoyed them to the full. Then I was in a church, singing songs of praise to God and denouncing the juju man and his ways.

The effect on me was too much for words. Thanks to God that I was not biased either way.

As small as I was then, I began to see that I could blend the charms and splendour of the church house and the colourful solemnity of Ife altar and use it to good advantage.

It was such a rich experience and one I shall ever be grateful that I had.

1933 was my last year in school -- as a pupil. That was at the African Bethel School, Ijebu Ode.

The following year, 1934, I was employed as a teacher in the St. John's C.M.S. School, in my hometown, Ososa, on a commencing salary of TEN SHILLINGS a month.

It was as a teacher that I started to give serious attention to music. My tutors were my school's organist, Mr. G. A. Adenuga, and my father.

I taught for eight years and was also an organist for eight years.

Then it was a special advantage for a teacher to know how to play the organ. For the schools then were owned by the church and the pastors and clergymen who ran the affairs of the school took it as an integral part of the church.

So it was not enough to know your subjects as a teacher. You had to know nearly everything about the church in order to progress.

And because the Church then was built on songs, the organist was looked upon as the live wire of the place. Such was the position I enjoyed for eight years in Abeokuta and Ijebu Provinces where I was most of the time.

It was at the Oke Ona United School Abeokuta that I first organised a band. The band had forty-two members.

We used bugles and flutes. The flutes we used were like the ones used by the Army and the Police.

Soon the band became very popular all over the province. My personal popularity grew with that of the band. I was liked and talked about by nearly everybody. But it was not without its consequences.

The girls came in. They clung around me. And what names did they not call me! "Darling"; "honey"; "sweetie"; "mine".

From every corner of Abeokuta reports flowed in of girls fighting and quarrelling because of Hubert Ogunde. Often the quarrels ended up in the Police station.

I became a regular visitor to the Abeokuta Police Station -- just to say what I knew about the girls who had fought over me. And often they were girls whose faces I could not remember having seen before.

In the midst of fellow boys I appeared pleased to be the talk of the town.

But in my sober moments and at home I felt very embarrassed about it all. The position remained so for three years.

When the school closed for the Christmas holiday in 1941 I went to Ibadan to visit a brother. This visit made its own mark in my life. For it was during that time that I applied and became a policeman!

This was how it happened:

It was a dull afternoon. I was strolling past the Dugbe Market when I saw a huge crowd in the Police Barracks, which was close by. I grew curious.

"What is it?", I asked a man who was passing by at the time.

"Oh", he said casually, "They are recruiting young men for the Force".

"Recruiting young men for the Police Force?", I asked myself.

I had never thought of joining the force before then although I had always admired the smart uniforms of policemen especially when they were on parade.

I stood still for a while watching what was going on in the barracks. There wasn't much activity in the place. There were young men, some of them looking very hungry and underfed.

Others lined up in a queue. Then I decided to try my luck. What it was that pushed me to that decision, I cannot say.

I jumped into the market, bought a sheet of foolscap paper, bent over my knees and drafted an application. Then I hurried to the barracks to join the Nigerian Police Force. There were over 500 in the queue.

Soon an officer, whose muscles looked as tough as those of a bullfighter, appeared on the scene.

We moved nearer and the officer began what I considered was a most careful examination of our physical standing. Finally he selected forty of us.

We were conducted to a room where a written test was set for us. I scored the highest marks in the test and was finally chosen along with three others to join the Police Force.

We were sent to the then Police Training College at Enugu. That was in 1942.

Of course, I did not write back to my school to resign my appointment!

After my training I was posted to Ibadan. I worked as a traffic officer, then I was moved to the Criminal Investigations Department and in 1943 I was transferred to Lagos.

Coming to Lagos in 1943 brought a spectacular change to my life.

TO BE CONTINUED