COLLECTANEA

# SEVEN BINI CHARMS

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The Bini are an agricultural people, numbering about 300,000, who live in and around Benin City, Nigeria, in West Africa. I lived among them as an ethnolinguistic fieldworker during the academic year 1955-56.

The number seven appears in the title, not because of the sacredness of that number to the ancient Sumerians and their cultural heirs, but because, of the dozen or so magic formulae in my Bini files, there were precisely seven that I felt able to parse, translate, and interpret without further help from an informant.

The term "charm," meaning "incantation," is one that I chose in preference to the near-synonym "spell," meaning "recitation," only with some hesitancy. While both are subcategories of oral literature, charms are normally sung, but spells are spoken without musical superimposition. All seven of the formulae described here were obtained from Mr. Osagie Ayobahan of Benin in August, 1963, while he was a student at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and I was Director of the African Language Program at New Haven College, West Haven, Connecticut. Although only one of the seven was specifically identified by Mr. Ayobahan as a song, it is my impression -- based on memory and a subsequent comparison of the formulae -- that all of them may be either chanted or recited. Because of this option, and because the term "charm" is more widely used by folklorists than the term "spell," I have chosen to use the former term only, throughout this article.

Because of the primarily cultural and artistic, rather than linguistic and analytic, intent of the article, I shall transcribe all Bini words in the Standard, or Church Mission Society, Orthography. (The Standard Orthography, while less arbitrary than conventional English spelling, is nonetheless nonphonemic in several ways: some of its graphemes represent allophones, others morphophonemes, and still others diagraph components -- in effect, that is, distinctive features. A strictly phonemic orthography, of the kind which I have used elsewhere, employs one and only one written symbol for each distinctive speech-sound.) The only respect in which I shall deviate from Standard Orthography is in adding tone-markings, without which only a native speaker could infer the pitch on which each vowel is to be pronounced.

For each charm, a text and three translations will be provided. The first translation is literal and verbatim. The second is a free prose translation. And the third is a verse translation, in the form of a rhyming couplet with optional alliteration, modeled on such traditional English verbalisms as

"Sticks and stones
May break my bones..."

Because of differences in cultural context, however, even a variety of translations may not make the import of the Bini text clear to the foreign reader. For this reason, the translations will be followed in each case by a prose interpretation, whose object is to convey, as nearly as possible, the same "moral" to the English-speaking reader that it would to the Bini-speaking auditor.

1. Ẹzẹ̀ ẹ́ gbé 'tèbètébé.

   a. river not beat surface-insect

   b. The river doesn't hurt the water-skater.

   c. However high the river wave,
      It's not the water-skater's grave.

   d. No difficulty is too great to be surmounted.

2. Èsfasfo 'r' ọ́ tìe y'ẹ́hámẹ̄n.

   a. Bristlebill he he call put hole (of) water

   b. The Bristlebill, let him call to the water-hole.

   c. Let the lordly Bristlebill
      Call other birds to drink their fill.

   d. It's better to be a leader than a follower.

3. Ọ̀ kpòl' èmùẹn, ɔr' émūẹn lēlé.

   a. he sweep ash, him ask follow

   b. Who sweeps ashes (onto others) will soon be covered by ashes himself.

   c. Trash swept abroad, though cheaper,
      Flies back to foul the sweeper.

   d. Misdeeds return to plague the miscreant.

4. Okhùo í mìanmían ìkpólōwíẹ.

   a. woman not forget sweeping (of) morning

   b. Women mustn't forget morning housework.

   c. Wives who fail to sweep
      Fail not to wail and weep.

   d. It doesn't pay to neglect one's obligations.

5. À má rú 'khọ́, à í wú 'khọ́.

   a. one not do bad, one not die bad

   b. Those who don't do evil don't die untimely deaths.

   c. He who breathes no evil breath
      Does not die an evil death.

   d. Virtue is rewarded, vice punished.

6. À má nyán 'húnmwùn, à í yá rú èsé.

   a. one not own head, one not go do well

   b. If one does not control others, he cannot do a favor (to a witch by transferring the control).

   c. Who cannot cause my head to itch
      Can never hand it to a witch.

   d. Don't let you enemies gain power over you.

7. Ghá gbé! Ghá gbe! À má kpé n'úẹn; ù t'òbò rùẹ́ gbé.

   a. go beat! go beat! one not call give you; you arm you beat

   b. Go ahead and dance! If no one keeps time for you, you can keep time for yourself.

   c. None need beat out time for you:
      The dancing you yourself can do.

   d. You don't need anyone's permission to enjoy yourself.

To a non-Bini, the comprehensibility of these charms is extremely variable. Charm 5 (evil deeds, evil death), perhaps because it also functions as a proverb, is so transparent as to make four different English versions seem unnecessary. On the other hand, Charm 6 (no possession, no sorcery), is wholly unintelligible without some knowledge of Bini tradition. To understand it, one must know, first, that the Bini regard the head as the seat not of intelligence but of magic power and, second, that witches are regarded as real and as being most dangerous when one owes them "favors." Charm 7 (don't ask, just do it) is baffling not in concept but only in vocabulary. To appreciate it, one must know that the Bini verbs gbe and kpe and the Bini noun òbó have multiple idiomatic meanings. Gbe means not only "batter," "hurt," or "kill" (as in Charm 1) but also "beat," "stamp," or "dance." Kpe means not only "play (an instrument)" but also "sing (a chorus)' and "call (a dance-step)." And òbó means not only "branch" but also "arm," "hand," and even "oneself."

As far as style is concerned, the most striking feature of the charms is the fact that each contains at least one duplication of form. Sometimes the form in question is a root, as in the case of le- le; sometimes a

stem, as in the case of tebe-tebe; and sometimes a word, as in the case of emuen ... emuen. As a literary device, its functional equivalent in English is sound-repetition -- primarily rhyme and secondarily alliteration.

Since magic in Benin is associated with a minority of elderly pagans rather than with the Christian majority, I was rather surprised, when I copied these charms down, to find them so clearly remembered by a scientifically-inclined young college student like Mr. Ayobahan. Although it is possible that he was a nativist by ideology or an antiquarian by avocation, I think it more likely that my informant remembered them so well because he had reinterpreted them in his own mind, in such a way as to make them relevant to contemporary concerns. Originally, there seems no doubt, these charms were verbal formulae sung, perhaps to the accompaniment of a magic ritual, in the belief that they had a supernatural power to compel others to behave in the manner described in the charm-text. In recent decades, however, I suspect that they have undergone a Nietzschean transvaluation into practical maxims of the kind familiar to us from mirror-tabs and wall-placards reading "Think" or "Do it now!" Today they are magical only in the suggestive sense in which Coué's slogans (such as "Every day, in every way ...") are magical: that is, when repeated with conviction, they have an auto-hypnotic effect, leading us to confirm in behavior what we anticipate in belief.