The Ẹpa Masquerades of Èkìtì

A Structural Approach

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all photos by the author except where otherwise noted

Forms appear out of other forms, that is they are contained by them: the container is everted, to reveal what is inside … It follows that past and future become present: any one form anticipates its transformation, and is itself respectively the transformation of a prior form. (Strathern 1992: 249)

Phillip Allison, formerly of the Nigerian Forestry Commission and then the Nigerian National Museums and Monuments Commission, is probably best known for the survey work that he carried out on the stone sculptures of the Cross Rivers region in Nigeria. However, the recently cataloged Phillip Allison archive contains material derived from research that was undertaken in other regions of Nigeria.[1] Among the extensive documents are photographs of a masked performance, labeled as "Ẹpa masquerade ceremony," taken in 1960 in the village of Ikùn-Ọba (Figs. 1–2). Allison's collection diary notes that he visited Ikùn on July 15, 1960, as part of a collection and survey journey that included visits to the towns of Òwò and Ìkòlé.

In his diary Allison writes that in Ikùn he encountered "five Egúngún [*sic*] with Janus faced helmet masks surmounted with carvings and feathers and porcupine quills, they carry swords and ornamental axes; they are followed about by singing crowds of women." He notes that he is told that "this Egúngún [*sic*] symbolises the new yam and promotes fertility amongst women." He also notes that the festival is rather dull, and by 4:30 that afternoon he is back in Ìkòlé and is much more animated by the political crisis that saw the Western House Assembly dissolved and elections set for August 8.

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The festival that Allison's photographs document is known locally as Egbùrù and is performed for a local deity (*ìmólè*) of that name. The masks are of a form routinely described as Ẹpa or Ẹpa-type. During the festival, five of these masks appear over a two-day period. Four of the masks have superstructural carvings that stand above the wooden mask that actually covers the head, while the mask that is called Egbùrù is a single, large, Janus-faced head covering.

ẸPA AND ẸPA TYPE MASQUERADES

Allison's photographs are not the only ones of the masquerade festival at Ikùn. In 1990 I was also given access to the festival, and some part of that experience formed the basis for a paper written in 2000 comparing Ẹpa and Ẹpa-type masquerades with other forms of masked performance extant in Èkìtì, particularly with those of Egígún, a masquerade form closely related to Egúngún performed to celebrate the departed dead (Rea 2000; see also Rea 2017). The endeavor in that chapter was to disentangle the two forms of masked performance, pointing to the structural and metaphysical differences between them. As such, and placed next to John Picton's (2000) similar disentangling of Egúngún and Gèlèdé, the attempt was to complicate the notions of masquerade in Yorùbá culture, particularly its iteration as defined by different regional forms and types of masked practice. The point was that the focus on the mask as an object tended to conflate a number of ideas about the regional distribution of Yorùbá practices and identities. The mask had become, in popular perception, a diagnostic object defining regional categories. Both papers were obviously influenced by Picton's more general meditation on "what's in a mask" and the diversity of forms and ideas that he had noted in western Nigeria (Picton 1990).

The aim of this paper (with Allison's photographs as a prompt) is to revisit Ẹpa and Ẹpa-type masquerades. To do so is to add to a corpus of literature which, to an extent, appears reasonably exhaustive. Clarke (1944), Thompson (1974), Vander Heyden (1977), and particularly Ojo (1974, 1978) have all written and documented different forms of mask and performance that have been

1 Ẹpa-type masks, Ikùn Ọba
Phillip Allison Archive, Weston Library, University of Oxford
Photo: Phillip Allison

2 Ẹpa-type masks, Ikùn Ọba
Phillip Allison Archive, Weston Library, University of Oxford
Photo: Phillip Allison

labeled Ẹpa or Ẹpa-type.[2] The forms of these masks are relatively well known, both in the literature and in collections. The grandeur of these masks, the fact that they are often the product of known and named carving workshops, and the diversity of differing representational themes depicted on the superstructures, alongside seemingly diverse contexts of performance, has meant a continuing interest both in Nigeria and in the West.

This paper, while adding to the understanding of Ẹpa and Ẹpa-type masked practice in Western Nigeria, aims to move away from those works that base their analysis primarily on the mask. Thompson's (1974) classic description of the Ẹpa masquerade goes a long way, in prose, toward an intuitive understanding of the mask as performed, but in failing to move beyond the performance of the mask, that analysis does not substantially grasp the implications of the wider context of this masked performance in relation to Èkìtì Yorùbá cosmology and within the social formations of the groups that perform and use these masks.

In attempting to grasp those implications, the effort here is also to address the remarks that Marsha Vander Heyden presented at the conclusion of her 1977 paper. She wrote,

3 Egbùrù mask. Ikùn-Ọba, 1990.

> At present, the Ẹpa mask should be considered basically as a mask type, rather than one strictly associated with a given festival, as Gelede masks are specifically associated with the festival of the same name. There is apparently an endless variety of combinations of mask names, festivals and mask types influenced by a multitude of historical and cultural contacts. The entire northeast area does not at this time lend itself easily to classification, as the quantity of research in this area is not yet sufficient (Vander Heyden 1977: 21).

Vander Heyden's comment that there is a seemingly endless variety of combinations of mask names and festivals is key: why this seeming proliferation? What are the underlying forms and structures that produce this seemingly confused situation noted by all researchers on Ẹpa and Ẹpa-type masks? This paper aims to investigate the place of the object within the structure, performance, and cosmology of the various cult groups that this type of object—the Ẹpa-type mask—is associated with. In turn, the paper looks to draw upon and add to the material on Eastern Yorùbá social organization, continuing the comparative project developed by Andrew Apter, that works toward improving "our understanding of the politico-ritual topography of Yorùbáland, [and] the historical processes of Yorùbá ethnogenesis itself" (Apter 1995: 395).

In part, confusion about Ẹpa stems from an art-historical literature impressed by the formal qualities of the mask and the remarkable moments of display rather than by the practices and beliefs with which that object is associated. The so-called classic Ẹpa mask is indeed an impressive object, the largest single-piece carved mask in Africa and one which, in the hands of the various master carvers of Èkìtì, gives fabulous testament to the skill of a carving tradition that thrived in (at least) the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In most cases the "thing" that is known as Ẹpa is a mask surmounted by a superstructure. The mask (the piece that sits on the head) is generally described as being like an inverted cooking pot (*ìkókó*) and it may or may not be Janus-faced. The superstructure is often tall and, in the hands of a proficient carver, can feature carvings of incomparable standard.

This paper is not overly concerned to offer a precise exegetical exercise in deciphering visual meaning or an iconographic or representational analysis of the sculptural form of these masks. Such an approach would, to an extent, be an exercise in simply reiterating the seminal work of J.R. Ojo (1974) and his subsequent 1978 paper. In that paper, primarily concerned with the exegetical analysis of the superstructural forms of the Ẹpa-type masks, Ojo offers three broad categories of sculptural iconography. These are "mother-with-children," warrior and leopard motifs, and sculptural forms based upon Ọsányìn, a deity associated with healing. Ojo acknowledges that this is not an exhaustive list of iconographic categories and that there is considerable variation in the forms and styles of these themes represented. In general, however, his typology corresponds to the most commonly observed themes of Ẹpa-type superstructure, whether in situ in Èkìtì or in the large number of these sculptures that reside in museums and private collections around the world.

Ojo's argument from his iconographic reading is that these three themes are related to and have developed in response to the history of disruption and warfare within the Èkìtì region. The province's historical position suggests that Ojo's assumptions are very reasonable. That the visual iconography of the superstructure reflects this history is unsurprising and Ojo's analysis that this history is reflected in the material culture associated with devotion and petition is, although somewhat functionalist, broadly correct. What is lacking from this work is any systematic attempt to understand the way that the festivals and masks intersect with the religious and political sociology that underpins the structural dynamics of performance, and how that history may not simply be manifest in iconography, but is the underlying reason for the variety and variation. Once that task has been completed it might then be possible to more accurately relate the corpus of Ẹpa-type masks and performances to a deeper, more nuanced, sociohistorical account of Èkìtì, one that accepts the iconological analysis as broadly correct as a function of Èkìtì's general history, but which also puts an emphasis back onto more precisely understanding the position of the "mask" (as a thing) and the relationships that pertain between lineages, cults, and the forms of manifestation contained within Ẹpa-type ritual. As such, this may then point to particularities within Èkìtì ritual organization that offers comparison with the more centralized imperial Yorùbá towns.

Lacking from Ojo's broad categorization of the Ẹpa-type masks was an attempt to try and disentangle the diversity of contexts within which the mask—as an object—is situated.[3] As noted, within the "masking" complex known as Ẹpa there is such a diversity of different-named cults for which this particular morphological form is used that it is more useful to refer to the formal properties of these masks as Ẹpa-type rather than referencing the singular Ẹpa. A simple survey reveals morphologically similar head coverings used for ceremonies known as Ẹpa, Ẹlẹ́fòn, Erìrù, Egbùrù Agbùrù, Arè, and Igbọle even before we reach into the proper names ascribed to each mask or indeed include those ceremonies, such as those performed for the deity Ògún at Ire village, that also use morphologically similar masks.[4]

This paper moves from a comparative and descriptive analysis of two particular festivals before broadening toward a more general understanding of the position of the mask within Èkìtì and the implications that this might have for understanding the status of this object.

THE EGBÙRÙ FESTIVAL OF IKÙN-ỌBA

Located on the eastern fringes of Èkìtì State in southwestern Nigeria, Ikùn-Ọba straddles a contested cultural border between people who define themselves as Èkìtì and those who call themselves Yagba or even Ìjùmú.[5] A few people in Ikùn-Ọba stated that the village was founded by refugees from the Akókó town of Ikùn, although it is equally plausible that the village formed from refugees of the shattered Ikùn-Èkìtì, which lies next to the large and important town of Ọtun to the west. At what point the settlement of Ikùn-Ọba occurred is unknown. The village is now located in the Èkìtì East local government district of southwestern Nigeria. It straddles the main highway that runs between the large towns of Ìkòlé and Omou (see Renne 2000). Ikùn-Ọba is now located between the village of Ilaṣa and Omou town; however, as with many of the villages along this road and in this region, the location is relatively recent, a move prompted by the building of the highway in the 1950s, and it is possible that the village has moved since Allison visited in the 1960s. The current Ikùn-Ọba is a part of Èkìtì East district but in the past it was regarded as being on the fringes of the Ìkòlé mini-empire known as the Egbe Ọba. Ìkòlé's various incursions into the Akókó region may suggest a plausible relationship, but this is a history that is overlain and rewritten by the various convulsions of the nineteenth century and the remaking of the Èkìtì region during the competitive boundary marking that went on between the Lagos Protectorate and Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

The festival at Ikùn-Ọba that Allison's photographs document takes place every second year in July. As with many of the major festivals belonging to the towns of Èkìtì, it is said to mark the new yam harvest. The festival itself celebrates the figure of Egbùrù, a deity variously described to me as an *ẹpa*, an *òrìṣà*, an ancestor of the town, a great warrior. The most common term used, however, when describing Egbùrù was *ìmólè*. The term may encompass much of the above description, but the notion of *ìmólè* requires further disentangling (see below). Cults celebrating Egbùrù are not confined to this precise locale and are found throughout eastern and northern Èkìtì; the name may be synonymous with, or a homonym for, cults such as Agbùrù or Areù. In Ikùn, however, Egbùrù is the name of the *ìmólè*, the central figure of the cult (Fig. 3).

4 Àwòrò dancing on the larger mound (*esin*). Ikùn-Ọba, 1990.

The public arena of the festival is the large open ground at the center of the town, used as a small daily market. It is cleared and seats are placed for the senior chiefs of the quarters involved in the festival. Allison describes the festival being ordered by the Onikùn—the *Ọba* of the town—but this was not the case in the instance I witnessed: the *Ọba* was absent. This open space is marked by permanent topographies and temporary structures. The permanent features consist of two large, grassy mounds of roughly two meters in height and five meters in circumference, and between them stands a shrine house (*ìlé ìmólè*) painted with the esoteric designs that are a feature of religious structures in Èkìtì. The entrance to the ground is marked by two poles between which are strung the ubiquitous palm fronds that mark boundaries and passages between domains. A further "gateway" marks the point where this path enters into the forest that surrounds the village.

From the forest an *àwòrò* (priest) arrives; he calls to the village and then climbs the larger of the two mounds (Fig. 4). A long

5 Elese and Olomoyóyó masks dancing. Ikùn-Ọba, 1990.

blast on a horn "trumpet" announces the beginning of the festival. Immediately two further *àwòrò* come from the bush, carrying a sheet that covers the head of a small child running between them. The child is hurried to the shrine house, which he enters, and is not seen until the very end of the day. This is the *alágbálé*, the child that "sweeps the road" for his elders, but is also a symbolic marker of the relationship between the festival and its place in fertility rites.

Once the child has entered the shrine house, the masks arrive from the surrounding forest. They have been there since early morning, preparing and making sacrifices at the shrine of Egbùrù in the bush—the home of Egbùrù (*ìlé Egbùrù*). Each appears separately from the forest, preceded by a man beating out rhythm on a hand-held slit gong. The initial four masks to appear are named: Egúngòrò, Eḷẹṣẹ, Ọlọmọyóyó, and Ológbò. Each of these masks has a similar pot-shaped head covering, carved as a face, but the superstructures differ. Egúngòrò's is that of a woman's head, Eleṣe that of a warrior on horseback, Ọlọmọyóyó the figure of a woman surrounded by small children, and Ológbò that of a cat (or leopard). It is only once these four masks have appeared and danced around the boundary of the performing area that the senior Egbùrù mask will appear, led into the arena by men carrying *màrìwò* palm-frond adorned poles.

Egbùrù first salutes the mounds, stamping three times. He then turns to leave the arena and has to be persuaded back by the priest accompanying him.[6] Eventually he takes a seat next to the assembled chiefs of the town. At this point the other four masks separate and leave the central arena. Each goes to salute the respective *àdúgbò* (quarters—see below) of the town from which they have come (Fig. 5): Egúngòrò to Ijù street; Eḷẹṣẹ and Ológbò to Ijeru street, which is subdivided with the Ológbò mask greeting Alámòn street as a part of Ijeru; and Ọlọmọyóyó "greets" the Iláfè quarter. Iláfè also claims ownership of Egbùrù but, as "king of all," he joins the whole town together, a statement that gains practical representation as all the masks return to sit with the Egbùrù (Fig. 6).

Once all the performers have returned to their seated positions, each is called out separately to dance with the women and children of its own quarter. Each dances to three separate drum rhythms—the first is persuasive, imploring the seated mask to dance; the second, when the performer stands, is explosive, the mask rushing wildly around and spinning while its supporters surround it. The third is slower, allowing the audience to sing *oríkì* and petition the masks. Finally the Egbùrù completes the same set of moves and steps and, once finished, the masks all retain their seats. Attendant chiefs at this point make short speeches and then once again each mask dances, this time around the main arena and then circling the shrine house. These dances are done in procession, women and children following the mask of their quarter, chanting its *oríkì,* and looking not to get in its way. The masks then depart and only Egbùrù is left; finally, he dances in front of the shrine house and, as he does so, the child that has been locked inside emerges, to be immediately surrounded by five *àwòrò* who beat the ground around him with *irùkèrè* flywhisks. Egbùrù rushes back to the bush, followed by the priests carrying the child, its head hidden and wrapped in white cloth.

The following day all four of the lesser masks return. They come to the town together and there is no set dance. Each rushes around the central area of the town in a wild manner, followed by groups of children. The chaotic melee is only calmed by the emergence of Egbùrù, who dances to the four corners of the town, while the four other masks assemble at the shrine house. Each enters it, and in that moment the priest of Egbùrù comes to the center of the compound and offers prayer and blessing to the people. Once again he climbs the larger mound and swirls around as the drums beat. Each mask then emerges and separately dances to the top of the mound. Finally, Egbùrù comes from the shrine house and performs a spinning dance in front of its entrance. There, the Àwòrò and Ológbò masks join him and they sit in front of the house. Members of the audience, particularly women, come forward and petition the masks for their future health and happiness (Fig. 7). Mask and priest discuss each case, with the petitioner kneeling before them. Once all those who wish to have completed their petitions, the masks dance back to the forest, Egbùrù at the rear. The festival is over and Egbùrù will not return for two years.

6 The seated Egbùrù and accompanying masks. Ikùn-Ọba, 1990.

THE ATTRACTION OF LOCUST BEAN CAKES

The people of Ikùn-Ọba are both justifiably proud of Egbùrù and also fully aware of the various metaphysical powers and protections that the *ìmólè* bestows upon them. The women kneeling before the figure understand implicitly that, if their petitions are answered within the two-year period before the next appearance, they will make sacrifice in answer to Egbùrù's interventions. Yet Ikùn-Ọba does not claim sole prerogative on the manifestation of Egbùrù. When asked where Egbùrù came from, the answers ranged from Ọ̀run (heaven) or the forest, but most people willingly recalled that he came to Ikùn from the neighboring village of Ilaṣa. They proudly declared that they had Egbùrù because he had visited their village from Ilaṣa, and that he had decided to remain, favoring Ikùn over Ilaṣa because he liked a the locust bean (*irú*) cakes given to him there.[7]

In Ilaṣa village they do not dispute the fact that Egbùrù went to Ikùn-Ọba and remained there, although the duration of the visit is disputed; for some it was only a momentary thing, for others a permanent removal. Egbùrù is, however, still a feature of the ritual calendar in Ilaṣa and he manifests in rituals and performances that are still carried out in that village. Here, though, the presence and performance of Egbùrù is confined to one particular quarter of the town and the festival in his honor is of a smaller scale than that of Ikùn Ọba. In Ilaṣa I was told that, "each quarter has its own festival, and that Egbùrù is the *ìmólè* of Iro street [quarter]."

As in Ikùn-Ọba, Egbùrù in Ilaṣa arrives in the form of an Ẹpa-type mask. A single secondary mask, Ọlọmọyóyó, accompanies him. The morphology of Egbùrù here is radically different (Figs. 8–11). The headpiece retains a Janus-faced base, but above and blending with this is a form of box-shaped structure, onto which are written the words, 'Eégún Iro. Odun Yii A san wa. Amin." (Eegun Iro. This year, we are paying. Amin.) Inside this "box" are placed two circular mirrors, and it is supported by two schematic figures that may be dogs or horses. A third, human, figure at the back perches as if holding on to the mask, and from the back two arms carrying cutlasses wrap around the side. Two further mirrors are attached to the box. The whole is painted in red, white, and black gloss paint and the headpiece is surmounted by the black tail feathers of the gray plantain eater (*Crinifer piscator*).

Ọlọmọyóyó is also Janus-faced, dog-eared, and with rounded mirrors that sit on the forehead above the carved facial features of both faces. The superstructure here is, as the name suggests, of a woman. The figure is carved from the waist upwards, with prominent breasts and outstretched arms that hold cutlasses. The larger female figure is surrounded by three full-length male figures, one of which is playing a flute. Again the whole is painted in red, white, and black gloss paint.

7 Woman petitioning the seated Egbùrù. Ikùn-Ọba, 1990.

These differences in mask morphology are also reflected in differences in performance. Ilaṣa's festival is less structured than that of Ikùn Ọba. Early in the morning, sacrifice is made over the masks (as objects) and they are then taken into the forest. In the early afternoon the masks appear together, arriving from the bush along one of the central farm roads, passing under the familiar palm-fronded gateway. However, rather than entering the town directly, they deviate into the interstitial back streets of Iro quarter, working through the narrow "loins" (passages) between compounds, until emerging at the central road of Iro.[8] A large crowd welcomes them.

Finally they dance toward the main compound of Iro, that of the Oniro, the *báálé* (head or king) of Iro. Here the civic chiefs of the quarter are assembled around the *báálé*. Both Egbùrù and Ọlọmọyóyó dance in front of the seated dignitaries, while women continue chanting and singing the *oríkì* of the masquerade figures and also of Iro quarter. Egbùrù dances backwards toward the seated chiefs, who produce money from a calabash. The Oniro, with the mask facing with its back to him, then ties a black chicken (*adiye dudu*) into the palm fronds at the back of the costume.[9] At this point the masquerade walks away from the chiefs and the crowd erupts into joyous shouts of "*Olè! Olè! Olè! Oooo!*" (Thief, thief, thief, oooo!).[10] The masks dance into the crowd, and as they do women approach them and tie knots of cloth containing their petitions for the future into the trailing palm fronds of the masquerade. Finally, accompanied by small children, the two figures walk back into the alleyways and then to the forest.

THE PART AND THE WHOLE: THE STRUCTURAL POSITION OF ẸPA-TYPE MASQUERADE IN ÈKÌTÌ

Both festivals present a varied terrain of symbolic and metaphorical idiom. The specific actions and moments of ritual drama outline a rich cosmological space. From the specific paths taken, the forms of dance step at each moment, the nature and forms of the sacrificial gift, through to the use of specific feathers, the color of the cockerel and of the cloth used to wrap the departing child: all work within the idioms of Yorùbá belief. Centrally it is the presence of the masks, the wood-carved objects, which attract most attention. In each festival, the themes that Ojo (1978) outlines are visible. In each, the image of warrior on horseback, mother surrounded by her children, animals from the bush—metaphors of warfare, violence, and renewal—are carried into the town in the form of the mask.

The imagery of the masks, as Ojo suggests, make reference to a general history of turbulence and warfare in Èkìtì.[11] More immediately, it is clear that within both festivals there is a generalized sense of reinvigorating the community, whether through reinforcing the boundaries of each place or through bringing metaphysical powers into the town, a source of renewal.

Clearly there is also, in the comparison between these two festivals, an underlying history of relationship. In both towns it is clearly acknowledged that Egbùrù comes from Ilaṣa and that Ikùn-Ọba "captured" him through their superior locust bean cakes. Egbùrù is capable, it seems, of existing (in different form) within both towns. This myth of division suggests that a specific history is implied within the running of the ritual.

Grasping the precise position of these histories and their place within the structural terms of Yorùbá towns relies upon the analysis of these festivals stepping away from both the metaphorical and the mythological to allow a synchronic and comparative perspective. Understanding the structural dynamics of Egbùrù (and Ẹpa-type festivals more widely) complements and broadens the historical narrative.

Andrew Apter describes the pattern of political segmentation that defines the small northern Èkìtì kingdom of Iṣan (about thirty miles west of Ikùn-Ọba). In the context of this paper, it is his description of the cult organization of the Irefin quarter of Iṣan village that is pertinent. Here, Ẹpa is one of three major cults—Irefin patriclan are greeted as Omo Ẹpa (children of Ẹpa), yet each of the three subquarters of Irefin have their own specific Ẹpa masks and associated *oríkì*; each *ìlé* in the quarter has their own manifestation of the Ẹpa cult. Apter argues that here the Ẹpa cult organization represents "the unity of the quarter as identity-in-difference" (Apter 1995: 384). More poetically, Irefin's Ẹpa worshipers "liken it to a hand (*ọwọ*) with fingers (*ìka*)" (Apter 1995: 384).

I encountered a similar description while documenting the festival of Eyelokun (or Eyeboko) in the village of Itapa, Iṣan's close neighbor.[12] The Ẹpa festival here, part of a larger ritual complex within the town, is centered on the *àdúgbò* of Egbe, which is itself divided into the *ìlé* (streets) of Iliya, Idofin, Egena, Idògúnja, Isaba, and Ilosun. The central figure of the cult is Yeyelókun (a manifestation of Olókun) and the primary act of this festival is the carrying of Yeyelókun from the forest into the town (Owoeye 1999: 49). She manifests in the form of a carving, one that absolutely resembles the superstructure of the Ẹpa masks but without the lower "mask" element. Wrapped in a white cloth, Yeyelókun is carried on the head of the (disguised) *àwòrò* into the center of the town, momentarily displayed in front of the seated *owatapa*—the *ọba*—and then carried around Egbe quarter before being deposited in her shrine. After her appearance the village erupts with performance of Ẹpa-type masks. In a reflection of the comment documented by Apter, I was told that, "just as a mother has sons," so each of the "streets" of Egbe quarter have Ẹpa-type masks.

Before each *ìlé* carries out its performance, sacrifices are made at shrines that initially seem scattered at random (often a pile of stones or a cement-covered mound), but which, when seen in the context of the festival, are actually placed in front of (or occasionally within) the central compound of the lineage. Before the appearance of the masks the young men and women attached to each compound move around the "street," beating the ground with palm fronds. Eventually the masks appear, each coming from the *ìlé* to which they belong and each accompanied by singing and chanting members of their compounds.

Apter's (1995) primary concern is with the relationship between political authority and cult organization; his work, however, reveals the constitution of these festivals as they relate to town structure. The basis of Yorùbá social organization, the town (*ìlú*), is a social unit of considerable complexity and has led to disputes in the anthropological literature over what exactly constitutes the social unit that forms the basis of town organization. Barber (1991) offers the most comprehensive survey of the different approaches, but her basic starting point is quite striking in its descriptive simplicity,

8 Egbùrù in Ilaṣa, 1991.

> Historical narratives ... represented the town as a collection of *ile*, each coming from a different place of origin and each having its own traditions: and these separate units were pictured as being held together by their common allegiance to the *Ọba* who was descended from the founder of the town (Barber 1991: 135).

The *Ọba* (king) is supported by a council of chiefs (the Íwárẹ̀fà), who represent the nonroyal lineages of the town—usually separated into lineage groupings known as *àdúgbò* or quarters (an anglicized definition that disguises considerable complexity). Quarters maybe divided in turn into smaller sublineage segments, with associated political titles as subchiefs to the quarter chief. The most basic element at the base of this structure is the lineage (*ídìlé*) or family compound—literally the house—known as *ìlé*. The classic model of Yorùbá social organization as expressed by Lloyd

9 Olomoyóyó and Egbùrù in Ilaṣa. 1991.

(1954, 1962, 1966) suggested that towns were the outcome and expression of domestic social organization; localized agnatic lineages serving as the dominant segmentary building blocks within towns. Lloyd proposes that, from this basic organization, complex kingdoms developed.

A number of authors have complicated Lloyd's model of Yorùbá organization. The term *ídìlé* is used to describe lineage, yet the more common term used is *ìlé*. The word means "compound, dwelling place, house," but as with aristocratic English usage, the term "house" can also imply a family. Thus *ìlé* are both living places, with corporate rights to land and tangible and intangible property, and in common usage, the word also identifies family and lineage. [13] Authors such as Eades (1980) placed emphasis upon the compound as a place of common residence.

Developing this view, Apter's (2013) review of Yorùbá urban social structure shows that Lloyd fails to fully grasp the complex clustering of different participant groups in and around the *ìlé* (house). Addressing the complexity of Yorùbá lineage structure, he argues that residential units are "an admixture of relational types, residential and lineal, consanguinal and affinal, core and stranger, freeborn and slave" (Apter 2013: 360).

Apter argues that the primary character of *ìlé* is fluidity. Far from being determined by familial relationships, the Yorùbá house (in both its literal, physical sense and its genealogical meaning) is a flexible and open "space" that can adjust to change and new membership. In this, he argues, the house reflects the nature of the Yorùbá town. Drawing upon Barber's demonstration that, at the heart of *oríkì ìlé* (the central poetic charter of each family), is reference to towns of origin, Apter suggests that at the foundations of lineage identity is not familial kinship identity per se, but rather the town of family origin. Indeed, Apter goes further, inverting the relationship between town and house, suggesting that rather than seeing *ìlé* as the primary building blocks of the town (*ìlú*), as Lloyd would have it, it is the very nature of the towns within *ìlé* that is important to the Yorùbá polity. Understanding the place of the town(s) at the heart of *ìlé* has radical implications for Apter's modeling of Yorùbá social organization, on both sides of the Atlantic.

The paradigm shift Apter proposes in respect to the incorporative flexibility of the Yorùbá lineage noted by Barber (1991: 164) rethinks the constitution of the Yorùbá town. Rather than seeing the town as an additive construction of segmented groups—a series of *ìlé* (lineages), forming *àdúgbò* (groupings of related lineages), forming *ìlú* (towns)—Apter suggests that the model misreads Yorùbá notions of quantification. Rather than an additive number theory, it is modes of division that are important. Couched in this way, Apter suggests that each quarter or even *ìlé* contains a town. It is the model that he draws upon to reach this conclusion that is of interest in our understanding of the Ẹpa-type masquerade.

Apter draws upon the work of Helen Verran (2001), especially the concept she names the "sortal particular." It is a concept that marks a difference between Yorùbá and European counting—a difference not only in the semantics of number, but also in thinking about things. Verran's exegesis is complex and detailed, relying on a close reading of Yorùbá language and number terms, but in essence it details the conceptual basis by which the Yorùbá account for the manifestation of things in the world. She notes,

> [I]n Yorùbá language and culture … things, objects and numbers in the world are conceived as "sortal particulars," qualitative forms of "thinghood" that infuse the universe and manifest themselves in different modes at particular times and places. Sortal particulars can manifest themselves within a plurality of objects that form what we would see as members of a set, but the "objects" themselves are secondary to the sortal particular which they instantiate … number in Yorùbá language talk is a degree of dividedness (Verran 2001: 198).

The implications, for Apter, are (very basically) that each *ìlé* in each Yorùbá town (or at least Èkìtì town) is itself a manifestation of a town of origin; that kept in the *oríkì ìlé* is the knowledge of places of origin.[14] Apter goes onto describe the *ìlé* as a potential sociological manifestation of the *ìlú* that it manifests, complete with political title, agnatic and nonagnatic kin, strangers, and so on. Importantly, it will also contain deities and associated ritual paraphernalia from the original town, which invoke and manifest during those sanctioned times of ritual renewal.

Jane Guyer (2017) also picks up on the implications of Verran's work for the understanding of Yorùbá logics (and in particular, those transactional and performative logics of the Yorùbá moral economy). She notes that in Verran's account of numbering, number links unity to plurality as either one/many or as part/

whole. Things counted can, then, also be thought of as manifesting within these particular modes. It is, as with Apter's discussion of the household, possible to be both a singularity and part of a wider plurality, but the regression is into particularity rather than that of the general—a logic presupposed on the nature of division noted by Verran. The key, as Guyer notes, is that the history and potential of things is always kept "in play." For Guyer, the implications, drawn from Verran, are that

> the contingency of the moment, as a punctuation point, where objects/subjects (are narrated) as outcomes of past collective going-ons and recognize their participation in remaking particular times and places as (re) generating worlds (Verran 2001: 94, quoted in Guyer 2017: 158).

These suggestions begin to offer a model against which the interpretation of Ẹpa and Ẹpa-type performances can be situated. If, following Apter, we understand that each *ìlé* is actually a manifestation of an originary town, then it is clear that each household has, clustered inside it, the tutelary deity of that town. It is the town's founding ancestor within the household, a figure to which both households (and towns) pay annual or biannual homage. The multiplicity of Ẹpa-type masks would then seem to correspond to the notion that each "house" owns the mask in homage to their own founding presence. Structurally each festival reproduces the politics of the *àdúgbò,* revolving around the major deity (*ìmólè* or *òrìṣà*) belonging to the dominant *ìlé* within the quarter. Yet each *ìlé* also brings a foundational ancestral presence into play, albeit one that sits subordinate to the dominant house of the quarter.[15] Nested within the cult of the dominant *ìmólè* and incorporated into its ritual domain are those that belong to lesser *ìlé*. Thus each mask can be conceived of as a division, a fragment or sortal particular of the primary mask. Each festival is structured around the primary figure, and that figure divides into smaller constituent parts.

The question is complicated by the actual nature of what is manifested within these festivals. Apter consistently refers to *òrìṣà* when naming the deities within his sociology whereas, on asking what these things were, the term I encountered most often in Èkìtì was *ìmólè*. (More precisely, the term was "*ìmólè ni*": "it is *ìmólè*"). In this region, *òrìṣà*, when referred to at all, named a very specific figure: Òrìṣà Ojúná/Iwákún, a manifestation of Òrìṣàn'la. Indeed, even Ògún, habitually referred to in the literature as the *òrìṣà* of iron, was not, in this part of Èkìtì, regarded as *òrìṣà* per se; rather, as I was told, "Ògún is all around, wherever there is metal," and yet Ògún also had precise manifestation as Ògún Ìkòlé, which people in that town differentiated from the more well-known Ògún Ire.[16]

Egbùrù (as with Ẹpa, Elefon, Agùrù, et al) is described as *ìmólè*. Abrahams (1962) defines *ìmólè* as earth spirits, a notion that has had a fairly wide airing in literature about the Yorùbá, in which the notion of *ìmólè* (or *ùmólè*) has tended to refer to a form of primordial deity. Idowu suggests (1962: 61) that *ìmólè* offers a contraction of *Emọ tí mbẹ n'ilẹ,* "the supernormal beings of the earth." The name he suggests connotes awesomeness, eeriness, the *mysterium tremendum* in distinction to the "somewhat prosaic and homely" *òrìṣà*. Idowu goes onto argue that the word is "a designation for the dreadful ones whose habitations were the thick dark groves and unusual places: those who walk the world of men at night and prowl the place at noonday; the very thought of whom was hair-raising"

10 Olomoyóyó in Ilaṣa: rear view. 1991.

(Idowu 1962: 62). Peel (2003: 347, ff160) notes, however, that Idowu ultimately concedes that the term has become somewhat more prosaic and synonymous with the term *òrìṣà*, and in turn it is "an old generic term for subordinate deities" (Peel 2003: 118).[17]

There is certainly something of these accounts in the way that *ìmólè* were described to me. The nature of the deity, unlike the descriptions of *òrìṣà* in the more central empires, appears to be one of close relationship with humans. Rather than separation in some more distant place, *ìmólè* seemingly inhabit an almost shared space with humans. The impression I received was of very real figures, inhabiting a life of routine and humanity, tending to farms within the forests or hills, removed from but in close relation to the activities of human life. The primordial connection with the earth is more clearly established by the fact that, often, *ìmólè* are described as the founding figures.[18] As such they are the primordial ancestors of particular and discrete communities.

The concept is further complicated by the fact that material things were often also described as *ìmólè*. The description of the material object as *ìmólè* is one that sits at the heart of the analysis of the Ẹpa and the various cults that are associated with this type of performance; in particular it questions the status of the material object most often associated with these displays: the masks. Picton, in his seminal paper on masks, hints at the possibility in

11 Egbùrù in Ilaṣa: rear view. 1991.

Ẹpa-type masks when he categorizes them under his Type III: masks that create dramatic distance, but which may be regarded as literal embodiments of metaphysical powers. The thing itself is where the energies lie. "What matters in this case is the visible tangible reality of the artefact. The mask reveals rather than conceals" (Picton 1990: 193).

Ẹpa-type masks are the literal manifestation of *ìmólè*. The question that this raises is then about the manifest status of the mask; does the *ìmólè* reside in the mask or are these performances actually concerned with the manifestation of *ìmólè*? Unlike the Egígún (Egúngún) masquerade performances of Èkìtì, where a generic form of human ancestors is manifested (see Rea 2017), the performances of Ẹpa-type masks are those of singular named and known presences. Performers make little effort to conceal their identity, for it is not important; performers are not disguising or concealing an identity that is replaced by another, rather they are carrying the visible form of the *ìmólè*.[19] Ẹpa-type masks are then the means by which *ìmólè*, primordial ancestral figures, are made manifest. However, in their performance they also make manifest a history of social relations within the towns of Èkìtì. Ẹpa-type performances actually make present and manifest the relations that Apter documents in his understanding of the social organization of Èkìtì.

In turn, the performance of Ẹpa-type ceremonies acts as another illustration of the logic that Verran outlines and which Apter draws upon. Working from the model of the sortal particular, wherein "things, objects, and numbers are qualitative forms of 'thinghood' and which manifest themselves in different modes at particular times and places," the notion that the Ẹpa-type masquerade is a singular individual object (a mask, for instance) needs to be rethought. Instead of the discrete singular, they need to be regarded as instantiations of the primary *ìmólè*—in this instance that of particular *ìmólè*. Further, if we hold with this logic, it is plausible to suggest that Egbùrù, for instance, not only manifests within a singular mask, but that during the festival he actually manifests in five different ways: not as five different individual masks, but rather as Egbùrù decomposed or differentiated into five.

Couched this way, the seemingly static form of Ẹpa festivals actually opens to a more dynamic reading, one in which histories of agglomeration and fracture operate in the same manner that Apter suggests for households. Festivals (and the cult) are open to accumulation, just as they are to decomposition. Here, Guyer's reading of Verran makes sense: "Routine should not be understood as a repetition of outcome but a reprise of method. It is an unending reapplication of past realizations to present potentials for theoretically limitless permutation and logic" (Guyer 2017: 158).

This does not deny the embedded historical logics of the Ẹpa-type festivals that Ojo points to—indeed, it captures the very historical contingency that these festivals seem to present—but rather than a stasis of form and structure, a routine replication, Guyer's understanding allows for a more performative, fluid understanding of that history, one that, for instance, could see the development of a festival structure based on little more than "a liking for locust bean cakes (!)." It is the incorporative fluid logic that Apter points to in the constitution of the household. Yet, as with *oríkì-ilé,* the *ìmólè*, the ancestral figure stands as a stable core at the center.

Guyer's argument allows one more (short) interjection on the temporal moment, what might be named anticipatory time. Ẹpa-type festivals take place every two years. It is a temporal gap into which time is given over to the resolution of the petitioning that forms the final act of Ẹpa-type festivals. It is in the anticipation of things to come—whether better health, the birth of children, protection from invasion—that provides these festivals with their *raison d'etre*. While there is, embedded in the very form of these festivals, the historical relationships between households as they sit in political relationship to one another, differential temporal moments are activated within the festival. They look to the future as much as the past. Ẹpa-type festivals bring the very foundation of the household into actual lived conjunction and relationship with the members of that household. Certainly this is a moment of memorialization, and yet the mask types, however monumental, are more than *aides-memoire*—they act as the active anticipation of hope.

In this sense it is with Guyer's commentary (alongside the wider argument that she makes) that we might begin to allow a consideration of both the mask as material object in relation to a metaphysic and the position of the festival in the performance of Èkìtì historical consciousness. In the actual performance of the festivals another temporal consciousness is "played" out—one that looks, not to an historical past, but to an imagined future.

Notes

This paper is in many ways Janus-faced, looking both backwards and forwards. It started as an MA project at the Sainsbury Research Unit at UEA in 1989 and was completed while working as a Fellow of the SRU in 2017. My continuity of thanks is therefore to the director of the Sainsbury Research Unit, Professor Steven Hooper, and his colleagues and particularly to the librarian of the Robert Sainsbury Library, Pat Hewitt. I would also like to acknowledge Mr. E.O. Abejide and Mr. Kayode Owoeye for their help in Nigeria and Professor John Picton, who alerted me to Phillip Allison's photographs.

1 This archive is now held by the Weston Library at the University of Oxford. My thanks to Lucy McCann for making it available to me.

2 These formally published works can be supplemented by a number of unpublished theses and field notes. E.O. Abejide's thesis (University of Ibadan) provides a similar survey form to that of Ojo, and my own MA thesis was based upon John Picton's survey notes made while working for the National Museum in Lagos.

3 His 1974 M.Phil thesis does provide the basis for a more comprehensive working of the contextual conditions of the festivals that he witnesses.

4 See Rea 1990—based on Picton's field notes, the appendix to this work contains a substantial working-through of the material that Picton surveyed in the villages of Èkìtì. By far the greatest number of "things" he recorded were Ẹpa-type masks.

5 While maintaining cultural distinctiveness as either Èkìtì or Yagba or Ijumu, all people in this region would also readily acknowledge their (self-) defined status as Yorùbá. While there are distinct dialect differences across this eastern region, the language used is recognizably Yorùbá.

6 The gender prefix is precise: Egburu is identified as being male.

7 Ilaṣa is literally the neighboring village.

8 "Loins" is a Leeds term that describes the back alleyways or ginnels that punctuate the town. It is an appropriate description of the alleyways that punctuate the spaces between buildings in Èkìtì towns.

9 The gesture of tying a black cockerel to the palm fronds is found in a number of masked festivals in Èkìtì. One explanation is that the bird replaces human sacrifice, tied onto the back of masquerade, as a mother would tie her child. See Rea (1995).

10 On the image of the thief, see Doris (2011) and Rea (1995).

11 Èkìtì was a "shatter zone"—caught between the competing interests of larger polities. Èkìtì's distant history is that of an interior region held between the competing claims of the empires of Oyo and Benin, and also deals more locally with the intentions of their nearest neighbors, the Ijesa (see Obayemi 1976). The nineteenth century was then dominated by raiding and invasion, either from the Ilorin Nupe and Fulani peoples to the north or the Ibadan "war boys" from the south. Èkìtì has been subject to incursion and invasion on an almost constant basis. And yet even as the people in the region suffered from the violence of invasion, enslavement, and destruction, even as this was then compounded by a reconstruction at the hands of British imperial power that depended upon partially concocted narratives and misplaced confidence in its own ideological model to recreate a "primordial state" that never really existed, the centrality of the town remains. The effect of this turbulence, still mentioned as being within living memory, was that villages were left "with six men and a dog"—a metaphor for the devastating effects the raids and invasions had on the region. The towns that now make up the region are, in part, the shattered remains of villages that formed quarters within larger and more defensible towns, refugees within kingdoms (see Akintoye 1971).

12 Itapa is a small town within the Ìkọ̀lé sphere of influence. It straddles the Ìkọ̀lé Ifaki main highway and is in close proximity to Ishan.

13 Peel notes that Lloyd's model (developed within the structural functional parameters of the British social anthropology of its time) generates a model of politics determined by kinship relations. He states, "[I]n Lloyd's case, politics is reduced to kinship, for the rules of kinship are treated as producing forms anterior to and determinative of politics" (Peel 1983: 10).

14 Somewhat counter-intuitively, the people of Ìkọ̀lé Èkìtì, where I conducted my main fieldwork, proudly proclaim "Ìkọ̀lé Orun, Ìkọ̀lé Aiye" as a statement of Ìkọ̀lé's unitary identity. The sense of this praise fragment is that Ìkọ̀lé was never defeated; that while other towns may have been thrown to the winds to find settlement where they can, Ìkọ̀lé has never been divided. Inherent in the statement is also the notion that Ìkọ̀lé on earth is a mode of manifestation of Ìkọ̀lé in heaven—the sortal particular as a town!

15 It is possible that, seen this way, some of the confusion about Ẹpa as an age-grade festival is resolved. It is the young men (and nowadays young women as well) of each household, rather than members of an organization, cutting across lineages that demonstrate most fervor in support of their masks.

16 Whether the difference between *oriṣa* and *ìmólè* is a matter of semantics between two fieldworkers in Èkìtì marks a distinct shift in cosmological thinking or, as Idowu suggests, the two terms have become synonymous, does not overly worry me here (see, however, Rea 1995). Apter (1995: 371) notices the tendency to identify singular figures as *oriṣa* associated with both particular towns and grand political centralization. In Èkìtì, with a much lesser degree of centralization and greater degree of political fragmentation, the singular pantheon does not exist, or at least not in the form more popularly expected.

17 See also Rea 2000: 165 for an account of the terminological confusions associated with Ẹpa-type masquerades.

18 In Ìkọ̀lé the most auspicious, and most secret, festival is that of Ìmólè Ìkọ̀lé, held to celebrate the figure of Akinsale, the legendary founder of the town.

19 Indeed, in a number of instances—Ishan and Itapa for example—it is clear that the *ìmólè* carried in physical form has no masklike head covering: it is purely the sculptural form, common in the superstructure of Ẹpa type masks, that arrives from the forest, wrapped in white cloth. See also Thompson's (1974) elegant description of the arrival of Orangun.

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