

central figure, enabling one to lift the lid with ease. Along the edge of the bowl is a series of triangular shapes reminiscent of the trailing edge of a *laba* Sango, the large leather bag carried by Sango priests.

Areogun's *arugba* Sango represents the burden and power of the devotee of Sango. It tells the celebrant about herself. The great central figure and those surrounding her are figures of composure and graceful power, even when kneeling as supplicants. She carries on her head the burden and power of Sango. It is not her physical ability to carry great weights, but her *ase* that is the very life and defines the *iwa* of the Sango worshipper. The darkly colored faces on the bowl and lid refer to the *ori inu* (the inner head or the personal destiny) of the one with the beautifully composed face below. The bowl is also a metaphor for the devotee's womb. It contains the evidence of Sango's power, a power which strikes unexpectedly, transforming and sometimes destroying, but also giving life. The god, whose *ase* is shown as thunder and lightning gives to his devotees the *ase* to bear his burden.

Just as the visual imagery of the bowl carrier captures aspects of the verbal imagery evoked in *Sango-pipe*, so in the context of a ritual, the interplay of the verbal and visual artistry in Sango worship reflects patterns of experience and conveys a perception of life in Yoruba culture. Art and ritual coalesce, creating a universe of experience and a distinctive sensibility. In the public realm of politics and the private world of the psyche destructive possibilities are present in every act of human creativity. It is this that the Sango worshipper acknowledges.

As in all sculptural art, the aesthetic qualities of the Sango pieces are related to, but not finally dependent upon, iconographic appropriateness to the context of use. With the expansion of the Oyo Empire and the Sango cult, carvers from the northeast to the southwest responded with extraordinary artistic imagination to the basic form of the *ose* Sango—a shaft with a double axehead.

The *ose* Sango in Figure 165 is reported to have "reached Switzerland . . . before 1820, through the activities of the Basel Mission."³⁸ The date seems remarkably early, but there is little doubt that from a stylistic analysis it was carved by a skilled craftsman from the Igbomina town of Ila-Orangun, and perhaps by a carver from the workshop of Inurin's compound.³⁹ The carver reverses the conventional form, showing the devotee with celts protruding from her head, and positions her on a base supported by the double axehead. Her elaborate openwork hairstyle composed of four braids brought together in a conical shape is similar to the form and pattern of "the crown of Banyani," the

elder sister of Sango, whose emblem is often found on Sango's shrines. Suspended from her left shoulder a *laba* bag or dance panel rests on her right hip. A sash of office is tied across her breasts. In her left hand she grasps a long cudgel, the baton of office. Hers is an image of solidity and balance, of composure and power: her oblong face, squareness of shoulders, full breasts descending to a narrow waist; long arms, hands grasping the *laba* and cudgel and pressing them firmly against her thighs.

A Ketu carver takes the same basic form of the Sango dancewand, but with sweeping, graceful curves extends the form into the surrounding space (Figure 163). The devotee firmly grasps a python, which lies quietly draped around her neck and extends the length of her body. Where Sango's thunder bolts would ordinarily jut forth from the head, long, pendulous breasts form graceful arches framing the devotee's head and from which the celts of Sango protrude. In the parallel curves of the breasts and the python the artist has created a visual metaphor of the power of the female devotee of the *orisa*. She is possessed by a divine power that gives her the authority, *ase*, by which to control the dangerous power of the python. But her nurturing power as woman, as "mother," is itself a dangerous power, as the celts issuing from the breasts suggest. As with her lord, she too can give life or deny it. It is a motif that echoes the theme of the Efe/Gelede festival, which is held annually in Ketu to celebrate the power of *awon iya wa* ("the mothers"), those elderly women, female ancestors, and female deities whose power affects the generative life of field and family, and who can respond, as Sango, with capricious and volatile behavior when not properly acknowledged.

Sango in the Pantheon of the *orisa*

In 1910 Leo Frobenius, the German ethnographer, photographed a Sango shrine, *ojubo* Sango, in the Agbeni area of Ibadan. These are probably the earliest photographs of the interior of a Yoruba shrine (Figures 171, 172). His colleague, Karl Arriens, made a beautiful watercolor drawing of the veranda posts at the front of the shrine (Figure 174). Recalling his first impressions upon entering the shrine, Frobenius wrote:

We slipped beneath a curtain-cloth, and I am bound to say that for a moment's space the originality of the building in front of me, whose straggling black facade was broken up with many colours, struck me dumb. A lofty, long and very deep recess made a gap in the row of fantastically carved and brightly painted columns. These were sculptured with horsemen, men climbing trees, monkeys, women, gods and all sorts of mythological carved work. The dark chamber behind revealed a gorgeous red ceiling, pedestals with stone axes on them, wooden figures, cowrie-shell hangings. . . . The whole



178. Ogun Axe, Ekiti/Kwara area, 19th–20th century. This very fine ceremonial war axe probably came from northeast Yorubaland. The worship of Sango is widespread among the Ekiti peoples, but is not found in the Kwara area, where Ogun is an important deity. The treatment of the eyes and the curved line of the jaw ending in a slightly protruding mouth is similar to figures surmounting chiefs' staffs found in the Kwara area. The integration of the two figures by the long, slender curve of the arm of the upper figure down the back of the lower one is beautifully rendered. Wood, iron. H. 22 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Christopher Taylor.



179. Chief's Staff, Iffe, Kwara, 19th–20th century. Kwara district men who have achieved distinction in their community are expected to take chieftaincy titles. As a sign of their office, they have staffs made by carvers and blacksmiths. The titles and staffs are not inherited; hence, when a chief dies, his staff is placed with others in a corner of the entrance hall or the room where he slept. Many staffs, especially nineteenth century ones, have an unornamented, slightly narrow phallus or helmet shape on the top. Later ones have abstract facial features on this top portion similar to those of the *ere ibeji* in Figure 198. Recent staffs are surmounted by images of kneeling or seated female figures, the heads of which have retained the shape of the earlier staff tops. The figural carving is markedly different from other Yoruba areas, far more stylized. The eyes are deeply recessed, the mouth is thrust forward, the ears defined by a simple curve. The body and upper arms of the figure may be severely elongated, the breasts prominent. The shaft consists of alternating linked-chain and disk patterns. The base is a short iron shaft. Wood, iron. H. 49 in. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria.



180. The "face" of *orisa* Oko is indicated by the cross-pattern, with eyes and facial marks near the center of the staff. A devotee will touch the "face" of her lord with her offering and then touch her own head thereby acknowledging that her *ori*, ("head" and "personal destiny"), are inextricably bound to that of the god. She gives prominence to the "face" of *orisa* Oko by securing cowrie shells and beads to the staff and placing on them an offering of a kola nut. Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1974. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.



182. Iyawo *orisa* Oko, priestess of *orisa* Oko, holding the shining metal staff of her lord and deity. Women are designated from childhood by Ifa divination to be a priestess and "wife," (*iyawo*), of *orisa* Oko. The red and white marks of her priesthood appear on her forehead. Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1974. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.



181. Fan of a Priestess of Osun, Osogbo. Brass bowls are used to carry the waters of *orisa* Osun from the river to the shrine. Devotees wear brass bracelets and priestesses carry brass fans as a sign of office. The surface elaboration here combines abstract geometric patterns with stylized lizards and birds. The cross-within-a-circle motif indicates a place of meeting, in this instance the meeting of the powers of the gods and of nature. Further, the fan is held by a priestess, who is also a mediator between these divine and natural forces and the world of humankind. Brass. Diam. 12 in. Arthur R. Thomson.

scene, the richly carved columns in front of the gaily-coloured altar, . . . and the upward-tending scaffolding towards the front, sustaining the mighty, soaring frame of thatch, was superbly impressive. . . .⁴⁰

Two screens of fifteen veranda posts (nine on the right and six on the left) stood on either side of the entrance to the altar. When I visited the Agbeni Sango shrine in 1971 and again in 1976, it was in a much transformed state. A fire had damaged it about fifteen years earlier, and the devotees had sought to restore it as best they could to its original design. While there were fewer veranda posts in the screen of the restored shrine, many of the same images appeared, for example, the seated female figure with child among the figures on the right (Figure 175). The red and white marks on her forehead indicate that she is a devotee of *orisa* Oko, deity of the farm. I was told that many of the other figures were followers of various *orisa* or, as in the case of the monkey, were associated with the cult of the ancestors. Of particular interest is the veranda post on the far right in Frobenius' photograph (see Figure 171). It depicts a Muslim, dressed in white, holding his prayer beads. A similar carving was part of the restored screen as well. For the worshippers of Sango it is perfectly appropriate that the follower of Allah be included along with the devotees of the *orisa* who assemble to honor the deified king of Oyo-Ile.

It is clear from Frobenius's photographs that the original veranda posts were the work of several carvers. It was not unusual in large sculptural programs for carvers to be commissioned to do one or more pieces, and to come from neighboring and distant towns. Well-known artists, such as Maku of Erin (died about 1915) and Taiwo of Ila-Orangun (about 1855–1935), traveled considerable distances and spent months in residence when a project was important and the compensation attractive.⁴¹ Frobenius's photograph of the interior of the shrine (Figure 172) provides an excellent view of two veranda posts depicting equestrian figures. The carvings are by different hands, although possibly from the same town—perhaps the little town of Erin, lying about 60 miles to the northeast of Ibadan and famed for its carvers, especially the workshop of Maku and his sons (see Figure 173).⁴²

The central portion of the shrine is the *irubo* (place of sacrifice). It contains a beautifully carved, inverted mortar known as *odo* Sango. There is also a large wooden bowl filled with *edan ara* (the celts of the thunder god). To the right there are carvings of a kneeling female Sango devotee and another of Sango's dog. There is also a small, figured terracotta pot. To the left of the *odo* Sango is a calabash containing rams' horns, usually associated with *orisa* Oya, and a pair of carv-

ings for *ibeji* (deceased twins). In a large calabash, which rests on top of this accumulation, there are prayer rattles known as *sere* Sango, and a striped cloth. Farther to the right there are three terracotta pots, each with distinctive embossed designs or incised patterns. One has been painted with *efun*, a chalky substance, and may contain the cool, medicinal waters of *orisa* Osun or *orisa* Obatala. Each of the pots supports a calabash. The open calabashes contain what appear to be celts, cloths, and other unidentifiable objects. Another figured terracotta pot rests in a depression on the raised portion of the shrine. Two earthen jars, probably for *orisa* Esu, the guardian of the ritual process, are situated on the floor in front of the *odo* Sango, focusing the viewer's attention on the place of power and sacrifice. Seven *laba* Sango hang at the back of the shrine, providing in their sharply contrasting colors and bold, energetic designs expressions of the god's power. For it is in the *laba* Sango that the celts hurled by the god upon defenseless mortals are retrieved by Sango priests and brought to the shrine.

In the towns and villages that came under the sway of the Oyo Empire, shrines for Sango held a prominent place both in the palace grounds and in association with one of the lineage compounds, some of which became known as Ile Olorionisango ("The-house-of-the-Chief-Priest-of-Sango"). The Sango festival was prominent in the town's festival calendar, but in many towns and villages earlier traditions held fast. In the Igbomina town of Ila-Orangun, for example, which was on the eastern outskirts of the Oyo Empire, the worship of Sango may be important, but Ogun, *orisa* of iron and war, is still the principal deity. His festival, Odun Ogun, is of the same order of importance as the festival for the ancestors, Odun Egungun, and rites for Ogun, not for Sango, are performed in the annual festival for the king, Odun Oro.⁴³ Indeed, Ogun, the god of warriors and of the blacksmiths and carvers who forge the instruments of culture, is the *orisa* most widely worshipped throughout Yorubaland (Figure 178).

In Osogbo, about 45 miles from Ila, the festival for *orisa* Osun dominates the liturgical calendar. The king and townspeople gather in the sacred forest to watch as priestesses offer libations at the Osun River and return with brass pots filled with the medicinal waters of the goddess. These are placed in the central shrine and other shrines in the palace and town.

As in Osogbo, at the annual festival for Osun in many northern Yoruba towns, the priestesses are dressed in white and carry a pair of *yata* (beaded panels) resting on their hips (Figure 183). Each panel hangs from a strap which crosses the priestess's body from the opposite shoulder. The straps often have bits of mirror sewn into

the cloth which reflect the light, as ripples on flowing water. The panels are about 14 inches square. The beads are threaded together and sewn on a cloth which is affixed to a stiff leather backing. As in Figure 184, the colors are usually shades of blue and yellow that are associated with Osun; they are combined with other colors used for aesthetic effect or to refer to other *orisa* associated with the house and shrine of the devotee. The patterns of the *yata* vary greatly, consisting essentially of a combination of geometric patterns, the juxtaposition or overlay of which, combined with the interplay of subtle colors, conveys a controlled energy. In the mid-portion of the design there is usually the image of a human face. The significance of this iconographic detail is variously interpreted by devotees. It recalls similar facial patterns on the crowns of kings (Figure 186) and on the large beaded bags that surround and hold together the numerous strands of cowrie shells, which are the emblem for the worshippers of Alarere, a version of the cult of *orisa* Oko, deity of the farm (Figure 188). Although the facial motif on king's crowns is often associated with Oduduwa, the first king of the Yoruba people, similar motifs on other *orisa* emblems need not be so specific. As in the prominence of the head and face in the sculptural arts, the facial motif on crowns and beaded panels refers to the destiny, or *ori inu*, of the one who wears, carries, or looks upon the emblem; this destiny is inextricably linked to an *orisa*. In the case of the Osun devotee, it is to know that one's destiny is bound up with a power upon which even the sixteen male *orisa* were dependent when they were commissioned to organize the world for human habitation. For it was not until Ogun, Sango, and the other *orisa* honored Osun and included her in their councils that their work on earth and their sacrifices offered to Olodumare, the High God, were effective.

In the neighboring town of Ilobu, *orisa* Erinle, a great hunter who became an *orisa*, is the most important of the gods although there are shrines for Sango, Oya, and other deities. Erinle is said to have conducted the first Olobu, the paramount chief of Ilobu, to the present site of the town, and over the years Erinle protected the people of Ilobu from the invasion of the Fulani. According to local tradition, when Erinle had "stayed long enough in Ilobu 'he returned to the river' from which he had originally come."⁴⁴ Thus, in the clay pots which are found on Erinle shrines, the devotee covers a cluster of smooth, round stones found in the nearby Erinle River with water from the river.

The Erinle cult probably existed in Oyo-Ile, for it is found throughout the towns of the Oyo Empire. The emblem of the god has a basic form—an earthenware

vessel with ornamented lid. In northern Oyo towns, such as Ilobu, the Erinle cult object is usually conceived entirely of abstract shapes. The surface of the pot and lid are sometimes lightly patterned. The lid is ornamented with two intersecting arches with a cone projecting at the top. As in the iconography of "the crown of Banyani" on Sango shrines, the basic form of the lid for the Erinle pot includes the abstract conical image of the *oba's* crown and that of the shrine for the *ori*.

An earthenware pot with intersecting arches is also found on shrines in the Ijebu area for *orisa* Osoosi, who is also a hunter and, as with Erinle, is associated with forest streams. As hunter gods, they express a relationship to the forest and hunt that contrasts with Ogun's thirst for blood. Their water-filled vessels, as those for *orisa* Osun, often appear on Sango shrines or near his emblems on household shrines, providing a cooling presence to the ill-tempered divine king (Figure 176).

In Saki, a town to the west of Oyo-Ile, to which many of Oyo-Ile's residents fled when the capital city fell, it is *orisa* Oko, deity of the farm, who defines the religious life of the community. *Orisa* Oko was once a hunter and friend of Ogun but abandoned the hunt to become a farmer. In the pantheon of the *orisa* he is associated with the *orisa funfun*, the deities of whiteness: Obatala the fashioner of human bodies, Osanyin the provider of medicinal herbs, Osun the mother of life-giving waters, as well as Yemoja and Osoosi.

It is in Irawo that the blacksmiths forge the *opa orisa Oko*, the "staff" and principal symbol of the *orisa* (Figure 187). The staff of Oko is made by smelting the bundles of hoes brought by devotees from throughout Yorubaland. Since the metal has twice undergone the smelting process, it has almost the quality and appearance of steel. Every staff is a commissioned work and therefore reflects the technical skill and artistry of the blacksmith who creates it. While the size of the staff may vary depending upon the number of hoes brought to the smithy and by the wealth of those who commission it, the form of the staff is constant. The top has a phallus shape, which is readily acknowledged by priestesses, for they are the *iyawo orisa Oko* ("wives of *orisa* Oko"). But the cone-on-stem form is also a reference to the head of the *orisa*. A third of the way down the staff there is a small square on which a cross pattern is inscribed on each side. On the front of the staff, two eyes are etched in the upper quadrants created by the cross. The area is known as the "face" of the *orisa*, and it is here that the priestess touches the offerings after having touched them to her head. Often a priestess will bind clusters of cowrie shells and large translucent beads to emphasize the ritual significance of the "face" (Figure 180). On the



183. Priestesses dancing at the festival for *orisa* Osun in Ila-Orangun. Each wears beaded dance panels (*yata*) and carries on her head a brass bowl filled with the medicinal waters and herbs of the goddess who cures the sick and blesses her followers with children. Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.



184. Beaded Dance Panel, Oyo/Osogbo area, 20th century. The beaded dance panels, (*yata*), worn by priestesses at the annual festival for *orisa* Osun, often combine subtle colors with geometric patterns that convey great energy. The vast majority depict a face. This iconographic motif is given various interpretations, but is at one and the same time associated with a divine presence and also the personal destiny of the devotee. Beads, cloth, leather. H. 11½ in. Collection Dufour, France.



185. Beaded Bag, Oyo/Osogbo area, 20th century. The beaded panel of this bag is a riot of shapes and colors. It expresses an uncontrollable energy like that which possesses *orisa* Sango. The face at the center is depicted in the conical form of a crown, appropriate for the deified king of Oyo-Ile. The series of triangular patterns at the bottom of the crown and along the lower edge of the panel are reminiscent of the seven triangular pieces suspended from the bottom of a *laba* Sango (see Figure 160). Ulli Beier photographed a Sango shrine in Ilobu in the mid-fifties on which beaded dance panels and bags hung on the wall of the shrine along with the traditional leather *laba* Sango. Beads, cloth, leather. H. 39½ in. Valerie Franklin.



186. The Orangun-Ila, king of Ila, wearing his great crown (*adenla*) called "Ologun," (Crown of the Warrior) during the concluding rite of Odun Oba, the festival for the king. The crown was made by a beadworker from the Adesina family in Efon-Alaiye. Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1984. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.

187. Staff with Beaded Sheath and Crown, Central Yoruba, 19th–20th century. An *opa orisa* Oko is referred to as the “staff” or “walking stick” of the deity of the farm. It is enclosed within a beaded bag and crown, when it is not displayed on ritual occasions. The staff is forged from hoes which devotees bring to the blacksmiths of Irawo, who alone have the secret knowledge necessary for making these sacred emblems. Although *orisa* Oko was never a king, he is honored by his followers with a beaded garment and crown. Iron, wood, beads, cloth, hide. Staff: H. 56½ in. Sheath: H. 52 in. Crown: H. 7 in. Gift of Evelyn A. Jaffe Hall, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College.



188. An Alarere shrine for *orisa* Oko, deity of the farm. Alarere is a variation of the cult for *orisa* Oko. Its emblem consists of thirty to fifty strands of cowrie shells, a sign of wealth, which are bound together by an elaborately decorated beaded panel. Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1972. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.



189. A shrine for *orisa* Oko showing the beaded bag and crown in which the staff of the god is kept when not ritually used. Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1974. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.

long bladelike lower portion, the ornamentation consists of a series of geometric patterns, although on the larger staffs there will be the image of a bird. Many devotees refer to the bird as “decorative.” Others, however, speak of it in a guarded way, suggesting that, as with bird imagery on other ritual artifacts, the bird refers to the power of “the mothers,” in other words the *ase* of women.

Often a priestess will have a beaded or cowrie shell-covered case and a crown in which the staff is placed when not being used on ritual occasions (Figure 189). The covering is to honor and enhance the beauty of her lord. (The use of a beaded crown is especially noteworthy, since, unlike Sango and Obatala, Oko was not a king before becoming an *orisa*.) As with the beaded dance panels for Osun, the patterns and diversity of colors reflect the artistic imagination of the beadworker, and, if the patron requests, beaded animal and human figures will be attached along the length of the case. Often the image of a face will be included on the upper portion of the case, the red and white marks appearing on the forehead just as they are worn by priestesses of the *orisa* on ritual occasions (Figure 182).

A surprising variety of gods compose the Yoruba pantheon. There is variation both in names and, to some extent, in the attributes of a particular god. Even within the region of the Oyo Empire, where the power of Sango held sway, other *orisa* remained part of the lives of communities and individuals. From place to place, whether region, town, or compound, there are constantly changing configurations of the gods. Through them, individuals and groups have articulated their deepest concerns, and in them are found perceptions of self and the world. The High God, Olodumare, who has neither shrine nor priesthood, stands surety for the ultimate coherence of the universe; but it is through the many *orisa* that the Yoruba express the dynamics and diversity of the forces that constitute the universe and the individuality of one's experience within it. This situation and rich religious imagination have provided the ground for artistic creativity.⁴⁵

The Cult of Twins

On many Sango shrines one finds carved images for deceased twins, *ere ibeji*, tucked in among the celts in the great offering bowl or leaning against the base of the *odo* Sango (Figure 160). Sango is known as the protector of *ibeji*, who are identified so closely with him that they have been called the “children of thunder.”⁴⁶

The Yoruba have one of the highest rates of twinning in the world, approximately forty-five twin births out of

every thousand births.⁴⁷ The reasons for this extraordinary phenomenon are unknown, although recent studies suggest a possible link between dietary and genetic patterns.⁴⁸ The response to twin births has its own social history.

Throughout that portion of Yorubaland once under the influence of the Oyo Empire, twins, both living and dead, are referred to as *emi alagbara* (“powerful spirits”), who are capable of bringing riches to their parents and misfortune to those who do not honor them. As with kings, twins are thought to have the powers of an *orisa* and to become *orisa* when they die, but in many of the *oriki* sung for twins an ambivalence about “twin spirits” betrays itself.

*Taiwo and Kebinde are rich children.
They give me pleasure, as does a crown,
As does one with a long, graceful neck,
As one whom it is good to see in the morning,
As one who attracts attention,
As one with beautiful eyes,
As one with small eyes and a long tail.
In the morning the householder sweeps the ground.
Colobus born of Colobus!
Colobus born of Colobus!
Colobus born of Colobus!
Touraco bird on the tree!
Do not touch my tail or my eyes!
You, who are honored in the morning with drum and
carving,
Who sleep with the Oni, but do not roll up your mats in
the morning.
You, who are taller than your comrades,
Who enter without greeting the Orangun.
Everyone is a king in his own house.
Tiny children in the eyes of the jealous co-wife,
Who are treated with care by their mother.
You shout, “Abuse me, and I shall follow you home.
Praise me, and I shall leave you alone!”
You, who do not despise the poor,
Who are relatives of the cloth seller.
You enter without greeting the Orangun.
Everyone is a king in his own house.
The Orangun refused to recognize them because they
were tiny.
The envious co-wife says: “One with a narrow head and
deep set eyes.”
Twin, you belong to the people of Isokun.
A tiny person who lives in trees.
Twin who cannot walk alone, who needs another with
whom to walk.”⁴⁹*

An *oriki* is often a highly original creation of the singer at the time of the performance. She may combine well-known verses from songs for *ibeji* with phrases borrowed from other oral genres, such as the hunter's greeting to the Colobus monkey. She may refer to local persons, including the king of the singer's hometown, the Orangun-Ila, as well as the Oni of Ife. *Oriki* for *ibeji* are sung to celebrate and placate the

orisa-like power of twins. They entertain those listening by clever word play and by the subtlety with which the singer expresses the oddness of twin births, the unique status of twins in Yoruba society, the social tensions that the birth of twins creates between co-wives, and the feelings of ambiguity about the propriety of multiple births for humans.

In the *oriki* cited, the twins, Taiwo (the first born, the “one who tastes the world”) and Kehinde (the second born and considered the eldest), are praised for bringing riches to their parents. The co-wife may mock their tiny size, but they are beautiful in the eyes of their mother. Nonetheless, they are thought to be strange even by their parents. They violate social protocol, by not observing the courtesies due kings. The first twins are said to have come from Isokun, a place apparently without specific location.⁵⁰ The singer refers to the twin as “a tiny person who lives in trees,” and associates *ibeji* with the *edun*, the Colobus monkey, who lives in the marginal world where forest and field border on human habitation. The singer also observes that “The Orangun refused to recognize them because they were tiny.” This echoes the historical fact that the “custom of killing twins prevailed all over the country in early times.”⁵¹ It is not clear when twin infanticide ended, but the practice may have ceased by decree of the Alafin of Oyo, when one of his wives gave birth to twins. The “King was loth to destroy them. . . [and] thereupon gave orders that they should be removed—with the mother—to a remote part of the kingdom and there to remain and be regarded as dead.”⁵² One analysis of myths relating to the origins of the cult of twins in southwestern Yoruba communities concludes that there was a remarkable reversal in attitudes toward twin births among the southwestern Yoruba that occurred during the latter part of the eighteenth and early in the nineteenth century, and coincident with the change was the appearance of the cult of twins.⁵³ In the poetry of Ifa, there is abundant evidence for a radical change in attitudes toward twin births from a time when twins were viewed as “monsters” to a later period when they were received as “kings” and “*orisa*.”⁵⁴

Cumulative evidence, therefore, clearly indicates that twin births were once unacceptable among the Yoruba, as well as among neighboring peoples to the southeast, and that such births are still unwelcome among many southeastern Yoruba communities.⁵⁵ (For example, the cult of twins is not found among the Ondo Yoruba, and hence there are no carvings for twins from Owo and other Ondo towns.) It also appears to be the case that the reversal of attitudes and practices relating to twin births seems to have been occasioned by Oyo-Ile’s contacts with Porto Novo in Dahomey, where, according to

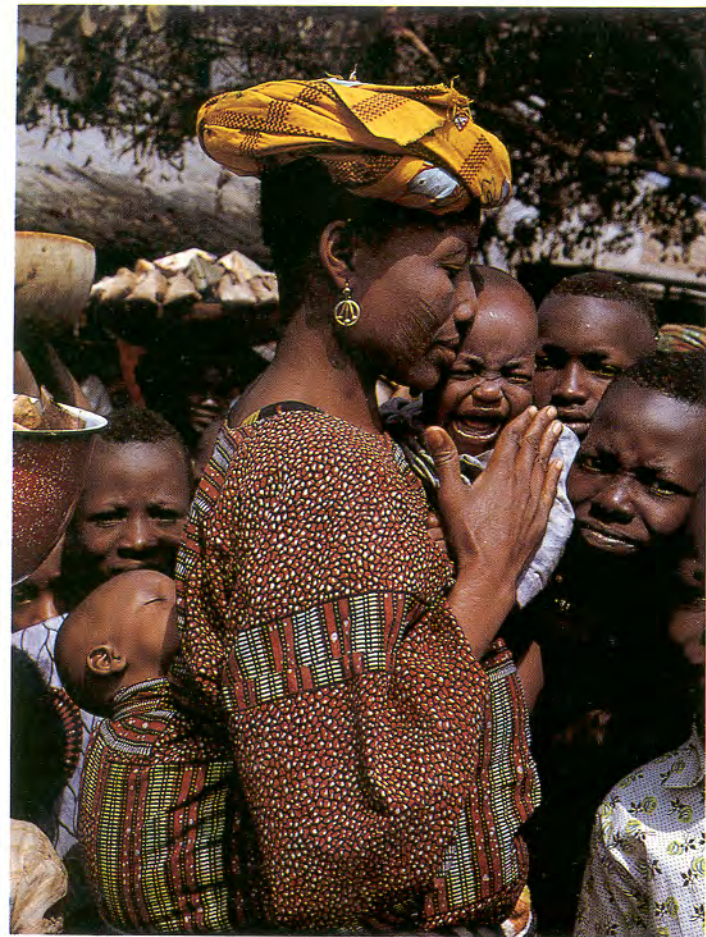
one account, “it was not the custom in those parts to kill twins as in Oyo.”⁵⁶ The cult then spread to other Yoruba towns within the Oyo Empire. Although Christian and Islamic missions may have played a role in supporting the change, it appears that the emergence of the cult of twins was a development within Oyo Yoruba culture, which was subsequently legitimized by the identification of Sango as the protector of twins.

The earliest recorded reference to carvings for deceased twins is in an entry in the journal of Richard Lander, who accompanied Clapperton on his explorations in 1826 and returned to West Africa in 1830. In the town of Egga north of the coastal city of Badagry, Lander observed “many women with little wooden figures of children on their heads [who] passed us in the course of the morning—mothers who, having lost a child, carry such rude imitations of them about their persons for an indefinite time as a symbol of mourning. None of them could be induced to part with one of these little affectionate memorials.”⁵⁷

Two days later, Lander noted that “the mortality of children must be immense indeed here, for almost every woman we met with on the road, had one or more of those little wooden images, we have spoken of before. Whenever the mothers stopped to take refreshment, a small part of their food was invariably presented to the lips of these inanimate memorials.”⁵⁸

Lander’s reference to the carvings as “affectionate memorials” is apt. Studies of the care and nurturing of twins in several Yoruba towns document the special attention given to them by their parents, especially the mothers.⁵⁹ It is expected that they will carry the twins to the markets to dance in their honor, sing their praises, and receive gifts of money from those who pass by (Figure 190). Special foods must be prepared for twins once a week; beans or cowpeas cooked with palm-oil, for example, are thought to “cool” their spirited temperaments. Privileged attention continues even when one or both of the twins die.

On the occasion of the death of a twin, the parents will consult an Ifa divination priest in order to learn which carver should be asked to carve an *ere ibeji*.⁶⁰ Following negotiations with the carver over the fee, sacrificial materials, and food that will be required for the preparation of the carving, the parents wait until they are notified. The carver will place a small sacrifice at the base of an *ire ona* tree, a tree of relatively soft wood used for carving *ibeji* figures. Apart from the parents’ decision regarding the lineage markings on the face of the figure, stylistic considerations in the carving of an *ibeji* are solely those of the carver. Before presenting the *ere ibeji* to the parents, the carver will invoke the *emi* (spirit) of the deceased child by submerging



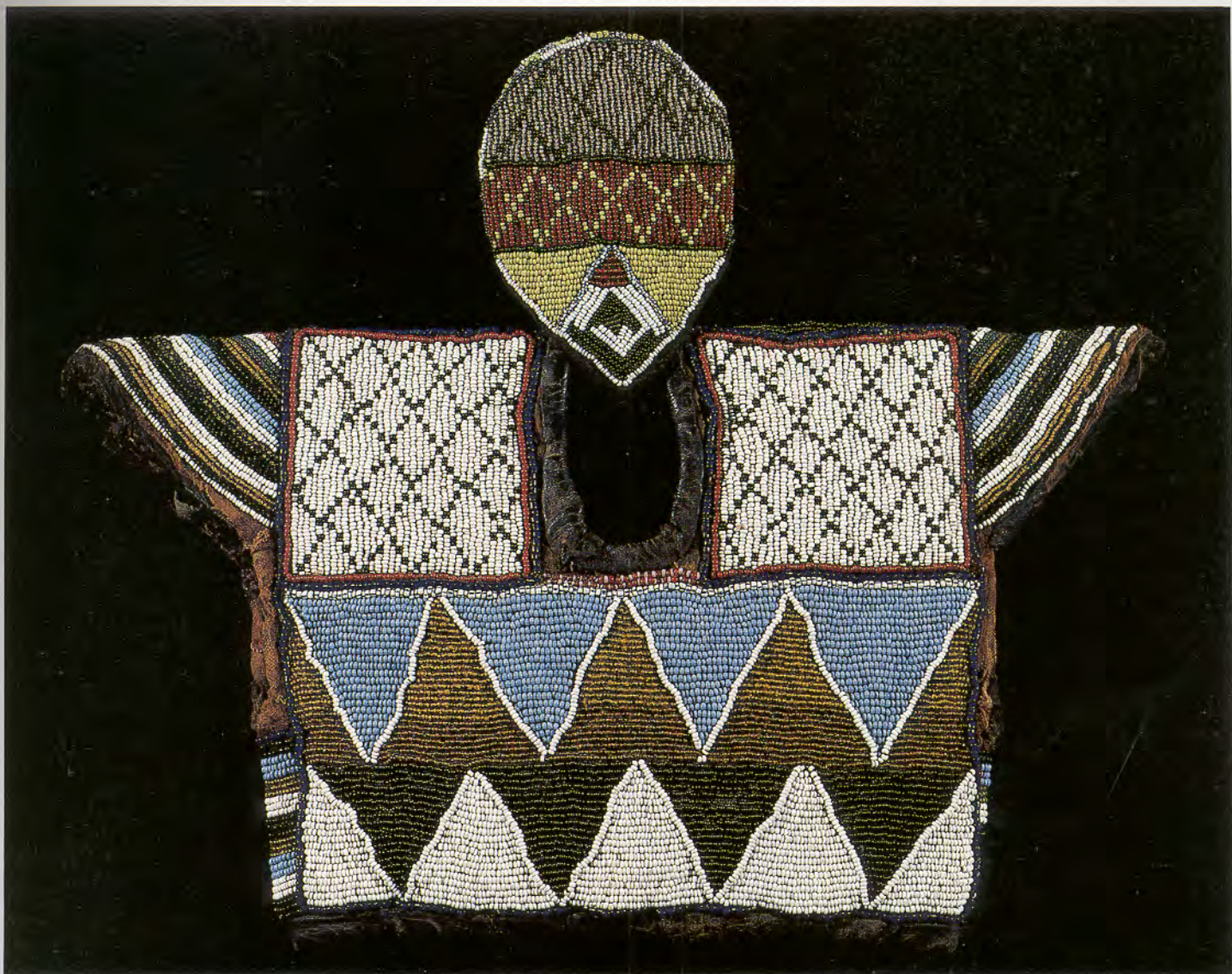
190. Mother of twins dancing in the market. Twins are said to bring wealth to their parents. Hence, *iyabeji*, "mother of twins," will go to the market to dance and to sing songs called *orin ibeji* which celebrate the power of twins, and include general social commentary. Often the songs are improvised on the spot and are highly imaginative creations of the singer, who will be rewarded with gifts of money by the market women and passers-by. Ogbaga, Oyo, Nigeria, 1971. Photograph by M. H. Houlberg



191. A young woman who has inherited the care of *ere ibeji* from her father's mother. The figures were carved by Oje of Aga's compound, Ila-Orangun, about 1925. Isele Quarter, Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1974. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.



192. Accompanied by drummers and her friends, the mother of twins dances in the market with the living twin on her back and the commemorative carving for the deceased twin tucked into her wrapper. Ogbaga, Oyo, Nigeria, 1971. Photograph by M. H. Houlberg.



193. Beaded Tunic and Hat for a Twin Figure, Central Yoruba, 19th–20th century. The clothing of a twin figure with a beaded garment honors and placates the spirit of the deceased twin, whose power affects the well-being of the living. Beads, leather, cloth. Tunic: 9½ in. Hat: 5¼ in. Joan and Thomas Mohr collection.

the figure for several days in a concoction of leaves crushed in water. Later, when the wood is dry, he will rub the carving with a mixture called *ero*, consisting of palm oil and shea butter.

On the day that the parents are to receive the *ere ibeji*, they will carry food to the carver's compound to feast the carver and his family. The carver will place the *ere ibeji* on a small mat in front of the shrine to Ogun and offer a sacrifice to the god of iron. The mother will then stretch forward her arms towards the little figure, offer a prayer to her *ibeji* and receive the *ere ibeji* from the carver. Tucking the figure in her wrapper as she would a living child, the mother will dance and sing songs appropriate for twins (Figure 192). As she leaves, she will be instructed by the carver to talk to no one and not to look back as she makes her way home.

The transformation of the carved image into something more than a memorial figure and the shaping of the mother's perception of the child that is once again with her continues with the ritual care of the *ere ibeji* over the days and weeks that follow. The figure will be washed with a coarse, black, medicinal soap and



194. Shrine for deceased twins. The carvings represent the deaths of twins over several generations in a family. Each generation takes on the responsibility to sacrifice and care for the spirits of the deceased represented in the twin figures. Imosan, Ijebu, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.



195. An elderly woman with the memorial figures of her deceased twins. The *ere ibeji* were carved by Ogunwuyi (c. 1890–1965) of Ore's compound, Ila-Orangun. Iseido Quarter, Ila-Orangun, 1984. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.

scrubbed with the soft, white chaff of sugar cane. (Sugar cane is a sacrificial food appropriate for *ibeji*.) A cloth soaked in indigo dye will be used to rub the head, for it is within the *ori* that the deep mystery of one's personal destiny resides. The body will be anointed with ground camwood, both to beautify and protect the *ibeji* from harm. Finally, she will add waist and/or neck beads, the colors of which will refer to the *orisa* she worships, perhaps to more than one (Figure 191). She may add cowrie shells for wristlettes, or brass rings on the ankles for Aro, the *orisa* who protects children from the appeals of *abiku* (spirit-children born to die) (Figures 196, 197). She may dress the figure in cloth or an expensive beaded or cowrie-shell bag (Figure 193). At weekly rites and on the occasion of annual festivals, the mother will prepare food for her *ibeji*, placing it in dishes before the carvings (Figure 194).

Through the process of ritual transformation, the carvings are no longer viewed by the mother, or others in the family, as wooden memorial figures. As the loci of ritual activity, *ere ibeji* come to embody the living dead. The deceased child, whether having died at six weeks or after sixty years, is present to the living in, with, and through the *ibeji* figure. Indeed, the carvings themselves convey the *ase* of the twin child even in death (Figure 195).

One of the striking characteristics of *ibeji* figures is their depiction of the human form in the fullness of life. They often portray physically powerful bodies, the breasts of female figures and the genitals of males prominently displayed. Their bodies are erect, hands usually positioned on hips or legs, emphasizing poise and balance. Their heads constitute a third of the carving and are adorned with an elaborate coiffure or hat, usually of the *abatiaja* type, having triangular projections on each side. The faces convey composure and an inner strength. *Ere ibeji* are an affirmation of life.

For all the pathos that lies behind the creation of *ibeji* carvings, their extraordinary numbers have been a boon to the study of Yoruba art. They provide a single type of art form with which to make comparative studies of regional styles. The emphasis on volume and careful delineation of the figure in the *ibeji* carvings from northern Ekiti (Figure 196), for example, contrasts with those from the western Oyo town of Shaki which are often slender, at times elongated figures, with highly refined features (Figure 197), while carvings from the southern Ijebu area also tend to emphasize volume but in rather squat and crudely defined figures (see Figure 194).

Ere ibeji also provide a means for identifying the distinctive characteristics of various workshops of carvers in a particular town. Studies have identified four major

workshops in the town of Ila-Orangun, and have traced the history of carving styles in Inurin's Compound through four generations of carvers.⁶² Two important workshops or "schools" of carvers in the Itoko quarter of the southwestern Yoruba town of Abeokuta have been identified: the Adugbologe school, established in the 1850s by Egbado immigrants from Aibo, and the Esubiyi school, established a decade later by Egbado immigrants from Ibara Orile.⁶² The extraordinary number of carvings from these workshops over the years has enabled students of Yoruba art to identify the hands of individual carvers and study changes in craftsmanship and artistry over time.

Ancestral Ensembles

The social world of the Yoruba consists of the living, the not-yet-born, and the deceased. Deceased twins, especially those who died as children, are thought of as not yet born, for they have not experienced the fullness of life and may return to the household. But those who have accomplished their days on earth and made a position for themselves in society become ancestors.

"Ancestor" is the term commonly used to translate the Yoruba phrase *Ara Orun*, which means literally, "Dwellers in Heaven" or, as more loosely translated by some, "Beings from Beyond." For the Yoruba, "existence" is not defined solely in terms of physical life on earth. The dead also "exist" in the sense that they make their presence known to the living, whose well-being depends upon their relationship to the living dead. Hence, throughout the Oyo Yoruba area annual and/or biennial festivals for the ancestors, called *Odun Egungun*, are held in every community.⁶³ They consist of a series of rituals performed over several weeks within the compounds of the lineages that compose a town, as well as public rites at the *igbale* (the forest of the *engungun*), in the marketplace, and at the front of the palace. It is during *Odun Egungun* and on the occasion of commemorative funeral rites for the deceased that the living dead appear and are honored through the mediation of masquerades, or *egungun*, meaning "powers concealed."⁶⁴

While there are several masking traditions among various Yoruba subgroups, *Egungun* has its origins among the Oyo Yoruba (Figure 199). The oral histories of the palace and lineages of Oyo, and the myths preserved in Ifa divination poetry, strongly suggest that the peoples of Oyo-Ile adapted a masking tradition found among the Nupe, richly embellishing it for their own purposes of honoring the ancestors.⁶⁵ The cult of *Egungun*, although closely associated with the myths and rituals for Sango and Oya, was probably a later development inspired by palace historians and fol-



196. Figure for a Deceased Twin, Ekiti, 20th century. The carver of this *ere ibeji* emphasizes the puffy cheeks of an infant though the figure, as in all carvings for deceased twins, depicts maturity. The mother of the *ibeji* has placed black beads around the waist as protection against *abiku*, spirit children who are born to die, and added the red beads of Sango, protector of twins, and the brass bracelet of Osun. Wood, beads, brass. H. 10 in. Deborah and Jeffrey Hammer, Los Angeles.



197. Figures for Deceased Twins, Saki, 19th–20th century. This pair of *ere ibeji* are among the finest examples of the Saki style, named for a small town to the northwest of Oyo. The tall, slender figures have had earrings, necklaces, bracelets and waist beads added by the mother in her appeal to the *orisa* for protection of the deceased and in supplication for their return to the world of the living. Wood, beads, brass. H. 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ and 14 in. Lawrence Gussman.

198. Figures for Deceased Twins, Yagba, 20th century. Remarkable for his highly stylized treatment of the human figure, the carver depicts the head as a cone on which the facial features are superficially sketched. The body and legs form another cone or inverted Y with the arms conceived as two curves extending from the neck to the lower portion of the leg. The patterns employed to delineate the face are similar to those found on the finials of late nineteenth century chiefs' staffs in Kwara villages. Wood, beads, iron. H. 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ and 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Private collection.





199. Egungun costume, Oyo, early 20th century. Masquerades for the ancestors are known as *egungun*, "powers concealed." The body of the dancer is completely covered by layer upon layer of cloth. On occasion one can tell the age of a masquerade by an examination of the cloths that have been used, since it is not unusual for new cloths to be added each year. The under layers of this costume reveal very old indigo-dyed cloth made of home-spun cotton. The outer layers are of machine-made cloth, including velvet. Cowrie shells, symbols of wealth, frame the sides of the netting that hides the dancer's face. Beads "crown" the masker's head, are used in horizontal rows below the face, and descend in parallel columns on the front of the costume. The wealth and status of the family, as well as the power of the ancestor, are celebrated in this assemblage of materials. Cloth, beads, cowries. H. 59 in. Eric D. Robertson.



200. Egungun costume, Oyo. Back view of Figure 199. Cloth, beads, cowries. H. 59 in. Eric D. Robertson.

201. An *egungun* masquerade of a type called Onidan, "owner of miracles." Ilogbo, Awori, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.

202. An Onidan *egungun* whirling and transforming from one appearance to another through the inversion of its cloth. Ilogbo, Awori, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by M. T. Drewal.



lowers of Sango in order to enhance the status of the Alafin and the *orisa* in the political and cult life of Oyo-Ile.

It appears from the oral histories that there were two groups in Oyo-Ile associated with Egungun. One was led by Chief Alapinni, a member of the Oyo Mesi, whose lineage was one of the "northern houses" in the capital city. The cult life of Alapinni's group focused upon celebrating the importance of the older nonroyal houses in the political life of Oyo-Ile. The costumes of this group were reputed to be very expensive and were probably composed of many layers of cloth. The other group was led by Chief Alagbaa, who was associated with the Oloba and Ologbin lineage groups, which traced their ancestry to other towns than those from the north. Their cult life was focused upon funerary rites, commemorative rites for the deceased and masked performances designed for public entertainment. Their costumes were of a type that entailed visual transformations.

In the early stages of the empire, towns with strong connections to the royal court, such as Ede, Ofa, and Oyan, also had well-developed Egungun cults. There was only one Alapinni, and he resided in the capital city; but the title of Alagbaa appeared in all Oyo Yoruba towns, as well as in the capital.⁶⁶ By the time of Alafin Abiodun (reigned 1774–1789), the Alapinni group was closely identified with the Oyo Mesi. The followers of the Alagbaa were clearly associated with the royal court and provided a network of communication with other towns throughout the empire in a manner similar to the organization of the Sango cult. With the expansion of the empire, the Egungun cult spread to Egba, Egbado, Awori, and Dahomey lands. It was in these areas that the organizational pattern of the Alagbaa, the leader of the local Egungun cult, and the *oje* (the members of the cult), closely paralleled that of the Mogba and *elegun* (those who were possessed) of the Sango cult locally and in its relationship to Oyo-Ile. With the fall of the Oyo Empire and the chaos that ensued during the civil wars, the movements of peoples carried the rituals and pageantry of the Egungun cult into other parts of Yorubaland where they were adapted to local traditions.

Clapperton's journal entry of February 26, 1826 regarding a performance of masked actors is the earliest account that we have of what may have been the *egungun* of the Alagbaa group in Oyo-Ile. His lengthy description suggests his fascination with what he saw, and sketches a performance and a number of masquerades that are remarkably similar to those seen today in Oyo Yoruba towns. The performance took place in the "king's park" at the front of the palace:

... the actors [were] dressed in large sacks, covering every part of the body; the head most fantastically decorated with strips of rags, damask silk, and cotton, of as many glaring colours as it was possible. The king's servants attended to keep the peace, and to prevent the crowd from breaking into the square in which the actors were assembled. Musicians also attended with drums, horns, and whistles, which were beaten and blown without intermission.

The first act consisted in dancing and tumbling in sacks, which they performed to admiration, considering that they could not see, and had not the free use of their feet and hands. The second act consisted in catching the boa constrictor: first, one of the sack-men came in front and knelt down on his hands and feet; then came out a tall majestic figure, having on a headdress and mask which baffle all description: it was of a glossy black colour, sometimes like a lion couchant over the crest of a helmet; at another like a black head with a large wig; at every turn he made it changed its appearance. This figure held in its right hand a sword, and by its superior dress and motions appeared to be the director of the scene, for not a word was spoken by the actors. The manager, as I shall call the tall figure, then came up to the man who was lying in the sack; another sack-dancer was brought in his sack, who by a wave of the sword was laid down at the other's head or feet; he having unsown the end of both sacks, the two crawled into one. There was now great waving of the manager's sword; indeed I thought that heads were going to be taken off, as all the actors assembled round the party lying down; but in a few minutes they all cleared away except the manager, who gave two or three flourishes with his sword, when the representation of the boa constrictor began. The animal put its head out of the bag in which it was contained, attempting to bite the manager; but at a wave of the sword it threw its head in another direction to avert the blow; it then began gradually to creep out of the bag, and went through the motions of a snake in a very natural manner, though it appeared to be rather full in the belly; opening and shutting its mouth, which I suspect was the performer's two hands, in the most natural manner imaginable. The length of the creature was spun out to about fourteen feet; and the colour and action were well represented by a covering of painted cloth, imitating that of the boa. After following the manager round the park for some time, and attempting to bite him, which he averted by a wave of the sword, a sign was made for the body of actors to come up; when the manager approaching the tail, made flourishes with his sword as if hacking at that part of the body. The snake gasped, twisted up, and seemed as if in great torture; and when nearly dead it was shouldered by the masqued actors, still gasping and making attempts to bite, but was carried off in triumph to the fetish house.

The third act consisted of the white devil. The actors having retired to some distance in the back ground, one of them was left in the centre, whose sack falling gradually down, exposed a white head, at which all the crowd gave a shout, that rent the air; they appeared indeed to enjoy this sight, as the perfection of the actor's art. The whole body was at last cleared of the incumbrance of the



203. An Onidan *egungun* completing the miracle, that is, the transformation of its appearance with his cloth reversed or inside out. Ilogbo, Awori, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by H. J. Drewal.

sack, when it exhibited the appearance of a human figure cast in white wax, of the middle size, miserably thin, and starved with cold. It frequently went through the motion of taking snuff, and rubbing its hands; when it walked, it was with the most awkward gait, treading as the most tender-footed white man would do in walking bare-footed, for the first time over new frozen ground. The spectators often appealed to us, as to the excellence of the performance, and entreated I would look and be attentive to what was going on. I pretended to be fully as much pleased with this caricature of a white man as they could be, and certainly the actor burlesqued the part to admiration. This being concluded, the performers all retired to the fetish house. Between each act, we had choral songs by the king's women, in which the assembled crowd joined their voices.⁶⁷

The visual and verbal artistry for Egungun is so rich and varied that attempts at typological analyses prove to be difficult in the extreme. Over the years local histories, the movement of peoples, and the imagination of creators (artist and patron) of masquerades, as well as of dancers and singers, have resulted in variations on earlier types and the creation of distinctive regional types of costumes and performances (Figure 204).⁶⁸

The Egungun performance witnessed by Clapperton appears to have involved masquerades of a type usually referred to as Onidan ("performer of miracles"). Visually, the most spectacular are those composed of a large square of cloth overlaid with panels and bits of other cloths all of bright and contrasting colors. When the dancer extends his arms upwards and to the sides, the colors and patterns present a dazzling sight (Figure 201). The dancer is completely encased within the cloth. When he moves about, he draws the cloth up tightly between his legs in order to perform the intricate dance steps appropriate to the Onidan. The dancer sees through a netting covering his face, and on the top of his head there is a bundle of wool strips bound together enclosing powerful medicines for protection and to enable him to perform with power.

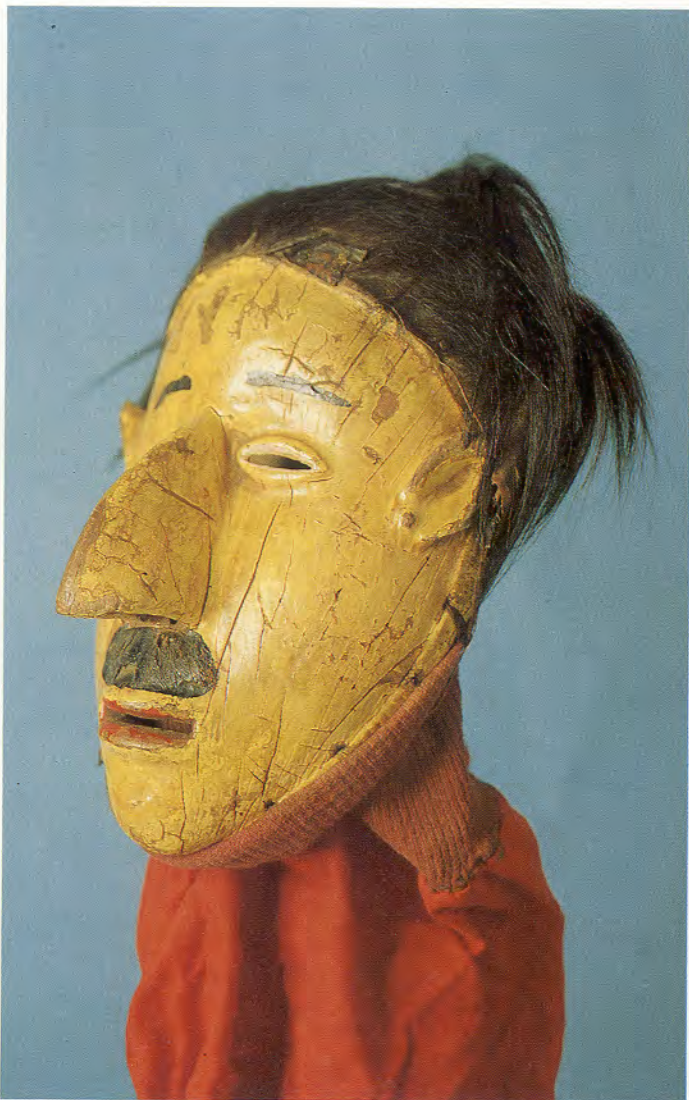
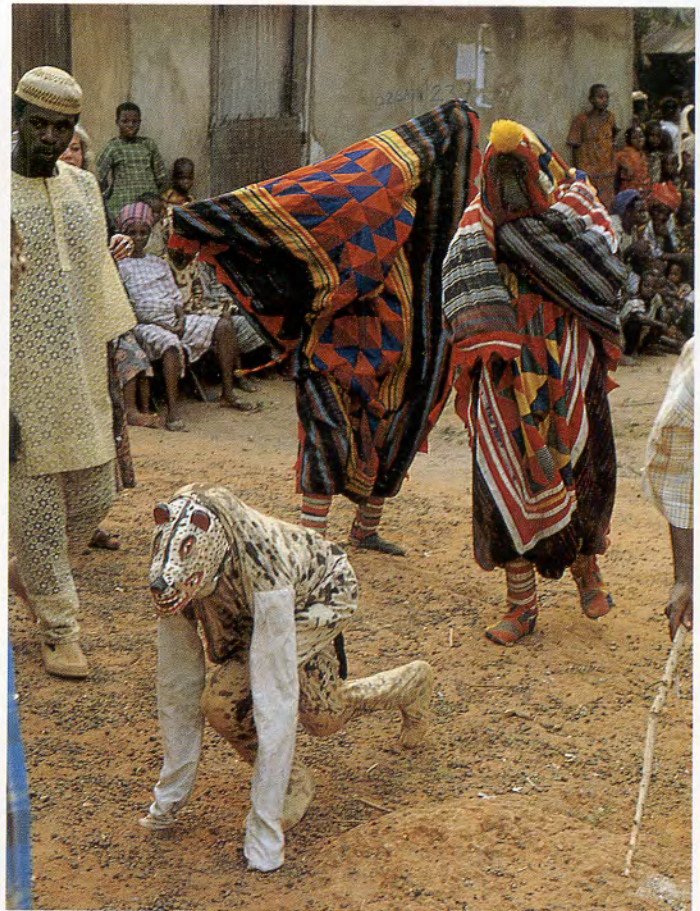
The "miracles" performed by the Onidan are numerous. Clapperton witnessed the transformation of two sacks into a boa constrictor and the wounding of the serpent by the sword-wielding masquer. The same visual trick



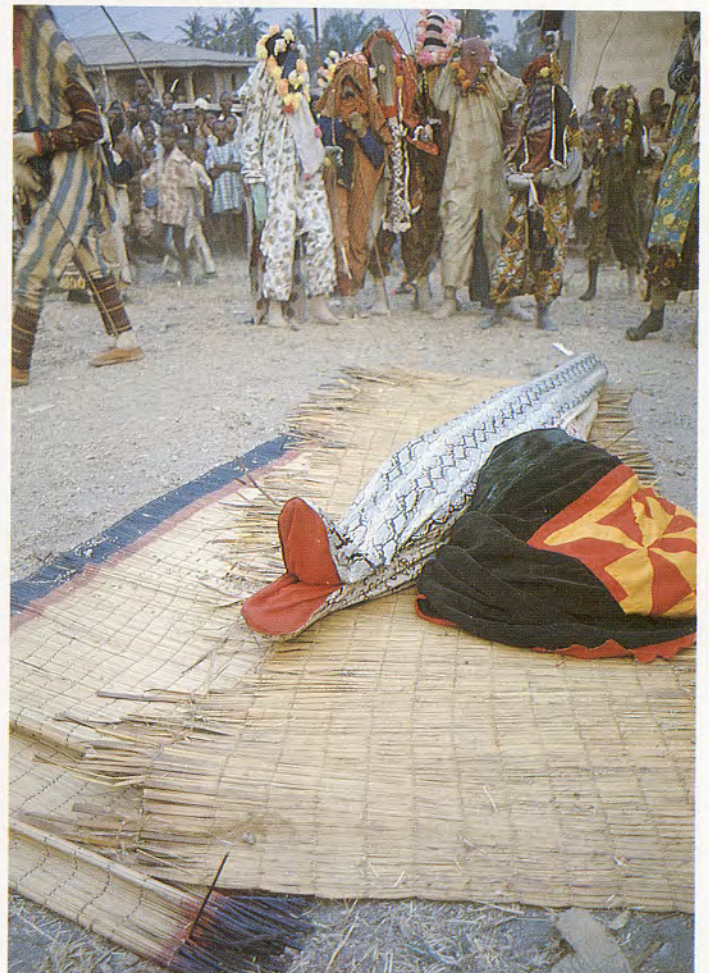
204. Egungun Face Mask, Owo, 20th century. The Agbodogin mask poses an interesting problem for the historian of Yoruba art and ritual. The form of the masquerade, in particular the carved face mask, appears to have been introduced from Ishan. It has no parallel among carvings created for western Yoruba ancestral masquerades. While the Agbodogin performs acrobatic stunts and dances as in Ishan, it has also been incorporated into Owo's ancestor festivals from western Yoruba sources. Wood, metal, pigment. H. 11 in. Collection of Toby and Barry Hecht.



205. A satirical *egungun* depicting a European couple. She clutches her purse while he holds a Bic ballpoint pen in order to write messages to his lover, for writing, rather than dancing, is the mode of communication of the *oyinbo*, the white man. Ilogbo, Awori, Nigeria, 1982. Photographed by M. T. Drewal.

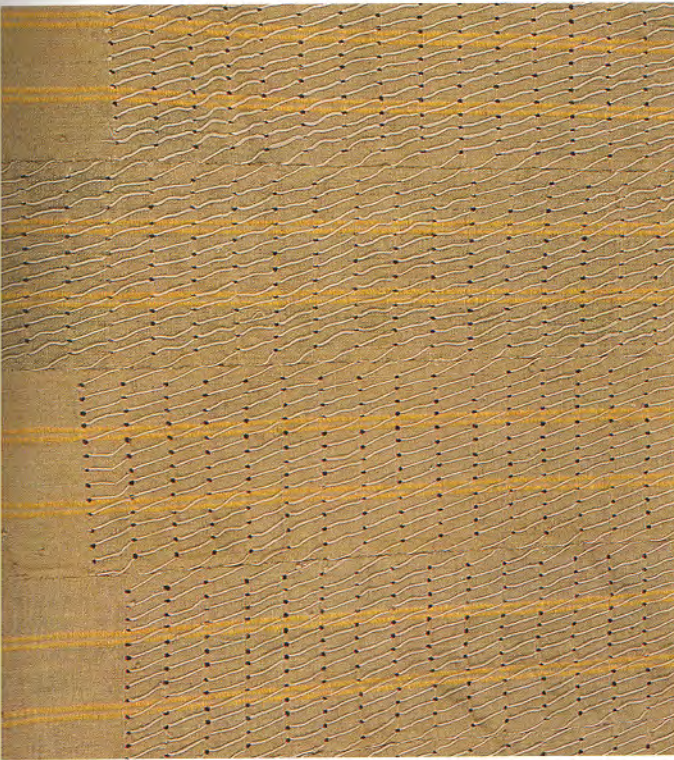


206. Egungun Headdress, Ibadan area, 20th century. Headdress for a satirical *egungun* imaging an *oyinbo*, or white man. Wood, animal fur, cloth, pigment. H. 9½ in. Private Collection.



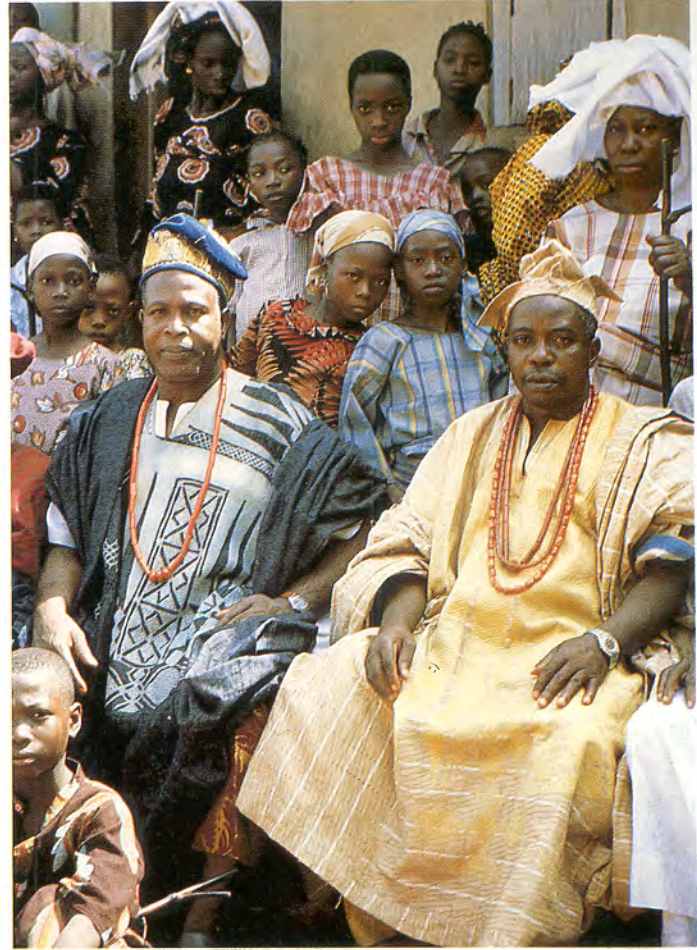


207. After nightfall and at the conclusion of the commemorative rite, the deceased mother appeared. Dressed in expensive cloth, the red and white marks of her devotion to *orisa* Oko upon her forehead, she danced briefly among her family and friends, acknowledging the honor that they had paid her. Ilogbo, Awori, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by H. J. Drewal.



208. An animal *egungun* depicting a leopard. It was one of several animal types that appeared in the sequence of masquerades in a ritual performance to honor a senior woman who had died the year before. Ilogbo, Awori, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.

209. At the conclusion of the ritual in honor of the deceased woman an Onidan masquerade appeared in the form of a serpent, whose jaws clacked open and shut as persons gave gifts of money to the family of the deceased. Ilogbo, Awori, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by H. J. Drewal.



210. At the concluding rite in the Festival for the Oba in Ila-Orangun, every chief wears his finest *agbada*, a voluminous robe made of four-inch strips sewn together selvedge to selvedge and hand embroidered with silk in various designs. Chief Obaro, who sits on the left, wears a cloth called *etu* made from indigo-dyed yarn woven into four-inch strips. Chief Obale on the right wears a cloth of the type described in Figure 211. Both cloths have been hand embroidered with a design locally known as "Three Knives." Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1984. Photograph by J. Pemberton.

211. Strip-woven cloth, Iseyin, 20th century. Yoruba stripweaving is done by men on a double-heddle loom. Iseyin, along with Ilorin, was one of the foremost centers of weaving in the southwest of the Oyo kingdom. The yarn used to weave the four-inch strips was machine-spun, creating a lighter weight textile compared to the coarser and heavier hand-spun yarn. The openwork pattern is created by binding small groups of warp elements together by using supplementary weft floats, usually imported silk or rayon. The extra weft is laid within the ground weft and floated across one face of the cloth. Cotton. L. 81 in. Eric D. Robertson.

is part of the repertoire of Egungun groups today. The most common, and in some respects the most spectacular, transformation is that of a dancer moving about the dance area with measured steps, his multicolored cloths pulled up between his legs and loosely around his body. As the drum rhythms accelerate, the dancer turns, twists, and then whirls (Figure 202). The cloth flares out, usually revealing a lining often of a solid color. On occasion the cloth lifts off his whirling body, spinning to the ground behind him, or is reversed in such a fashion that, when he finally comes to a halt, he appears in an entirely different garb (Figure 203).

In a performance in Ota in 1982, which commemorated the life of a woman who had died the year before, the Onidan appeared first.⁶⁹ Their performance gave the clear impression that things are not always as they seem. Other Onidan of the satirical type followed, several of which depicted human stereotypes: the drunken Dahomean, the bedraggled Hausa trader, or, as Clapperton witnessed, the sad European visitor (Figures 205, 206). Then came a series of animal masquerades: happy wart hogs, copulating leopards and rambunctious rams (Figure 208). As the satirical figures staggered, shuffled, or pranced about, the viewer had the amused, uncomfortable impression that caricature and reality were not easily differentiated. The commemorative performance ended with a gathering of the Onidan, who, when they dispersed, revealed the masquerade of a large snake lying upon a mat (Figure 209). Its jaws clacked open and shut as it received gifts of money from those present. Finally, in the darkness that had descended, there appeared the masques of the beautiful mother and her husband (Figure 207). The face masks glistened with a dark olive green enamel paint. The red and white marks of *orisa* Oko were on her forehead, and she was dressed in very expensive cloth, with an elaborate headtie. She responded to the cheers of the crowd with gracious gestures of head and hand, danced a few steps, and soon disappeared into the darkness. She had been honored by the living, her children, and she in turn had honored them with her presence. The living dead are and are not as they seem to be in the world of the living. The commemorative performance is not merely a remembrance of relationships past, but an expression of relationships that now exist, albeit vastly transformed.⁷⁰ The same observation holds true for the ancestral ensembles that are identified with lineages and appear on the occasion of the annual and/or biennial town festivals or on special occasions within the life of a family, as, for example, when a death has occurred or some other misfortune has befallen the household.⁷¹

Although masks are used for the purpose of concealing the identity of the one who wears it, the intent of a masquerade is to reveal a reality not otherwise observable. For the Yoruba the ancestral ensembles are designed to disclose the presence and power of the living dead and also the status and filial piety of the "owner" of an *egungun*. It is through the use of cloth that the creators of a masquerade achieve both concealment and revelation. Layers upon layers of cloth cover the body of the dancer, cascading to the ground from a headpiece which, as among *egungun paaka* in the Oyo area, may consist of a narrow, cloth-covered piece of wood about three feet in length from which colorful pieces of applique are suspended (Figure 214). The cloth is usually cut in long strips so that when the dancer moves, the cloth moves in undulating patterns, giving no evidence of a person within, concealing him even when he whirls, causing the cloth to splay out in all directions (Figure 217). The number of layers of cloth often reflect the age of a masquerade; each year new cloth is added by the owner of the *egungun* and by family members to honor and petition the blessings of the ancestor. Hence, on older *egungun*, hand-woven and locally dyed strips of dark blue and red are overlaid with the bright colors and pliant textures of machine-manufactured cloth. Whether the costume is old or new, many of the panels will have a white, serrated edge, the significance of which is given various local interpretations.

The headpiece of an *egungun* usually consists of cloth sewn to a leather cap with a close mesh netting covering the dancer's face. In Figure 199 an *egungun* costume expresses the wealth and status of the family by framing the "face" with strands of cowrie shells (once a mode of currency) and weaving elaborate beaded patterns into the face netting. Beaded panels are attached below the netting and suspended from the shoulders and back of the head. On the head of other *egungun* a wooden tray will contain earth encrusted with the blood of sacrifices, the skulls of monkeys, the horns of antelopes, the beaks of birds, packets of powerful medicines marked with cowrie shells and other materials. Some *egungun* carry a carved headdress the subject of which will vary depending in part on the circumstances that occasioned the creation of the masquerade and on local perceptions of what is appropriate. Among the Igbomina Yoruba in Ila-Orangun, for example, many of the carvings juxtapose animal and human figures (Figure 212) or meld their features (Figure 213), creating an image both amusing and bordering on the grotesque, although that would not be a term acceptable to the owners. They would perceive it as strange, perhaps



212. The *egungun paaka* called "Olobaloro" from Obale's compound in Ila-Orangun. The juxtaposition of animal and human figures in the carving and the presence of animal skulls and other natural materials juxtaposed with the human cloth is designed to convey the strange and marginal presence of the ancestor who dwells in heaven (*Ara Orun*), but appears in the midst of the world of the living. Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1977. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.

weird, but how is one to depict the peculiar nature and extraordinary presence of the living dead?

What is being conveyed in these varied and richly imaginative creations is the presence and power of the ancestor in the life of the living. The ancestor is and is not a part of the on-going life of a lineage—is distant, yet part of the household. When they appear, they are richly clothed but do not wear their cloth in the fashion of the living. Some myths of origin concerning the Egungun cult refer to the pataguenon monkey, the creature that moves between and lives in both the forest and the cultivated fields of the farmer, who walks upright and steals the farmer's produce. The dwellers in heaven have the power to cross the boundary separating the realm of the dead from the world of the living, and they can affect the life of the household for good or for ill.

Egungun are the creations and reflections of social relationships. They reflect the continuing relationships of the living to the deceased, as well as the relationship of the living members of a family to one

another. A household may have several *egungun* identified with it, although a particular *egungun* may be considered by reason of age or power the principal representative of the lineage group. The existence of more than one *egungun* in a compound reflects the Yoruba concern to recognize the histories of sub-groups and the experiences of individuals within a lineage group, and the capacity to incorporate them within the bond of reference to "the ancestor," which is an inclusive concept even when the term is used in the singular. An individual may discover through divination that he is required by a deceased parent to have an *egungun* created. He will go to a maker of masquerades and together they will decide on the general type and form of the masquerade, which may have been in part stipulated by divination and/or the need to reflect the situation that occasioned the decision. The type of headdress and cloths to be used will be decided upon. A carver may be commissioned to create a headdress of a certain general type, the details of which may be stipulated by the owner. An herbalist may be commissioned to prepare packets of protective



213. The marginal status, the strangeness, of the ancestor is conveyed by melding animal and human forms. A detail of the head-dress of an *egungun* costume in the collection of The Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, 1972. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.





215. *Egungun* Owolewa of Obaro's compound dancing at the palace of the Orangun-Ila, where one of the daughters of Obaro's house lives as a junior wife of the king. Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1981. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.



216. *Egungun* Costume, Ouidah, Popular Republic of Benin, 20th century. The box-shaped headdress with panels of brocaded fabric covers the dancer's head on three sides. At the front, a shorter panel consisting of two matching pieces at each end and a variation in the cloth at the center introduces three vertical motifs. They descend the entire length of the costume, increasing the sense of height. Pieces of older, indigo-dyed materials are used on either side of the netting which hides the dancer's face. The panels below are of recent machine manufacture, the central one consisting of a beautiful gold brocade. All of the panels are edged with a red saw-tooth pattern which is found on the earliest of *egungun* costumes. The innovative use of various types of cloth and the imaginative construction of the costume demonstrate the artistic skill of the tailors who make such costumes. Cloth, wood. H. 64 in. Eric D. Robertson.

214. *Egungun* Costume, Ogbomoso, 20th century. This type of *egungun* costume is found throughout the Oyo/Ogbomoso area. It consists of a length of wood balanced on the dancer's head from which panels of cloth are suspended. The great rectangular image completely denies and conceals the human form. The appearance of the ancestor is other than that of humans who also conceal (and reveal) themselves through the use of cloth. The owners of this costume added thirteen Roman Catholic Madonna medals which bear the inscriptions: "Regina Sacri/Scapularis" and "O Mi Jesu/Misericordia." The Yoruba have the imaginative ability to incorporate beneficent powers from whatever sources into their traditional modes of religious and artistic expression. Cloth, wood, metal. H. 59 in. Eric D. Robertson.



medicines. Each person involved will have his particular perception and, through role and skill, contribute to the total ensemble. When complete, the masquerade will be taken to the leader of the Egungun cult, who will perform appropriate rites and designate the person who will dance the *egungun*. The owner will name the *egungun*, for example, Obadimeji, (“The-king-has-become-two”) Adinimodo, (“The-one-who-blocks-the-way-to-the-stream-of-water”) or Alobaloro, (“The-one-who-comes-from-a-rich-family-and-has-a-position-of-honor”).⁷²

Songs will be sung by the women of the house as they escort the *egungun* from the forest of the ancestors to their compounds and accompany the ancestral masquerade through the streets of the town on its visits to the compounds in which married daughters of the house now live (Figure 215).

In a measure all Yoruba art is a collective endeavor, involving artist, patron, performer, and/or devotee, but the artistry of *egungun* entails the most extensive communal creativity. There is the owner or patron, the priest of divination, the carver and tailor, the herbalist who prepares the packets of medicines, the leader of the Egungun cult, the dancer, the drummers, and the women of the house who sing the praises of the *egungun* and the lineage. There are also the lineage members who make offerings and others who proclaim the benefits received or seek through prayerful petitions the blessings of the *egungun*. The ensemble of materials and actions that constitute the masquerade reflects the ensemble of persons who compose a household. The ancestral masque gives tangible expression to life lived in relationship to the living dead, to those who founded and continue to sustain the household (Figures 216, 217).

217. An *egungun* dancing at the palace in Oru, Ijebu area. Note the multiple layers of cloth which conceal the dancer even when the panels of cloth fly out in all directions as he whirls. The performance discloses the presence of the living dead, for masquerades are intended to reveal a reality not otherwise observable. Oru, Ijebu, Nigeria, 1986. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.