

## The Life of Hubert Ogunde

### Part Two

While in the Police Force I was a member of the Aladoro Church, Lagos. I took such active interest in the activities of the Church that later in 1943 I was commissioned to write a Service of Songs for the Church.

A Service of Songs is just a list of songs for use on various occasions. This was thought a particularly important assignment because the Aladoro Church attached so much importance to songs.

I took up the job enthusiastically for I knew that a successful discharge of it would make me a hero in the church. What I did not realise then was that the writing of the Service of Songs would open a new world to me.

Something struck me when I started assembling songs for the book. I thought it was not enough to sing songs. There must be action to make it lively. There were several passages in the songs I had gathered and in the Bible which I was also studying intensely which could be dramatised successfully.

For some days I helped up the preparation of the book, thinking how to add "life" to the Songs. Soon I found myself writing my first play "The Garden of Eden." It was first staged in the Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos, on June 12, 1944, by members of the Aladoro Church.

The success of this play inspired me to write my second play "African and God". Later in the same year (1944) I wrote and directed the staging of "Israel in Egypt" and "Nebukanezzer's Reign".

1945 was another year of writing of plays for me. I wrote "Strike and Hunger"; "Human Parasites"; "Journey to Heaven"; "The Black Forest"; and "King Solomon". All the plays were based on themes in the Bible and in other religious works.

I was invalided from the Police Force in 1945 after I had attained the rank of Second Class Constable. It is not true, as has been said in many quarters, that I reached the inspectorate grade in the Force.

Perhaps what the friends who placed me so high meant to say was that the second class constable of those days is the equivalent of the sub inspector of today.

Following my invaliding from the Police Force I turned a professional showman. But most of my plays continued to depict religious thoughts.

I broke into a new field in 1946 when I wrote and dramatised "Herbert Macaulay" in memory of that greatest of Nigerian patriots Herbert Samuel Heelas Macaulay who died earlier in the year. I followed that up with "Mr. Devil's Money" and "The Tiger's Empire".

I was, by standards obtaining in the country, doing fine as a playwright. But I knew that I had a long way to go before I could be a truly professional playwright and showman. Daily I wanted to go to Europe and study drama. I was convinced that an overseas study course would greatly add to the show talents which I already possessed.

I beat my own procrastination in 1947 and went to England and was lucky to be admitted in the Buddy Bradley School of Dancing at the Piccadilly Circus, London. During my stay there I had the opportunity of visiting several theatres and film studios in the United Kingdom and later I went to Paris on a sight-seeing trip.

Returning to Nigeria towards the end of the year I wrote more plays -- "Towards Liberty" and "Yours Forever". The name Hubert Ogunde was now becoming fairly well known in the country. To establish myself firmly I used the whole of 1948 for tours to advertise myself and my plays. I visited Ghana and the Ivory Coast. The big receptions I received encouraged me greatly. The crowd at Ivory Coast was so big that I had to make the gate fee ONE POUND flat. Yet the hall was packed to capacity.

Perhaps I have been giving you too much of the rosy side of my life. Let's go back now to 1946 for a little excitement.

I was in Jos, Northern Nigeria. I had gone there during my Northern tour to stage the play "Strike and Hunger". The play concerned the 1945 general strike by Nigerian workers. The strike brought misery to many homes and nearly brought many Government and commercial businesses to a halt.

Suddenly in the middle of the play policemen swooped on me and my party and we were dragged to the local police station where we were arrested and locked up in cells. Nothing so stunned me as that arrest. I just did not understand it at all. I thought it was a dream.

I was charged with attempting to incite His Majesty's subjects to disorder. The court found me guilty and I was fined a total of £125!

Before the Jos incident I had staged the play in Kaduna, Zaria, Lagos, Ibadan and Abeokuta without trouble. That was why I was shocked that the Jos Police took a different attitude.

However my arrest did me a good turn. It made me a hero in Northern Nigeria. Fans gathered round me and made voluntary subscriptions to pay for the services of two counsel, who defended me, and the court fine. I was left a handsome balance after paying for the expenses!

This wonderful generosity of the people on the Plateau inspired me to continue my tour of the Region. Unfortunately for me the Kano Police were not prepared to be outdone in the business of protecting His Majesty's subjects from the "bad" influences of Hubert Ogunde and His Concert Party. Just as I landed in Kano the Police called on me and warned me not to stage "Strike and Hunger" in the walled city.

When I first came into the show business I used to play with native drums. Most of the songs in my plays were in Yoruba. That was the position until I visited Ghana in 1948.

The journey to Ghana was a big failure. It was obvious why I failed. The Ghanaians could not understand the Yoruba dialect and that killed their interest in my plays.

I think I can claim that I brought Nigerian girls into music. When I started my band in 1950 I thought girls would be useful material -- to attract boys! So I started teaching girls how to play the alto -- saxophone.

The first girl I taught was Clementina, who later became my wife. I met her when she attended one of my shows in Ibadan, in 1946.

Clementina, who comes from my village Ososa, had come to Ibadan to spend her holidays. After seeing the shows, she moved up to me and said she wanted to join the party which was then composed of about thirty girls.

I took her on but it was not long when I found myself falling in love with her. Since we married in 1946, Clementina has been taking the leading roles in all my plays. We visited England together.

My failure in Ghana in 1948 was always in my mind. As every showman would, I was always planning to revisit Ghana and redeem my good name. The opportunity came in December 1950 when my band had reached a comparatively high standard.

It was the first time I took the band out of Lagos. On our way we stopped at Lome and played at a local club. After the show we were invited by Mr. Tonvenyadji, who owns a night club, to play at his club on New Year's eve. Mr. Tonvenyadji made such a fuss about Hubert Ogunde and His Girls from Nigeria and I am happy we did not let him down.

Nigerian parents don't encourage their children -- especially girls -- to take to the stage. Often the girls are willing -- they find the stage exciting and charming -- but their parents prevail on them to quit.

Once I had a brilliant girl in my party. I was paying her £15 a month. But she quit to take a job as a petrol station attendant on £3 a month! Her parents thought that was a much more respectable job!

Certainly I could not continue to put up with this state of affairs. It was clearly ruining my business. I had to think how to arrest the situation.

The answer was to make it a family business where I would have complete control over the members.

Today members of the Ogunde Concert Party are nearly all from my family. Three of the girls are my wives; two are my relatives who have been married to the manager of the party and his assistant. The boys are members of my family.