Celebrating a Heterogeneous Community: The Ẹ̀bìbì Festival of the Ẹ̀pẹ́ People

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Abstract

The Ìjẹ̀bú people and their rituals have been the subject of several scholarly studies, but existing work concentrates on the larger and more prominent Ìjẹ̀bú communities. Little attention has been paid to the more obscure communities, particularly those in the riverine areas. This article examines the coastal community of Ẹ̀pẹ́, divided into an Ìjẹ̀bú and a Lagos "town," through a study of the Ìjẹ̀bú Ẹ̀bìbì festival. It pays attention to the origin and plural nature of the community, to participation in the various communal events, and it offers a comparison between the coastal and upland Ìjẹ̀bú communities. Other areas of focus include the aesthetics and didacticism of oral performances, moral codes and communal self-reliance. The article concludes that Ẹ̀bìbì is a festival that delineates community both through bringing together multiple performances, styles, and social groups in Ìjẹ̀bú Ẹ̀pẹ́, by highlighting differences between different Ìjẹ̀bú communities that celebrate Ẹ̀bìbì, and by confirming the boundary between Ìjẹ̀bú and Lagos Ẹ̀pẹ́.

Introduction

Festivals are public celebrations staged usually by local communities, to commemorate some unique aspects of the lives and mutual existence of the people. They are also used to meet specific socio-cultural needs of the people as well as provide entertainment. In southwest Nigeria, festivals such as Ọ̀sun Ọ̀ṣogbo festival, Ògún festival, or Ẹ̀yọ̀ festival are celebrated to ensure the health, unity and the general well-being of the people. They also serve as a way of preserving the traditions of the people and reminding them of their respon-

sibilities to the society to which they belong. Robertson,[1] Gerson,[2] and Enekwe[3] all opine that festival celebrations offer a sense of belonging for religious, social, or geographical groups, contributing to group cohesiveness. They may also provide entertainment, which was particularly important to local communities before the advent of mass-produced entertainment. Festivals that focus on cultural or ethnic biases also seek to inform community members of their traditions; the involvement of elders sharing stories and experience provides a means for unity among families within a community. Illustrating how community and belonging are mobilized by the Ẹ̀bìbì festival in Ẹ̀pẹ́, this article argues that festivals contribute both to group cohesion and to the delineation of group boundaries.

Among the Ìjẹ̀bú who can be found in Ògùn and Lagos States in the Southwestern part of Nigeria, there are many traditional festivals celebrated annually. The Ìjẹ̀bú celebrate Orò, Agẹmọ and Ẹ̀bìbì as major festivals every year. Ẹ̀bìbì is celebrated annually by the Akilẹ̀-Ìjẹ̀bú,[4] to the exclusion of the Ìjẹ̀bú-Rẹ́mọ to their west, who usually do not have Ẹ̀bìbì in their corpus of festivals.[5] The Ẹ̀bìbì Festival, the focus of our study, is a corpus of variegated festival events filled with ritual ceremonies, propitiation, environmentally determined events, also performance-based with a lot of spectacle in dance, song and drama. The stated purpose of the Ẹ̀bìbì is to ensure the wellbeing and cohesion of the community for the coming year. The Ẹ̀bìbì festival which takes place between January and May of every year, features a lot of spectacular performances, drama, music, dance, accentuated by a rich display of musical instrument ensemble, costumes and make-up.

However, rich as these festival events are, it appears only generalist and superficial attempts have been made to study and document them. In fact, there is a dearth of research on the dialectics of the Ẹ̀bìbì festival corpus which this

1. Noel Robertson, *Festivals and Legends: The Formation of Greek Cities in the Light of Public Ritual* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992).

2. Ruth Gerson, *Traditional Festivals in Thailand, Kuala Lumpur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

3. O. E. Enekwe, "Myth, Ritual and Drama in Igboland," *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, (1981): 140–155.

4. This term refers to the people in the central and eastern part of the old Ìjẹ̀bú kingdom.

5. The modern Ìjẹ̀bú-Rẹ́mọ do not derive traditional authority from the Awùjalẹ̀ of Ìjẹ̀búland, who is the traditional authority in the Akilẹ̀-Ìjẹ̀bú area of Ìjẹ̀búland. However, like other Ìjẹ̀bú people, the Rẹ́mọ people celebrate Orò and Agẹmọ. They also celebrate *Ẹ̀lúkú*, see Insa Nolte, *Obafemi Awolowo and the Making of Remo: The Local Politics of a Nigerian Nationalist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); idem, "Colonial politics and precolonial history: Everyday knowledge, genre, and truth in a Yoruba town," *History in Africa*, 40.1 (2013): 1–40.

study seeks to redress, by examining the Ẹ̀bìbì festival with particular focus on the heterogeneous and plural nature of the Ẹ̀pẹ́ community, participation in the various communal events, and comparison between the history and cultural practices of coastal and upland Ìjẹ̀bú communities. Other areas of focus include the aesthetics and didacticism of oral performances, moral codes and communal self-reliance. This study purposively selected the Ẹ̀pẹ́ variant of the Ẹ̀bìbì festival performances for several reasons. Ẹ̀pẹ́ is very rich in artistic forms which unfortunately have been greatly unexplored. The few researches on Ìjẹ̀bú festivals have consistently left out the Ẹ̀pẹ́ variant of Ẹ̀bìbì from their studies. This can be adduced to the fact that for political exigencies, Ẹ̀pẹ́ has been carved out of the mainstream Ìjẹ̀bú, who are predominantly in Ògùn State, and added to Lagos State of Nigeria.

Origin of the Ẹ̀pẹ́ People

Ẹ̀pẹ́ is a small town on the north side of the lagoon and about 32 kilometers south-west of Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde. It is bounded in the north by Odòmọ́lá, and in the south by the lagoon and a string of islands called Etíọ̀sà Islands. To its east and west are located the small Ìjẹ̀bú settlements of Ìráyè-Òkè and Témú respectively.[6] Beyond that, the town is linked by water to market towns such as Ìkòsì and Ejìrìn to the west, and the riverine areas of the eastern Yorùbá, the Ijaw and the Kingdom of Benin in the east.

Lying between Latitude 6.37°N and Longitude 3.59°E, Ẹ̀pẹ́ is situated within the rain forest belt. The northern part of this area is a mountainous landscape with about 250km of fertile land while the southern parts lie within the mangrove swamp forest.[7] Ẹ̀pẹ́ enjoys the copious rainfall typical of the rain forest belt of Nigeria and has a well-drained soil suitable for agriculture, and a forest that provides the raw material for a veritable boat building industry. Its geographical location in a fertile area of the rain forest, the easy means of communication afforded by the lagoon and the opportunities it provided for agriculture, fishing and the boat-building industry made the Ẹ̀pẹ́ area attractive to the people from its immediate hinterland as well as to others from both the western and the eastern lagoon areas of Southwestern Nigeria.[8]

6. O.A. Disu, "The History of Epe," (B.A. Project Essay, University of Lagos, 1987).

7. R.K. Udoh, *Geographical Regions in Nigeria* (Los Angeles: UCLA Publishing Co., 1970).

8. G.O. Oguntomisin, *The Transformation of a Nigerian Lagoon Town: Epe, 1852–1942* (Ibadan: John Archer, 1999).

There are two main versions of Ẹ̀pẹ́ tradition of origin; the more popular of the two being the Húrakà tradition.[9] In his account, Avoseh claims that Húrakà was a hunter from Ilé-Ifẹ̀ and was the first settler in Ẹ̀pẹ́. He had founded Pọ̀kà before he came to Ẹ̀pé. While Húrakà was in Pọ̀kà, his hunting grounds extended to a place he called Oko-Ẹ̀pẹ́ (Ẹ̀pẹ́ forest). The name Ẹ̀pẹ́ was derived from certain black ants which infested the forest. Oko - Ẹ̀pẹ́ has since been corrupted to Ẹ̀pẹ́. Gradually, Húrakà left Pọ̀kà to settle at Ẹ̀pẹ́, where he was at different times joined by other settlers like the Alárá, an Ọba who came from Ilé-Ifẹ̀, Lúgbàsà, Àgbajà, Òfùtèn, Aláró (a woman) who all came from Òbù, Ògúnmudè, Rámòpé and Ọlọ́jà Sàgbàfàrà from Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde. These people settled in different locations in Ẹ̀pẹ́. While Húrakà, Alárá and Lúgbàsà settled at Apá Kini, Òfùtèn and Agbaja settled opposite Húrakà's settlement which is called Apá kejì (Second Quarters). Though Alárá did not remain in Ẹ̀pẹ́ for long, he left his son behind before proceeding to the nearby town of Ìlárá where his descendants remain today.

The Alárá tradition is not popular or current in Ẹ̀pẹ́ itself. However, it is contained in a written document submitted by Adésànyà, the Alárá of Ìlárá, a town located a few kilometers North-East of Ẹ̀pẹ́ to the District officer of Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde in 1939. It stated in that document, that the founder of Ẹ̀pẹ́ and many other villages beyond the Lagoon, was the Alárá Adésọ̀wọ́n. who, like several other traditional rulers in Yorùbáland was a son of the Ọ̀ọ̀ni of Ifẹ̀. He migrated from Ilé- Ifẹ̀ via Benin to Ẹ̀pẹ́. Húrakà, Lúgbàsà, Alárò and a prince from Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde were among those who subsequently settled with him in Ẹ̀pẹ́. He later obeyed the order of an Oracle to leave Ẹ̀pẹ́ but while doing so, he left behind four sons to whom he left the administration of the community and whom he instructed to take charge of the security and well-being of the people.[10]

These two versions revolve around the two founding fathers with whom others settled. Apart from the sharp discrepancy between them about the founder and first settler, the details are only slightly different. In any case, the inference that can be made from the two versions is that Ẹ̀pẹ́ was a confluence for hunters, fishermen and adventurers from llé-lfẹ̀, Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde and Benin. The attractiveness of Ẹ̀pẹ́ as a commercial centre meant an influx of people from different backgrounds and cultures. This meant that the community was cosmopolitan in outlook: Ẹ̀pẹ́ transacted business with Lagos mainly through the

9. T.A.A. Avoseh, *Short History of Epe*, Epe Parochial Committee of St Michael's Anglican Church, 1960.

10. RG/c5: "A report on the administrative reorganization of Epe District Native Treasury Area of the Colony" by H. Childs and E.J. Gibbons, 1939, National Archives, University of Ibadan.

Ejìnrìn port, but its people also traded with towns further east, such as Makun Omi and Atijere. The high demand for Ẹ̀pẹ́ fish attracted Ijaw and Ìlàjẹ fishermen to fish in Ẹ̀pẹ́ waters. The trading activities attracted the attention of both Lagosians and the people in the interior, and several of these people settled in Ẹ̀pẹ́ fishing villages and the shores of the town itself.[11]

However, Ẹ̀pẹ́'s trading successes also created conflicts. Some conflicts arose from the piratical activities of the Ijaw. Commercial disputes between individual traders sometimes led to inter town disputes also. One of such occurred in 1850 between Ẹ̀pẹ́ and Makun Omi.[12] In 1851, the settlement of Ẹ̀pẹ́ was powerfully transformed by the arrival of Kosoko and his followers, said to have numbered 1,500 people.[13] Kosoko had ascended the throne of Lagos after emerging as the stronger candidate from a protracted dispute with his half-brother Akintoye in 1945, but after he refused to sign a treaty abolishing foreign slave trade, the British backed Akintoye and attacked Lagos, whereupon Kosoko fled to Ẹ̀pẹ́. During an earlier period of exile from Lagos, Kosoko had stayed in Whydah, but some of his followers had already stayed in Ẹ̀pẹ́. It is possible that he chose Ẹ̀pẹ́ on their recommendation. As Kosoko used his location in Ẹ̀pẹ́ both to expand his personal power and the town's importance, Ẹ̀pẹ́'s rise as an important lagoon city is linked to his authority.

After a long and complex engagement with the British, who annexed Lagos in 1861, Kosoko returned to what was now the Colony of Lagos in 1862 as a recognized chief, the Oloja Ereko, on the significant stipend of £400/annum.[14] However, benefitting from Ẹ̀pẹ́'s importance as a major lagoon trading port, many of Kosoko's followers remained there. The often competitive and even disharmonious relationship between the two communities of Ẹ̀pẹ́ has led to the identification of the Kosoko group with Lagos, while the diverse group of settlers that draws legitimacy from their association with the town's pre-1851 history identifies with the Ìjẹ̀bú as the sub-ethnic group that historically controlled the territory. The histories of origin for Ẹ̀pẹ́ today given by the Lagos Ẹ̀pẹ́, also known as Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́' are very different from those discussed here, as are the religious practices, festivals and even the traditional hierarchies: as both sections of the town are in fact complete towns in themselves, each with its own traditional ruler. But despite the conceptual separation of these two towns, it is important to bear in mind that the Ẹ̀pẹ́ discussed in this article,

11. Prominent fishing villages are Ìmàgbọn-Aládé, Abomitì, Emina, Orímedú, Ilágbọ́, Ìmógò, Àbẹ̀joyè and Erese, to mention a few.

12. Inter-ethnic conflicts arose on account of fishing and trading rights between the Ijebu-Epe, and and Makun–Omi communities

13. Kosoko's arrival in Epe on exile changed the socio-political and economic landscape of Epe.

14. Robert S. Smith, *The Lagos Consulate 1851–1861* (Macmillan: London, 1978).

including its Ẹ̀bìbì festival, also exist in constant competition with the Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́. Moreover, the Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́ are predominantly Muslims who perceive the Ẹ̀bìbì festival as ritual worship, which went against the tenets of Islam. However, it was observed that Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́ indigenes were prominent and accepted in the various audiences of Ẹ̀bìbì.

Although the account of the traditions or origin of Ẹ̀pẹ́ are rather stereotyped, and chronologically vague, the first reliable statement which seems possible to make currently about the pre-1851 history of Ẹ̀pẹ́ is that it was a subordinate town of Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde under the jurisdiction of the Awùjalẹ̀, the paramount ruler of the Ìjẹ̀bú kingdom. Just as the settlement of Ẹ̀pẹ́ consists of two towns, the Ẹ̀pẹ́ under discussion is – and was – divided into wards known as Ìtùn handed by the Olórí Ìtùn (Ward Head). Each ward head is responsible for the maintenance of law and order in his ward. The Olórí Ìtùn settled minor cases and passed decisions taken in his ward on town matters to the Ọlọ́jà.

The Awùjalẹ̀ placed the overall administration of the town in the hands of the Òṣùgbó, whose members held meetings in the palace of the town's ruler and, like a parliament, discussed and legislated on behalf of their ruler and their town. The Awùjalẹ̀ had messengers called Agurin who closely supervised the Òṣùgbó council and reported to the Awùjalẹ̀ whenever it exceeded its power. The traditional ruler of Ẹ̀pẹ́ was the Ọlọ́jà who ruled with the advice of the Chiefs of the Òṣùgbó society. The Òṣùgbó, which was the governing Council in Ẹ̀pẹ́, settled cases that were not resolved within the Ìtùn or wards, though its authority did not extend to quarrels with other towns. These were referred to the Awùjalẹ̀.[15] In present times, the role of the Òṣùgbó in the actual governing of the town has greatly diminished. However, their importance in the spiritual decision-making of the community, king-making and burial and sacred festivals cannot be undervalued.

Like the people of other Ìjẹ̀bú towns, the Ẹ̀pẹ́ people also divided themselves into associations according to their ages. This system is known as Rẹ́gbẹ́rẹ́gbẹ́ (age-grade association). They are sometimes called Ẹgbẹ́ Okosi.[16] It was the duty of the younger age grades to perform communal work such as building and repair of the Ọlọ́jà's Palace, cleaning and clearing of the foliage surrounding shrines and building of roads and bridges. The older grades took

15. In Epe, the head of the Òṣùgbó Chiefs is known as Olúwo. Others are the Akọ́nilọ́rọ̀ and the Apènà. Other members of the Ọlọ́jà's administrative council were the Balógun (War Captain), Ọ̀tún Balógun (Commander of the right wing of the army) and Sẹ́ríkí (Head of the Vanguard). These were the Chief military officers of the town. The Àgbọ́n (Head of the Young men), was also a notable member of the council. He was the custodian of the drums used for inter-community communication.

16. The age-grades have their leaders headed by the Gíwá. Among others are the Jagunà, Baálẹ̀, Balógun, Ọ̀tún.

an active part in the political affairs of the town. At their meetings, they discussed matters concerning the welfare of the town and communicated their decisions to Ọlọ́jà or the Òṣùgbó council.

When important matters that required consensus were to be discussed, an assembly of age grades known as the Àjọ Ìpàdé was convened. Whatever was decided at this age-grade meeting was then communicated to the Ọlọjà or the Òṣùgbó council as the common stand of all the age-grades on such an issue. To avoid too much of an overlap between different hierarchies of influence, a man ceased to be an active member of his age-grade as soon as he took a Chieftaincy title.[17]

Traditional Belief and Worship in Ẹ̀pẹ́

Bọ́lájí Ìdòwú[18] defines the Yorùbá worldview as theocentric. He writes of the Yorùbá that

> The keystone of their life is their religion. In all things they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and all the governing principles of life for them. As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of all their affairs belongs to the deity…

He goes on to emphasize man's dependence on the higher order of the supernatural. The divinities, who have human vassals on earth, demand regular acts of worship as pledges of loyalty. Others have complemented the existing cosmological theory with the claim that the Yorùbá cosmos has a threefold structure namely; the sky (Ọ̀run) the earth (Ilẹ̀) and the world (Ayé).

The Ẹ̀pẹ́ people have total belief in Olódùmarè or Elédùmarè as the supreme deity and look up to him/her as the final arbiter in all things that affect their lives. Apart from the general belief in the existence of a supreme being, there is also the worship of popular deities like Ògún, Ṣàngó, Ọbàtálá and Egúngún which these tend to be ubiquitous within the Yorùbá cultural matrix. There are other deities that are specific to coastal and riverine areas which are also worshipped by the Epe people, including Ekínẹ, Ògúnbẹjú, Olúwẹri, and others. The Ẹ̀pẹ́ people have also deified some of the heroic figures in the history of the town like Aláró (the first female settler), and Ògúnmúdè (an early settler from Ijebu-Ode, see above) to name a few.

The nature of the traditional belief and worship reflects on the festival resources available to the people of Ẹ̀pẹ́. Their festivals consist of a mixture of coastal and hinterland forms which engenders a uniqueness in the modes of

17. See Avoseh, *Short History of Epe*.
18. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Ibadan: Longmans, 1962).

performance. Among these festivals, the Ẹ̀bìbì falls into the category meant for cleansing and purification of the town as well as good health and general prosperity of the people of the community. It is also interesting to note that in Ẹ̀pẹ́, as in many other Ìjẹ̀bú towns, what sets out as a purification rite often becomes solely an occasion for singing satirical songs against evil doers, or those who have contravened accepted social norms. There is also plenty of symbolic action and the dramatization of short archetypal incidents from the experiences of the people in the outgoing year.

The Ẹ̀bìbì festival of Ẹ̀pẹ́ takes place between January and March of every year and features a lot of spectacular performances, drama, music, dance, accentuated by a rich display of musical instrument ensemble, costumes and make-up. [19] Olúyọmí further affirms that Ẹ̀bìbì is part of the culture of the Ẹ̀pẹ́ people and suggests that it became an annual festival from the 13th century. It involves ancestral worship, and worship of local deities and some deities in the Yorùbá pantheon. The Ẹ̀bìbì festival corpus includes a range of celebrations and performances by different groups, some of which contain several sub-performances including rituals, entertainment and historical enactments or re-enactments.[20] But although Ẹ̀bìbì attracts a wide range of performers, the Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́ people only participate in the Ẹ̀bìbì festival as spectators and observers. As the group that claims to have introduced Islam to Ẹ̀pẹ́, they are predominantly Muslims, and their major festivals are Ileya (Eid al-Adha) and Kayokayo, which is an annual celebration of Kosoko's arrival in Ẹ̀pẹ́.

The local understanding of Ẹ̀bìbì festival is that it ritually cleanses the society of all evils, commemorates and celebrates the heroic deeds of the founding fathers of the community, and showcases all the symbols of the origin and evolution of Ẹ̀pẹ́land. During the Ẹ̀bìbì festival, the aim is to achieve oneness with the Supreme Being, Olódùmarè, in an effort to ward off all evil from the land through the performance of various rites and rituals. During the performance of these rituals, evil doers are warned to desist from their wickedness or face the wrath of Olódùmarè through the invocation of his several emissaries. The implications of these rites and rituals on the community are that any disobedience of this sacred injunction could lead to the retardation of positive progress and developmental strides of the community. It could also signal the occurrence of disasters, outbreaks of epidemics and diseases, economic downturn, war, and strife. Except for some purely religious and sacred aspects, the festival is open to all indigenes; including those in the diaspora, non-indigenes

19. Oluyomi Philips "Origin and Development of Epe from Earliest Times to 1966," (B.A. Project Essay, University of Ibadan, 1989).

20. See Disu, "The History of Epe".

as well as people from other communities. Everyone is welcome to participate in the festival since it is a joyous celebration.

Preparing the Ground for Ẹ̀bìbì Festival

There is a tradition in Ìjẹ̀búland which bestows the fixing of the period for the Ẹ̀bìbì festival on the Elésè (ruler) of Ìlesè Ìjẹ̀bú. According to existing records, the fixing of the Ẹ̀bìbì can only come up after the celebration of the Ìdémunù festival. Ìdémunù is an Egúngún festival exclusive to Ìlesè Ìjẹ̀bú, a historical town in Ijebu North-East Local Government near Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde. Ìdémunù is usually held in the last quarter of a given year (October-December). Immediately after the Egúngún Ìdémunù festival has been celebrated, the various Ìjẹ̀bú towns begin to fix the date for their own Ẹ̀bìbì festival. This is usually in the first quarter of a new year: in Ẹ̀pẹ́ the Ẹ̀bìbì takes place between January and May. The activities preceding the Ẹ̀bìbì festival proper normally commence at the beginning of January and last for a month. After this the Ẹ̀bìbì festival takes place. This implies that the Ẹ̀bìbì festival proper commences in early March, which roughly coincides with the first rains after harmattan and the beginning of the planting season.

The first in the series of ritual activities that precede the Ẹ̀bìbì are the sacrificial rites to the deities of Èṣù, Oguntá, Ọbalúwayé and Ìgbérùn.[21] These rituals are carried out in a procession led by the king, traditional chiefs and priests, acolytes of each deity and the people of the community. Womenfolk are also represented by their leader, the Ìyálóde. Prayers are held, led by the various priests, masquerades, womenfolk and the king himself. Afterwards, the king with his chiefs and elders will perform the annual rites of propitiation throughout the entire community to ward off evil spirits. From this point on, most of the remaining pre-Ẹ̀bìbì activities are carried out by the two major quarters in Ẹ̀pẹ́, Aléke and Ebode, again with the aim of engendering the peace and well-being of the Ẹ̀pẹ́ people.

The king supervises the activities carried out by each of the quarters to ensure the desired unity of purpose. Once the Ẹ̀bìbì is declared open by the king, the next event is the Ìgbesi-Osu. It is a rite which involves the king and the Òṣugbo chiefs under the leadership of the Olúwo (the head of the Òṣugbo). During the rite, the king invokes the ancestral spirits to shower blessings on the town. Sacrifices are offered and prayers by all designees are said. This cul-

21. These deities are part of the Yoruba pantheon of gods. They are celebrated generally among the Yoruba. Propitiations to these gods are deemed to be germane to the entire Ẹ̀bìbì festival rites.

minates in the beating of Gbẹ̀du royal drums which the king, his chiefs and the Òṣùgbó members all dance to.

The Ìgbesi-Osu is followed by the Ẹ̀rẹ̀nà celebration, which, according to a local source, is a purification rite carried out by the secret societies, and where ancestral spirits are invoked.[22] The Ẹ̀rẹ̀nà terminates on the eve of another major purification ceremony called Iyo Osu-Jígbó. This ceremony involves Jígbó masquerades, who are an important ancestral masquerade in Ìjẹ̀bú and along the lagoon. They have the important function of going from house to house to pray for the wellbeing of the people of the community. As they are believed to be ancestral spirits sent from heaven, Jígbó masquerades, which represent ancestors from Aléke and Ebode, the two major quarters of Ìjẹ̀bú - Ẹ̀pẹ́, are held in very high esteem by the people. The people offer monetary gifts to the Jígbó masquerades, who in turn pray for the wellbeing, peace and prosperity of the people. Jígbó masquerade outings continue for a thirty-day period, between the Ẹ̀rẹ́nà and Ẹ̀bìbì proper.

While the Jígbó masquerades perform their own functions, there is no lull in the other activities geared towards the purification of the land. Alégbàgbá, another masquerade involved in the purification rites appears three times at an interval of four days. Alégbàgbá harvests plantain bunches from gardens and farms irrespective of ownership. The Alégbàgbá masquerade brooks no resistance as it is escorted by fierce-looking, machete-wielding, able-bodied young men. The Alégbàgbá masquerades also hold a sharp machete in their hands. This aspect of the purification is very significant. Alégbàgbá is believed to cart away sins and evil from the community, symbolized by the plantain bunches.

The coming out of Alégbàgbá is accompanied by the Ìdájó Òkóòrò, an event that involves prayers at specific shrines by the king and his chiefs. This event also involves some of the youth who beat special traditional drums and gongs, as well as bamboo clappers. This is the event where through Ifá incantatory divination, the date for Òk̀óòrò and Ẹ̀pà masquerade performances is established. The Ẹ̀pà masquerades are known for their athleticism, dexterity in gymnastics and acrobatic displays.

Another event which precedes the Ẹ̀bìbì festival is the annual boat regatta called Ọkọ̀sí. The boat regatta is organized and anchored by the town's age groups. Men and women of the same age group pay homage to the king and his chiefs by beating traditional drums and playing an array of traditional musical instruments such as, the Apepe, Gumbe, Omele, Kuge, Agogo and Ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀. The group dances around the entire community, with stops at each of the six-

22. This explanation was made by Pa Saaka Ajetunmobi, a prominent member of the Ìjì-Ńlá Association. Evidence taken on October 14, 2016.

teen ancestral shrines in the community. All these activities are performed on the eve of the Ọkọ̀sí boat regatta. On the actual day of the Ọkọ̀sí boat regatta, six traditional boats appear on display at the Alárọ̀ shrine at a point on the Lagos lagoon. There are maneuvers and skirmishes in the waters to re-enact some of the battles that have been fought and won by the valiant Ẹ̀pẹ́ warriors. There are also traditional rites, which include flogging to select those who have the physical capabilities to withstand the rigors of war.

On that same day of the Ọkọ̀sí regatta, there is the Ọkọ̀sí procession Ìwọ́de Ọkọ̀sí. This is a mixture of ritual and social activities. There is a lot of fanfare, similar to that which occasions the return of a hunter from an expedition with a great kill, or warriors returning from battle victorious. Family members, musical ensembles, and praise singers accompany the Ọkọ̀sí age grade members in triumphant return from the Alárọ̀ lagoon shrine to the town centre. The procession is led by the Gíwá Ẹgbẹ́ who is the leader of the age grade and other chiefs of the age grade. This hierarchical order is like a general and his lieutenants being welcomed from battle. To add color to the Ọkọ̀sí event, Òkóòrò and Ẹ̀pà masquerades will also perform traditional rites and rituals at the shrines. The age grades will also display their proficiency in acrobatics and tests of physical prowess. All these activities are accompanied by Àpépé and Wọ́rọ̀ music and songs.

The last event of the day is the Ìjì-Ńlá ritual night. The Ìjì-Ńlá association, linked to the Awo-Opa association, is vital to security and social control in many communities along the lagoon. The Society also pays homage to the Kábíyèsí and his chiefs during the festival. Its members proceed to perform annual traditional rites at the sixteen major shrines in the town. This aspect of the festival is secret and those who are not involved are usually advised to keep indoors, from about ten o'clock at night to five o'clock in the morning. This signifies the last activities before the formal Ẹ̀bìbì festival ceremony commences.

Celebrating Ẹ̀bìbì Festival

Ẹ̀bìbì formal ceremonies commence from the Ìpèbí, the place where communal meetings and celebrations are held, which is located in the Ojú Alárọ̀ Òkè shrine. This is one of the shrines commemorating Alárọ̀, one of the community's first settlers (others include is Ojú Alárọ̀ Ìsàlẹ̀, which is sometimes called Ojú Alárọ̀ Lágbadè, see below).[23] To kick-start events, prayers of suppli-

23. The Ojú Alárọ̀ Òkè shrine is strategically located in the center of the town, while the Ojú Alárọ̀ Ìsàlẹ̀ shrine is located at the edge of the lagoon in the Lágbadè area of Ẹ̀pẹ́, which incidentally is in the Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́ area of the town. The Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́, as earlier stated, do not celebrate Ẹ̀bìbì.

cation are offered for the entire community for peace and tranquility to reign in the land. Prayers are also offered for the king so that his reign will bring goodwill and prosperity to the land. Sacrifices of appeasement are also offered to the ancestral spirits, since it is believed that they are required to watch over the land and intercede with the gods on behalf of the people.

One significant aspect of this ritual performance is the Ìyànfòràn. At the Ojú Alárọ̀ Òkè shrine, one of the activities is the building of a large fire in which divinatory and sacrificial items are burnt. After prayers have been offered, pieces of dry wood are lit and then taken into people's houses. The smoke from the lit pieces of wood is supposed to purify the homes of the people and the air they breathe. After this has been completed, the people congregate at the Ojú Alárọ̀ Òkè shrine. From there, they sing and dance in a procession led by the king to the Ojú Alárọ̀ Ìsàlẹ̀ shrine at the edge of the lagoon. At this point, the torches are immersed in the lagoon with another prayer session held for the good health, long life and prosperity of the community. With this, it is believed, all the evil has been immersed in water and the land consequently becomes purified for another year until the next Ẹ̀bìbì festival.

As the people return to the Ojú Alárọ̀ Ìsàlè shrine, another group of masquerades popular along the lagoon and coast, the Òkóòrò masquerades, begin to invoke the ancestral spirits whilst displaying their acrobatic and dance prowess. They then lead the procession back into town, as each person cuts a Wọ́rọ̀ leaf. Wọ́rọ̀ leaves are deemed to neutralize whatever else is remaining of the evil in the land. As the people hold the Wọ́rọ̀ leaves, they invoke the spirits to cleanse whatever is remaining in the community that could bring anything negative into the land. The procession then visits some important shrines such as Ojú Alárọ̀ Lágbadè, Rósì Igbókùsì, Bàdò Ọba, and Ojú Márọ́fà Àjàgánàbẹ shrine and returns the Ìpèbí in Ojú Alárọ̀ Òkè to round off the events of the formal Ẹ̀bìbì ceremonies. The celebrants disperse with the assurance that all is well, at least for the next one year. The Wọ́rọ̀ leaves are then taken back home and hung on the sentinels of each home.

Post- Ẹ̀bìbì Activities

Three days after the Ìyònfòràn and plucking of Wọ́rọ̀ leaves, and the conclusion of the rituals attached to this rite, the Ìjì-Ńlá perform rituals as well as a cultural display. Ẹ̀pẹ́ happens to be the national headquarters of the Ìjì-Ńlá association which is a version of the dreaded Awo-Ọpa society. All other members initiated into Ìjì-Ńlá from other parts of southwestern Nigeria converge in Ẹ̀pẹ́ during the Ẹ̀bìbì festival to celebrate with the people. Other groups which participate in this public display are the Osugbo fraternity, age grades as well as Òkóòrò and Ẹ̀pà masquerades. Like the Òṣùgbó, the Ìjì-Ńlá is

a secret society, which is restricted to initiated members only and often operates in secrecy. However, during the Ìta-Èbì procession of both groups, the members of the cult are identifiable.

The groups that participate in the post-Ẹ̀bìbì activities visit all the shrines located across the community to pray and eulogize the deities on behalf of the entire community. This is done amidst specialized drumming, dancing and singing peculiar to each of the groups. The Òkóòrò and Ẹ̀pà masquerades also showcase their prowess through gymnastic and acrobatic displays. They then revert to the Ojú Alárọ̀ Òkè (Ìpèbí) which has been gaily decorated and where the king with his chiefs and the town's people awaits them. The various chief priests, the king, and the Ẹlẹ́kú (shrine keepers) all offer prayers for the well-being of the community. The various groups each dance around the big baobab tree in the centre of the Ojú Alárọ̀ Òkè (Ìpèbí) shrine seven times. Afterwards, the king does the same by dancing to the royal Gbẹ̀du drums. From this point, the various groups retire to their bases, either the meeting houses (Ilédì) of the secret societies, or the groves or "preparation chambers" (Ẹ̀kú) of the masquerades, to conclude the ritual ceremonies in their custody.

Exactly a week after these formal Ẹ̀bìbì activities are concluded, the Kílájolú and Ìgòdò masquerades, discussed in more detail below, take centre stage. The two main Ìjẹ̀bú quarters of Ẹ̀pẹ́, Alékè and Ẹ̀bọdè, each have their own version of the masquerades.[24] This festival begins with prayers and rituals before the masquerades come out of their groves. The first point of call is the king's palace. Kílájolú is a resplendent and colorfully bedecked masquerade with a beautiful face mask and a cane in his hand. Along with his priest, the Ẹlẹ́kú, and his acolytes, the Àwòrò Ẹ̀kú, the masquerade prays for the king and beats him symbolically with its cane. The implication of the symbolic beating of the king is that the masquerade has taken royal authority to beat anyone, since the king himself has been beaten.

From the king's palace, Kílájolú proceeds to the Divisional Police Officer (D.P.O.) and repeats this action. By this action, Kílájolú has received the sanction of the custodian of the culture, the king, and that of the chief security officer, the D.P.O., to beat anyone he likes with his cane. Kílájolú is accompanied by the age group involved with the ritual; all the members of this group wield canes. The people of the community all carry long canes with which they beat one another, ideally in an atmosphere of camaraderie. To prevent abuse the flogging tradition has undergone a lot of metamorphosis and modifications over the years.

24. These masquerades appear a day apart, and that of Ẹ̀bọdè normally appears on a Sunday.

The flogging practice continues all evening until it is time for Kílájolú to return to its grove. Meanwhile, Ìgòdò traverses the length and breadth of the town at the same time as the Kílájolú, though care is taken that the two do not meet until late evening. Once Ìgòdò meets Kílájolú, the latter masquerade must submit his mask and costumes to Ìgòdò. This in fact is a re-enactment of a war that occurred between Ẹ̀pẹ́ people and an Ìlàjẹ warrior named Àkàlàjolú. The Aláùsá family of Ẹ̀pẹ́ were able to conquer Àkàlàjolú and cut off his head. The capture of Kílájolú by Ìgòdò and the removal of Kílájolú's mask are symbolic of this feat. At the time that this capture occurs, all women must have left the street because Kílájolú must return to the Ẹ̀kú naked and no woman can see this.

The Kílájolú celebration is the last major festival attached to the Ẹ̀bìbì festival. After the Kílájolú festival component of Ẹ̀bìbì, some other lesser masquerades appear on appointed days to round-off rituals and sacrifices. These include masquerades such as Àgbó, Agira, Òlòlò and Àjòjì Imalẹ, which are ubiquitous to Ẹ̀pẹ́ and the entire coastal communities bordering it, and whose appearance signals the end of the Ẹ̀bìbì period for that year.

Difference and Unity in the Ẹ̀bìbì Festival

The Ẹ̀bìbì festival is dedicated to the purification, affirmation and celebration of the community. The preparation, celebration and aftermath of Ẹ̀bìbì reflect these three phases. During the preparatory phase of purification, the town is purified through a large number of mini-festivals and ritual ceremonies that contribute to the town in different ways but also highlight the potential dangers to the community. Only when this phase is completed and all contrary spirits and evil doers have been neutralized, does the main Ẹ̀bìbì celebration start, which centers on the history of the town and its ruler. After the main festival, the Kílájolú masquerade re-enacts the town's military victory over an enemy.

Ẹ̀bìbì celebrates the unity of Ẹ̀pẹ́ by highlighting and mobilizing its diversity and internal differences in various ways. Mobilizing many forms of ritual and celebration, Ẹ̀bìbì brings together different groups, masquerades and outings, and different musical and performance styles. The assemblage of these different performances highlights the presence of diverse styles of music and performance, and of different social groups. The differences between these make the festival a fascinating, compelling and an unequivocal aesthetic experience.

Ẹ̀bìbì confirms the existence of many different forms of communal wellbeing: sacrifice to the deities and ancestral masquerades emphasize the importance of divine support, shared outings by the king and Òṣugbo highlight the

importance of collaboration and power-sharing, the casting out of evil affirms the importance of morality in the constitution of the community, peaceful competition highlights the importance of collaboration for achievement. Ẹ̀bìbì itself celebrates the king's link to the foundation of the town, while the re-enactment of a historical victory celebrates self-reliance and military prowess.

Also, Ẹ̀bìbì presents the diversity of groups within the town not as a disadvantage but as a form of joint wealth or social capital. By bringing together different deities, the king and his chiefs, the town 'parliament' (Òṣugbo), the age groups (Réẹ́gbẹ́réẹ́gbẹ́), and the most important security group (jì-Ńlá), Ẹ̀bìbì celebrates the contribution of different interest or influence groups to the making of the community

But Ẹ̀bìbì also mobilizes different groups beyond the town. It is worthy to note that several of the masquerades and events within the Ẹ̀bìbì festival corpus are influenced by other cultures. This is possible because the Ẹ̀pẹ́ settlers came from various parts of what is today southwestern Nigeria to settle in Ẹ̀pẹ́. The festival's different performances are linked to the different groups that make up Ẹ̀pẹ́'s community historically, linking the town both to Ijebu-Ode and the upland Ijebu, and to other towns and groups along or across the lagoon.

The internal cohesion of Ẹ̀bìbì is illustrated by the fact that although each group and performance has its own distinctive style and aim, thematic content is often shared across genres and among oral texts across the Ẹ̀bìbì festival corpus. As illustrated above, most of the subjects of the dances and dramatic actions were communal heroes who have been deified. It is the heroic deeds of these ancestors that provide the materials for songs and re-enactments. Thus, the festival is also an important occasion for the people of the entire community to gather with unity of purpose and a period for the expression of religious beliefs, culture and art.

The shared thematic content of Ẹ̀bìbì is replete with literary allusions which amplify the concerns of the community.[25] Many oral artists and creators seek to espouse themes within the cultural and historical paradigms and contexts presented in poetic, narrative or dramatic performances. This thematic interplay seeks to bring to light human glories, plights, dilemmas, conflicts, alternative values, quests for survival and identity. In this mode, the oral performer, the audience and indeed the entire community, experience a multiplicity of aesthetic patterns which validate the integrity of the artist who has created or re-created the performance.

25. Tejumola Olaniyan, "Festivals, Ritual, and Drama in Africa," in F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi, eds, *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 35–48.

For instance in the Òṣùgbó aspects of Ẹ̀bìbì, the Olúwo or any of his designates recites lines in a call and response format with a variety of tonal inflections of the voice, starting from a high pitch, and then moving to a mild pitch and then to a low pitch. This arouses great emotional excitement in the audience. The Olúwo walks around with gesticulation and dramatic movements that suit the sounds produced. In the text, allusion is made to the founders of the community. Homage is paid to these progenitors through veiled allusion and through potent choice and use of words. In praising the ancestors, the Olúwo uses words which enhance the thematic construct of Ẹ̀bìbì as follows:

Ẹ̀pẹ́ Alárò, Ògúnmọ́dedé
Kúkúrú lọ́sàn-án, gboro gboro lọ́' ru
Ẹ̀pẹ́ olúku àbàtà
Ẹ̀pẹ́ má jẹ gi, má jẹ̀ nìyàn
Ọmọ oní wà mo fẹ́ ẹ́ san, òfò
Ohun á hù wà
Ọmọ wọn ní ìta àgan bú
Àgan bú ramú ramù

Epe child of Alaro and Ogunmodede
Unassuming in the day time but unpredictable at night
Epe who is enamored of mud
Epe fearsome to creature or man
One who has a terrible character and still is proud of it.
The child of Àgan that roars
Roars which echo all through the land

In addition to the celebration of cultural heroes, many of participants of Ẹ̀bìbì actively act as the moral guardians and watchdogs of the society. During the Ẹ̀bìbì festival, the various Apẹpẹ and Ẹ̀pà groups have the license to publicly ridicule, lambast, lampoon, and denounce proven or suspected evildoers. These could be adulterers, thieves, witches, wizards, drunks and layabouts. The Apẹpẹ singing groups compose appropriate songs to suit whichever situation they want to comment about or draw the attention of the society to. They often embark on the dramatic re-enactment of specific acts of evil by members of the society. These usually serve as deterrent to other would be evil doers.

These groups also use the music and enactments for veneration and propitiation of the gods and the ancestral spirits at appropriate times. A mime of the attributes and mannerism of a specific deity or ancestral spirit is acted out with the appropriate music accompaniment. Such performances are deployed by the experienced oral artistes who have undergone tutelage and have a deep sense of art, history and the demands of the audiences and the community at

large. They also affirm the role of the creative artists and performers, who conjure and add the different elements of the festival together to create its artistic ambience. The creative capacities of participating groups and individuals evoke in the people a sense of being in one accord with the spiritual realm and in this way contribute to the success of the festival.

Finally, the festival, which has international appeal, is also a period for the revival, resurgence, propagation and promotion of Ẹ̀pẹ́ culture and art forms in their highest and widest conception. This is achieved through the highlighting of the various and diverse contributions of the people of Ẹ̀pẹ́ to the universal currents of thought and art. Through these local artists, performers and musicians facilitate their global access and acceptability.

Making Communities, Drawing Boundaries: The Ẹ̀bìbì Festival in Ìjẹ̀bú and Ẹ̀pẹ́

Just as the multiplicity of Ẹ̀bìbì highlights both difference and togetherness within Ẹ̀pẹ́, the shared celebration of Ẹ̀bìbì in many Ìjẹ̀bú communities creates a shared identity. As pointed out above, all towns that celebrate Ẹ̀bìbì do so after the completion of Ìdémunù festival in Ìlesè Ìjẹ̀bú. All the communities involved in the Ẹ̀bìbì in celebrations had the following common characters in their corpus: Jigbò, Ẹ̀pà, Òkóòrò, Alégbaga, Rẹ́gbẹ́rẹ́gbẹ́, Òṣùgbó Àjòjì-Imalẹ̀ and Wọ́rọ̀/Ọ̀fọ̀ràn. Moreover, just as Ẹ̀pẹ́ is considered the centre of the celebration of the Ìjì-Ńlá and attracts visitors from other towns to this event, so some other towns attract other visitors or performers to their Ẹ̀bìbì celebrations.

But at the same time, variations in practice suggest that there are two different networks of Ẹ̀bìbì celebration. In addition to Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde, Ẹ̀bìbì is celebrated in its affiliate towns like Ìlesè, Ìjẹ̀bú Ìmuṣin, Èsùrẹ́, Ìjẹ̀bú-Ifẹ̀, Òwu-Ìkijà, and Ìtèlè, all of which are situated close to and east of Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde in the upland area of Ògun State. But coastal communities including Ẹ̀pẹ́, Oríbà, Ejìrìn, Ìwòpin, Ìbíadé, Makun-Omi, Òde-Omi, Ìmóbì, and Abigi along the coast from Lagos State to Ògùn-Waterside also celebrate Kílájolú, Ìgòdò, Ìjì-Ńlá, Osugbo and Ẹ̀yọ̀. Okòsì, the boat regatta event, is celebrated by the coastal Ìjẹ̀bú communities of Ẹ̀pẹ́, Ìwòpin, Ìbíadé, Ẹ̀yìnọ̀sà and Ìmóbì among others.

The tension between unity and difference is also visible in other aspects of the performance. While the song texts were all mainly rendered in the Ìjẹ̀bú variant of the Yorùbá language, the themes and contents of song texts were mainly situated within the events and history of each community. The dances had a conspicuous difference given that it was observed that the dances witnessed in Òwu Ìkijà and Ìlesè were heavy and the music and movements appeared to resemble farming and hunting movements. This can be attributed to

the major traditional occupations of the upland Ìjẹ̀bú people, which are farming and hunting. On the other hand, in Ẹ̀pẹ́ and the other coastal communities where fishing is predominant, there was a degree of fluidity in the dance steps. The dancers were light on the feet and the hand and arm movements imitated the movement of canoes and paddling. The twists and twirls of most of the dances in the Ẹ̀bìbì festival performances created a mental picture of dexterity at handling a canoe or a paddle.

The influence of the lived environment could also be observed in the masks worn by the various masquerade characters. In Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde and environs, the masks have animals such as buffalos, elephants, lions, pythons, and deer as the motif for mask design. These animals abound in the rain forests around the communities. However, in Ẹ̀pẹ́ and its environs, the motifs for the masks were various kinds of fish, boats, rhinoceroses, crocodiles, alligators and other marine animals.

But while similarities and differences in the celebration of Ẹ̀bìbì highlight different bonds and life-worlds among the towns that celebrate it, it also serves as mark of distinction within the settlement of Ẹ̀pẹ́. Because the Ẹ̀bìbì festival is only celebrated in the Ìjẹ̀bú town of Ẹ̀pẹ́, it specifically excludes the Lagos Ẹ̀pẹ́. While people from Lagos Ẹ̀pẹ́ can attend as spectators, and while there is some fluidity in how individuals of mixed parentage may identify in different contexts, all those that participate actively in the festival events are, through their participation, identified as Ìjẹ̀bú-Ẹ̀pẹ́.

But the Ẹ̀bìbì festival also excludes sections of the Lagos town of Ẹ̀pẹ́ in another way: there is no open or direct reference to Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́ during the celebration, or during any major ritual part of the festival. Indeed, most of the different groups and performers that participate in Ẹ̀bìbì speak and sing about their town in the manner that has been adopted in this article; by not even mentioning the Lagos or Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́. While the Kílájolú masquerade recognizes the former enemy of the Ìlàjẹ warrior named Àkàlàjolú and thus includes them into the festival, the silence surrounding Lagos Ẹ̀pẹ́ makes it seem as if they did not exist. Thus the celebration of Ẹ̀bìbì in Ìjẹ̀bú-Ẹ̀pẹ́ is also an affirmation of difference from Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́.

In conclusion, the complex aesthetic, spiritual and political appeal of the Ẹ̀bìbì festival is intrinsically linked to the celebration of the community, illustrated both by the assemblage of Ẹ̀bìbì practices and art forms in Ẹ̀pẹ́ and by the different forms of community created by the towns sharing the celebration of different aspects of the festival. Yet at the same time, the implicit exclusion of Eko-Ẹ̀pẹ́ from all aspects of Ẹ̀bìbì in Ìjẹ̀bú-Ẹ̀pẹ́ confirms that the community is not created by accident, or simply on the basis of shared settlement: not every group can or does become part of the community celebrated by Ẹ̀bìbì.

While Ẹ̀bìbì celebrates the community as constituted by a multiplicity of diverse styles, histories, and groups, it also affirms that despite its diversity, the community is based on choice and purpose.

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