

# **“Dembe”: A Traditional Boxing Sport Among the Hausa People of Nigeria during the Pre-colonial and Post-colonial Times**

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## **Abstract**

This paper evaluates “Dembe” A traditional Boxing Sport among the Hausa people of Nigeria during the pre-colonial and post-colonial Times. Dembe is a martial art of the Hausa people from northern Nigeria where the goal is to subdue ones opponent by knocking them to the floor. This is a traditional sport with rich culture but has not been given the patronage and sponsorship it deserves. The paper primarily makes use of both primary and secondary sources of generating information. This is another sport which if properly managed could generate a lot of revenue to both the boxers and the country at large. Unfortunately, it has not been properly managed. It has been observed that the teeming youths between the ages of 12 and 40 years in various parts of Northern Nigeria are without a trade, formal education and above all, can hardly communicate in English language. They are gathered and wait patiently to either watch or participate in Dembe. If this sport is developed and well managed, it would help to reduce cases of idleness, unemployment and cases of crime on the parts of the youths. This paper traces the origin of ‘Dembe’ processes involved, reward and a comparison with modern boxing. Findings from this study would throw more light on the challenges that this sport faces and bring out salient issues that policy makers or scholars can improve on to give the sport a wider coverage and recognition.

## **Introduction**

Africa and Nigeria in particular has diverse ethnic groups, tribes, beliefs and cultures before colonial rule. Each of such cultures or beliefs were meant for the good and betterment of the respective communities or societies. There were usually seasons for everything. For example during rainy seasons, some of the people were involved in farming or even fishing. However, during the dry seasons when farm work was over, the people were involved in other activities such as hunting,

basket making and a host of other activities. Sporting activities were not neglected as they were tools or instruments to which a society rated its military strength, that of its neighbor or rival. A society with much younger, energetic and brave men who were said to have defeated their opponents during competitions were accorded recognition in the society. The quest for fame or recognition was the driving force for many of the people who were involved in pre-colonial sporting activities in Africa, Nigeria and the Hausa nation in particular. Different sporting activities were observed or practiced in pre-colonial Hausa land but the most admired was the 'Dembe'. 'Dembe' is a martial art of the Hausa people from northern Nigeria: - where the goal is to subdue one's opponent by knocking them to the floor. One source described it as "a game of bare-bodied male boxers, who often leave the battlefield with broken jaws, bloodied noses, and cracked ribs"<sup>1</sup> According to *Marriam-Webster's Dictionary*, sports are defined as "a contest or game in which people do certain physical activities according to a specific set of rules and compete against each other."<sup>2</sup>

Sport has also been defined as:

An activity requiring direct physical competition with an opponent(s), has established procedures and rules, and defined criteria for determining victory... Whether or not there is an immediate tangible reward (e.g., trophy, medal, or money) for victory is irrelevant because competitors have the immediate goal of winning the contest. What happens afterward does not change the nature of the context.<sup>3</sup>

Little is known as to exactly when prehistoric sporting activities began in human due to paucity of the relevant archeological records, but it is likely that the first athletic events were contests of the physical skills most important in fighting, hunting, and warfare (e.g., races, throwing contests, target games, and combat sports),<sup>4</sup>

This fact has also been corroborated in the paper titled "Evolution of sport". It maintained that: sport likely had its origins as a way for men to develop and practice hunting targets with projectiles, and stalking is obvious. Because primitive warfare used the same skills, some have argued that training for war is the source of all sport<sup>5</sup>

Yet according to Williams:

Sport, for many individuals, is a cult that fulfills generalized and specific need gratifications. It represents a specific and externalized value system that inculcates its own form of good and evil, rewards and punishments, as well as a complete matrix of individualized normative outcomes. In a way it can be said that sport determines its own situation in the context of culture.<sup>6</sup>

However, one may not be far to note or realize that, even among animals, we see certain animals such as hens, dogs, ram, goats, etc. put up mock fights aimed to develop their strength, speed, endurance and will. Interestingly, man is not only superior but also a rational being as compared to animals. At every evolutionary period of man, sport has played an important role in helping to define, develop and test newly acquired physical, psychic and social skills. As man moves from the status of forager to hunter, there arose the need to acquire new skills which could aid him in his hunt for game.

It has also been observed that:

They became the training which would prepare young hunters for the hunt. Youths emulated the elders of the tribe, to ready themselves for the day when they would have to do the providing. It was probably at this time that the first team sports evolved, as a result of the collective effort needed in stalking, trapping, killing and transporting. As the population increased, conflicts arose between tribes over territory, herds, wealth, prestige and due to mutual fears. As tribes clashed with each other, the sport field became the training ground for battle. Those who succeeded in the warrior-like play of the sport field were best equipped for survival and victory on the battlefield.<sup>7</sup>

### **Origin of 'Dembe'**

Little is known as to when or how 'Dembe' started in Hausa land. Our informants whose knowledge is faint about the origin of the sport claimed that it must have begun during the days of prophets. He and his group could not however, mention the names of the prophets in whose time the sport started. They pointed to the fact that, they (boxers) are descendants of butchers who got involved in this sport during harvest periods. They alleged that, during such periods, descendants of 'Dembe' families went round villages organising fighting bouts with other butcher guilds from the area as part of the festive entertainment.<sup>8</sup> Power, a researcher of Nigerian martial culture, in his writing traces the origin of 'Dembe' in Nigeria while revealing its striking similarities to the image of Egyptian boxers from the 12th and 13th dynasties when he reveals that:

Muslim scholars claim it arrived in Northern Nigeria sometime between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century. However, Dembe boxing – also known as Kokawa – started out among the lower class of the Hausa trained animal slaughterers – the Butcher caste group.<sup>9</sup>

It is believed to be from such development that, Dembe sport developed and became a traditional practice where men are prepared for war. Victorious fighters under this sport were also privileged to marry wives as a price for victory. Presently, the fighters use the sport as a demonstration of masculinity, as well as a means to acquire personal prestige and earn a living .

### **Processes Required Before Going in for a Fight**

The first process is to be sure that the would-be fighter traces his genealogy to the butcher family. This is followed by his watching the sport from outside the ring for at least two months after which he is required to pick a mentor who would groom him in the sport with various skills. During this period, one is taught how to fold his hand and ready to punch with different tricks or fighting styles. People who venture into the sport for the first time would always sustain injuries on their knuckles due to the hard nature of the training. However, such injuries are treated with local herbs except for severe injuries that are taken to the local chemist or hospital. Regrettably, the boxers prefer to be treated on herbs to the English drugs. This training is expected to last for another one month or two, though it varies from place to place depending on how fast such individuals are able to learn the rope of the game. At the end of the apprenticeship, the mentee receives blessings from his mentor with the encouragement to go out and dominate. At this period, he is required to take up a pseudo name which he would be using in the ring. Having participated in the sport for twelve (12) months, this individual is now qualified to start training other members most especially if he is victorious in his fights. There is no age limit as to when individuals must start such trainings but in most cases it is between the ages of ten (10) and above.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Rules of 'Dembe'**

like boxing and every other modern day sport, the following rules are observed in Dembe;

1. Only a fist is wrapped and punches are directed to the opponent using the wrapped first.
2. The maximum rounds in a match is three (3)
3. No boxer directs punches on the lower part of the body and no head butt.
4. No Boxer can run out of the playing circle
5. Three (3) yellow cards leads to disqualification.
6. The officials for the sport are; a Referee, two side judges and a time keeper.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Fight**

According to our informants, fighters are required or expected to fight with people of their age range, starting from (12) twelve years and above. Fighters can also pick whoever they want to challenge to a fight. The challenged individual may decide to decline the challenge and be regarded as a weakling and a disgrace to his clan or boldly accept the challenge. Charms are freely used or displayed as both a sign of protection and as a tool for intimidating opponents.<sup>12</sup>

During olden days, our source informed us that, fighters gathered on a clannish basis around a sand pit where they would taunt rivals to a fight and in most cases a fight would suddenly break up. 'Dembe' is gradually taking a more organised shape. Like modern boxing, a circle or line of approximately fifty (5) or sixty (60) meters is drawn which symbolises the ring for the match with a referee who must have been an experienced 'Dembe' fighter of between five to seven years of consistence practice. Like all sports, there are rules and penalties.

The fighters are called up for their fights through the assigned announcer. The referee for the match would remind them of the rules of the games after checking to ensure that they had not dangerous weapons on them which is a common practice in the modern sport arena. While this activity is going on, singers and drummers play mesmeric songs to embolden fighters. Once the signal is given, the fighters bind their punching hand – referred to as ‘the spear’ – with a rope called ‘kara,’ making it as strong as a stone, while the weaker hand is used as a shield for protection and must be held with the palm open facing towards the opponent. The game is arranged or divided into three (3) rounds of 3 minutes each. Winners can emerge under any of the followings;

1. An opponent who accidentally or mistakenly crosses his heel, foot or legs across the drawn ring is considered a loser. Even at this there are rules which must be applied before a conclusion is made. The first instance of defaults attracts one (1) point, second instance (2) attracts two (2) points, while the third (3<sup>rd</sup>) instance attracts three (3) points. For one to win in a match, one needs at least three (3) points against his opponent.
2. A punch that knocks one’s opponent to the ground or such an individual touches his finger tip to the ground has 3 points out rightly against him. Once a winner emerges, the fight is then called off by the referee of the game. Where a winner did not emerge after the three (3) rounds, the match is called off and re-fixed for another day.

According to our informants, winners are awarded the following prizes depending on the tournaments; At the state or national level;

1. 1<sup>st</sup> prize-Gold; The amount of (1,000,000) one million naira is given to the winner and is placed on a monthly salary by the state government, pending when he retires. A house is also built for such an individual in the state capital.
2. The person who comes second in the fight takes silver and the sum of (500,000) five hundred thousand naira only while third prize attracts Bronze and the sum of (300,000) three hundred thousand naira only to the winner.

At the local or community level, winners may be presented with any of the following laurels;

- i. Money
- ii. Cars
- iii. Motorcycles
- iv. Fans
- v. Cattles<sup>13</sup>

During matches, at the local level, minor injuries are treated locally through herbs or other local concoctions while severe injuries are rushed to the chemists or hospital. In most cases before such victims are rushed to the nearest medical facility, the havoc must have been done. At times the injured are left to the mercy of friends, relatives or individuals to help. However, during states or national

competition, medical practitioners are usually available to attend to such emergencies

In the event of the death of one of the fighters in the ring, the following things are observed;

- i. The family of the deceased is notified through a delegation or phone calls as the case may be.
- ii. They inquire as to whether the corpse of the victim should be conveyed to the village or origin or be buried where he died.
- iii. The Chairman of the local ring where the sad event occurred is required to get in touch with chairman of other rings of Dembe in the various locations for financial donations. In case of champion who fight for their states, the state government take charge of the burial and at least five hundred (500,000) thousand naira is released to the bereaved family.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

Dembe, the traditional Hausa boxing which is similar to kick boxing believed to have started when clans of butchers moved round village during dry season to compete is gradually gaining attention. According to *Aljazeera* online.

Today, the game has become an internet sensation. Fans across the world have viewed videos posted to YouTube millions of times... Videos of Dambe matches have been posted to YouTube and viewed millions of times. In January 2017, with a desire to showcase the game to the world, they launched Dambe Warriors on YouTube... At the time of publication, Dambe Warriors had 46,000 subscribers and their videos had been viewed 11.7 million times. Their content is enjoyed by enthusiasts in countries form the Philippines, Thailand and Brazil, to Indonesia and the US.<sup>15</sup>

However, this sport has been poorly managed in the country. in some of the match centres visited the areas seemed to be unkempt, populated by weed smokers, drug addicts and most probably a breeding ground for criminal minded elements. As popular as this sport is, it does not enjoy enough patronage form the government. Winners are awarded prices from well spirited individuals or money generated from the sale of tickets. There are no stand by medical personnel to attend to the injured except during state to state contest. Those who suffer permanent injuries or death through the sport are left at the mercy of well spirited individuals or sport lovers. Interestingly, government spends a lot of money on training provision of medical care and juicy benefits to alien sports in Nigeria without encouraging this indigenious sport. This must change if Africa and Nigeria must take their place among comity of nations. The governments at both the local, state and national levels including lovers of sports must do anything humanly possible to provide a conducive and enabling environment so as to promote this sport both at the local, state and international levels. It is also worthy of note that in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, history must not be allowed to repeat itself like what Africans went through in the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. During these periods, our ancestors

were taken to Europe and America as slave to work on plantations. Until we as Africans are prepared to change the narrative we may be taken again as slaves, this time to the moon. This can only be avoided by recognising and developing the various talents we have been endowed with in Africa before anything else.

### Footnotes

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