

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

It is gratifying to note that *The Nigerian Field*, the journal of the 75 year old Nigerian Field Society, featured "African Mankala" (Ayo ọlọpọ̀n) known here as Ayo, in its edition of April 2005. I congratulate Dr. Roselyn Adele Walker, all the way from Dallas, Texas, USA, for rekindling in us nostalgic memories of this ancient game. Ayo is a most intriguing pastime whose origin, now lost in obscurity, is closely identified with the African continent. Stewart Culin in 1894 called it "the national game of Africa". One often reads in the sports pages of Nigerian newspapers of board games like draughts, chess, scrabble and chequers, but seldom does Ayo get a mention. My delight and excitement are then understandable when *The Nigerian Field* came out with Dr. Walker's article on Ayo. I salute *The Nigerian Field*.

I have been particularly interested in Ayo subsequent to the indelible impression on my mind made by my Papa, late David Oladele Ajao, who introduced me to the game at the age of about four, nearly seventy years ago. My earliest recollection of the game is watching my parents play together. I soon became a partner, initially playing the *Ayo J'odu* version with my father. The *Jerin-Jerin* version of the game was my mother's favourite. I graduated to playing *Ayo-Sanyo*, the standard Yoruba version, and many times I won, or perhaps Papa deliberately allowed me to win. I confess I enjoyed the toffee which was the reward more than the winning.

I must have learnt counting and basic arithmetic through Ayo. This was the methodology of a veteran teacher for introducing his son to numbers. Ayo not only "appeals to the intellect," as pointed out by Dr. Walker in her article, but also develops mathematical skill. Dr. Afolabi Ogunlusi, a master player and an ardent promoter of the game, once told me that it combines anticipation, permutation and concentration. It is in regard of this mathematical connection that the contribution of Mr. O.J. Afolayan comes to mind. Mr. Afolayan, a lecturer at the computer centre of the Federal Polytechnic, Ado-Ekiti, as far back as 1991 introduced "Ayo Ọlọpọ̀n as a packaged automated assorted game" on the computer through his "Abamode software products". The idea was to make the game fully computerised. The latest development is the yet to be registered software version called "Away Game" from Didier and Olivier Guitton from Toulouse in France, evidence of the world-wide interest in the game

The three versions of playing Ayo, as mentioned above, have been described in detail by Chief A.O. Odeleye in his book *Ayo: a popular Yoruba game*, published by the University Press Limited in 1979. The title of Chief Odeleye's book made me think, until I left school, that Ayo was a popular game among Yoruba people only. But as I reached adulthood and moved round outside Yoruba country, I found that Ayo, known as *sikilige* (Hausa), *Ocho* (Igbo), *Okwe* (Afemai), *Daa* (Tiv), *Koyan* (Yakhur), *Ogiurhise* (Edo), is more than a Yoruba game and has a pan-Nigeria connection. In later years in my travels, I discovered

the global spread of Ayo, seeing it played in Saudi Arabia and the Philippines. The Philippino game, known as *Sunnka*, has seven holes on each side of the board and is played with shells. In the New World it is called *Warri*, and there is even a Warri Society International dedicated to gathering and dispersing information on the "oldest game in the world". It can be reached worldwide on www.warrisociety.com.

In medical treatment, I have found Ayo useful in the therapy and rehabilitation of the injured hand. The patient is motivated to play Ayo and carry out all the therapeutic movements with interest and determination. The movements involve the fingers (in gripping), the wrist, radio-ulnar joints (in pronation and supination), the elbow and even the shoulder. They are all used in playing Ayo and the patient is saved from other repetitive exercises and consequent boredom.

Ayo is more than a recreational activity for the Yoruba, and Dr. Roslyn Adele Walker has dealt exhaustively with the traditional and cultural aspects.

The UNESCO has now beamed a search-light to make tangible cultural heritage and give Ayo pride of place in Yoruba tradition. Ayo is the source of certain Yoruba aphorisms. For instance, when you say "Igbèhin ni alayo ta," it means "He who laughs last laughs longest." The player of great skill and experience, when expected to lose, brings his wizardry to bear towards the end of the game and wins. "Nwọn nta ayo fun ra won," means "Two people are playing tricks and trying to outwit each other." "Jẹ ki nje ni Ayo fi dun" means "Live and let live." I learnt a few of these Yoruba good-humoured remarks as I sat near my grandfather, Baale Morenikeji Ajao, Baale Yaaku, at play.

The senior staff clubs of the University of Lagos and Obafemi Awolowo University, trying to promote the game, used to hold Ayo competitions. The Sports Council also introduced Ayo as one of the games in the National Sports Festival. Regrettably, these were feeble attempts and are now little heard of.

The Nigerian Field Society, one of the oldest NGO's in the country and certainly the oldest in the field of environmental and cultural development, has done well through the hands of Dr. Roselyn Adele Walker in *The Nigerian Field* to remind us of the heritage that Ayo represents. But it can do even better and the honour will be greater if and when the Nigerian Field Society can sponsor an Ayo competition on a global network.

The Editor and readers of *The Nigerian Field* may think I am an ardent Ayo player adept at the game. They are mistaken! I am only moderately knowledgeable, still learning as I look forward to my proper retirement when I shall find time to enjoy "the oldest game in the world".

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OBITUARY

Margaret Amosu 1920-2005

Margaret Amosu died on July 4 at the Whittington Hospital in London following a heart attack. She was 84 years old, having been born in Ilford, Essex, in 1920.

She came from a family that believed strongly in education and, despite being herself an Eleven-Plus failure, she was to graduate from her beloved Harrow Weald County School with matric. However, the family was very poor, relying on relatives to subsidise bus fares and school uniforms. Although her younger brother was to win a scholarship to Cambridge to study engineering, Margaret went out to work, and enrolled to study for a part-time degree at Birkbeck College, London.

The 1939-45 war intervened almost immediately, however, and she joined the Land Army's forestry division in Cumberland. In 1940 she joined the Communist Party.

She was, for the rest of her life, a socialist and an internationalist, committed to CND, to the Movement for Colonial Freedom and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. She was passionately against the war in Iraq and marched—in a wheelchair—through London in February 2003 with two million others against Britain's participation in the US-led coalition.

In the 1950s, Margaret (then Margaret Melzer) was the medical librarian at the Chester Beatty Cancer Research Institute, the job that first allowed her to combine her librarianship skills with a lifelong respect for science and medicine, born during her first job as a clerk in Glaxo's general laboratory.

Margaret married Nunasu Amosu in 1958, coming to Nigeria in 1963 where she was Africana Librarian, University of Ibadan, and later Medical Librarian of the country's leading teaching hospital, U.C.H. She became Deputy Librarian, University of Ibadan in



1975. She returned to England in 1977 where she lived in Oxford until 2000.

Faced with worsening health problems, including progressive heart failure and long-standing insulin-dependent diabetes, she moved to London to be near her daughters. She continued to maintain close links with friends in Oxford, however.

She encountered many like-minded people in the city—some in the local community, others visiting from countries like India and South Africa, who shared her passionate commitment to the humanitarian cause. She loved the city for its international character, its beauty and its tradition of free-thinking.

Margaret was an active member of the Nigerian Field Society both in Nigeria and England. Her beautiful garden in Crowther Lane, U.I., won the competition organised by the Society in 1974. Courageous and independent in spirit, her frailty in her latter years did not deter her from taking part in activities she deemed important.

A keen gardener at home, she also had allotments at various locations, where she grew hundreds of pounds of vegetables with great satisfaction and enjoyment.

Margaret is survived by 2 daughters and 2 grandsons of whom she was enormously proud.



Statue of the goddess Osun by the river
[photo by Gerhard Merzeder]