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Sunny
Oribioye

'A

LL was silent again.

Akin placed his drum under his left armpit and slapped it three or four times. He tilted his head to one side, and his lips parted in a smile. Then he

The Other Life

struck again, varying the intensity of his strokes, moving the drum so that the bells sang out a stirring tune.'

This short excerpt from Nigerian novelist Cyprian Ekwensi's novella, *The Drummer Boy*, about a musically precocious but blind lad he called Akin, might well be used to describe Akin's flesh-and-blood alter ego, the 71-year-old Benjamin Aderounmu, widely known as Kokoro the blind minstrel.

Benjamin Aderounmu

Indeed, the events of Akin's youth as narrated by Cyprian Ekwensi could well pass for an account of Kokoro's life in the little-known years he wandered from his native Owo in Ondo State of Nigeria before his eventual settlement in Lagos in 1947 as a street entertainer.

First published in 1960, the novella *The Drummer Boy* relates the adventures of Akin in the urban setting of Lagos, albeit with less-crowded conditions as obtain today, armed with a samba, a West African term for the tambourine,

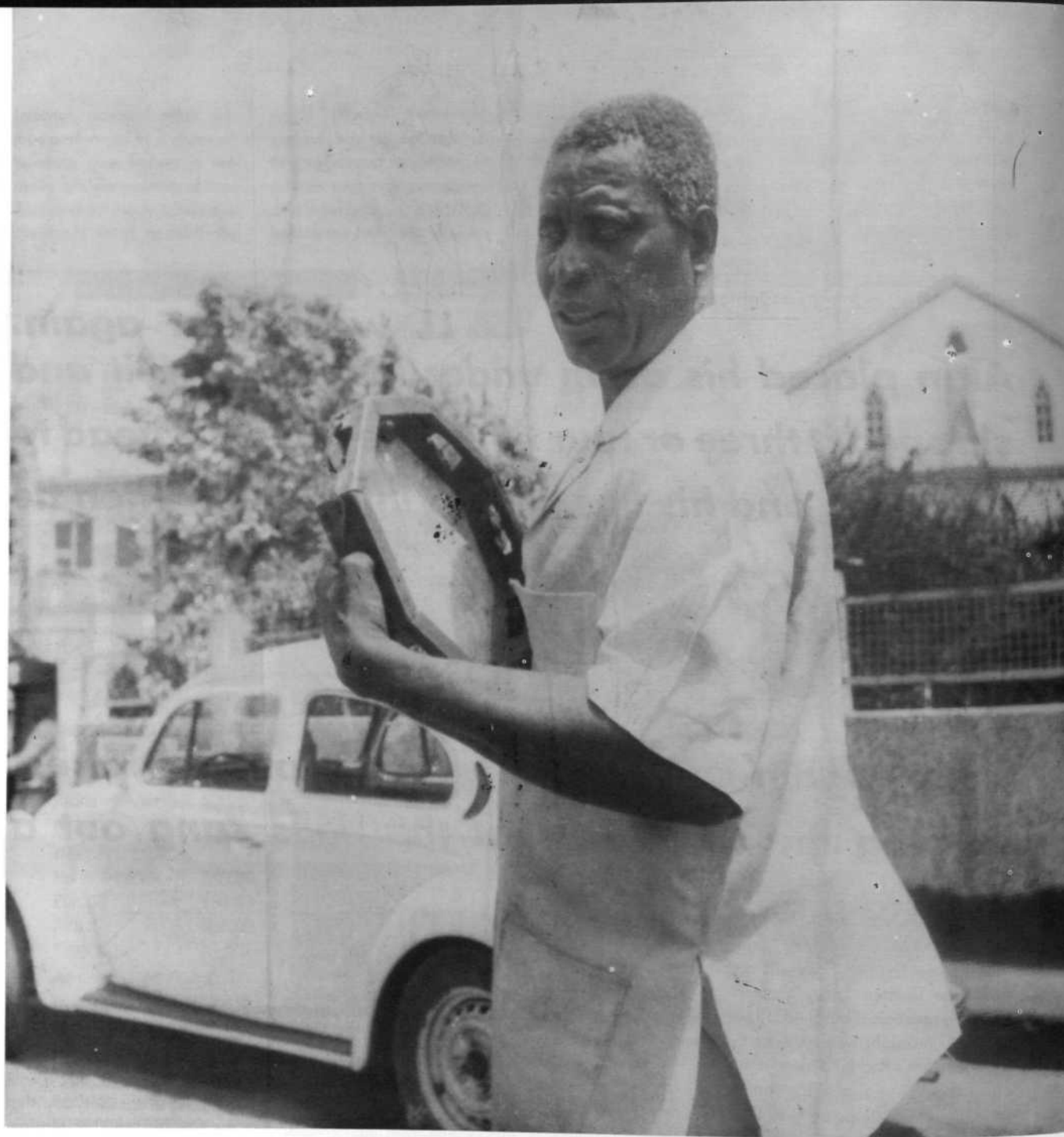
which is a small drum, flat and circular in shape with a cluster of bells around the rim. With his drum, Akin derives a sort of narcotic pleasure and escape from the normal worries of a blind person and also brings joy, comfort and good cheer to those who listen to him play his music.

Deserted by his parents and without any education or trade, Akin makes the open streets his permanent haunt, occasionally enjoying the goodwill of solicitous members of the public like Madam Bisi and Herbert, although the latter turns out to belong to the ilk of humanity who would exploit the blind and handicapped for personal gain.

Akin so relished his freedom con-

ferred by the power of his music, which affords him the resources to 'buy a little akara (bean cakes) to eat everyday' that he spurns the genuine offer of Madam Bisi, who felt scandalised that such a gifted little boy should be allowed to roam the streets, and would rather see him in a home for the reform of wayward little boys, where he could learn useful skills.

In his flight from the prospect of a dull and dreary life in Mr. Fletcher's Boys Forest Home, Akin falls in with bad company in the persons of Herbert and his three other musician-friends who are members of the Oro cult, and almost gets into trouble with the police. His triumph over the criminal musicians marks the beginning of his rehabilitation at the Boys Forest



Kokoro, Lagos street Samba

Home. But now without his precious samba by his side.

The living kokoro is no less attached to his samba and no less a symbol of the universal appeal of music and its capacity to radiate joy. Little is known about the pre-1947 antecedents of kokoro, the year he finally arrived in Lagos and started entertaining Lagosians with a tin drum before switching on to the samba. Born into the royal family in Owo Town in

Ondo State on February 25, 1925, as this writer gathered from Kokoro's son (who declined to give his name), the little Benjamin attended the Modern School at Okitipupa where he gradually started going blind midway into his education. Kokoro himself had alleged in an interview that his blindness was caused by the machinations of a step-mother.

Confirming this charge, Kokoro's son revealed that his grandfather, Kokoro's

father, was a prince of Owo who had five wives. He attributed Kokoro's blindness to the animosity between the wives of Kokoro's father, saying 'if you have four or five wives you can expect such a thing to happen. My grandfather loved my father more than he did the children of the other wives'.

But Kokoro had taken to music at a young age, so that when he started going blind from unknown causes, he only had

to turn to his music for succour and as a means of earning his livelihood. He teamed up with two other musicians at Okitipupa and formed a band playing at social gatherings. Later, he left for Ilesha and thence to Ibadan before finally settling in Lagos in 1947. That was the period in which Cyprian Ekwensi conceived the idea of using Akin as the central character of his novella.

Kokoro has been a part of the Lagos social scene since 1947, exposed to the likes of Victor Olaiya and the late I. K. Dairo who have been influences on his music. Being a poor, blind and itinerant musician who could not afford the luxury of more sophisticated instruments, Kokoro has remained wedded to his samba, which is even a great improvement on the tin drum he started with.

Like Akin the drummer boy, Kokoro derives great pleasure from his music and has entertained Lagos crowds both on and off the streets. He has also become something of a legend as one of the oldest musicians still actively practising their art in an unadulterated form inspiring paintings and various other works of art. Married to Mrs. Beatrice Aderounmu, he has two children, a young man and a girl. His music is a cross between fuji and highlife delivered sometimes rather spontaneously. A one-man act, Kokoro, according to his son, waxed a record in the '60s which appears not to have been successful.

Both Kokoro and Akin the drummer boy share characteristics which to the interested observer, would lead to the inescapable conclusion that Kokoro must be the prototype for Akin. While Akin is referred to by his creator as a drummer and vocalist (p29), Kokoro's performances have drawn the tag percussionist and singer. Kokoro's musical journey had taken him from Owo through Okitipupa to Ibadan and Lagos. In *The Drummer Boy*, Akin undertook a tour, 'from West to East' and back, through towns like Osogbo and Ile-Ife, entertaining people and profiting from their goodwill before ill-luck befell him in the form of the three criminal musicians he had earlier met at Ayike's eating house.

Kokoro the blind minstrel is nowhere near rehabilitation, either by his music or by the society he serves.

And there is no doubt that Kokoro, like Akin has been a victim of the most imaginable forms of exploitation that blind people of his talent are wont to be subjected to by relations and impostors. Akin was cruelly exploited by the owner of the eating house he helped set up with his music, Ayike, and Herbert and his three friends who robbed him and insisted on sharing the proceeds from his performances. And in an interview with a writer with FETAC NEWS, it was revealed by a cultural officer in the department of culture that, 'the old man (Kokoro) has always fallen easy prey to exploitation by his successive managers'. The officer added that these managers were never sympathetic nor considerate of the old man's condition. 'They all want to exploit him, and that's why in spite of the money he makes, you always find him back on the street'.

Continuing, the officer discloses: 'Don't believe what they tell you about his liking so much street performances. The fact is they are mostly cheats. There was the case of the one, in whose account was paid the emolument for the old man during a world tour. He embezzled it. Then, is the case of the other who is collaborating with some of his family members to defraud the old man'.

But while Kokoro has never learnt or practised any trade outside of his music, the life of Akin was meant to be an experiment in the rehabilitation of the blind, which Cyprian Ekwensi asserts was inspired by a little blind boy he encountered at the Igbobi Orthopaedic Hospital in 1947. The Drummer Boy, he insists, was not modelled on Kokoro but on this boy.

Ekwensi says: 'I was a teacher in Igbobi College in 1947. I taught biology, chemistry and English. I had just come out of the forest department then... and Igbobi College shared a common fence with Igbobi Orthopaedic Hospital. You could just slip under the fence and you are in Igbobi Orthopaedic. There was a blind boy who used to go from bed to bed ministering to people, but he was not a drummer. He was just a musician and he used to bring comfort to the patients; and he wasn't a member of the staff. Then it struck me that creativity, you see when you want to create something, you take a little here, a little there then you bring it all together. It struck me that I could use a character like that in a story, a kind-hearted blind boy who is loved because he's blind and who reciprocates that love in a useful way that if he were not blind, he would do better. Later on, I used to see this Kokoro. And I said 'look at this man', it's coincidence of a type. But it was not modelled on him, although it may have stolen something from him'.

Among the manifestations of Ekwensi's creative adventure in *The Drummer Boy* was the character Herbert, whom Ekwensi says in real life was a houseboy of his who was very crooked. In this story, he was the houseboy of a kind teacher whose death he caused by collusion with others. The idea of Braille, he discloses, was a new invention then which he read up and which appealed to his imagination. 'The blind school is a creation of mine. I don't know if there is such a blind school in the forest somewhere', he says.

However, while it is assumed that Akin was eventually rehabilitated in Mr. Fletcher's Boy's Forest Home, Kokoro the blind minstrel is nowhere near rehabilitation, either by his music or by the society he serves. In 1994, Kokoro under the aegis of the Switzerland-based Federlos Circus Theatre directed by Nikki Pop, undertook a tour of European countries including Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Belgium. He has also been in Ghana, Togo and Zimbabwe among other African countries, says his son. At 71, for Kokoro the blind minstrel, the show still goes on. **GR**