Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì in Art and Cultural Narratives

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Abstract

Ìkẹ́rẹ́, a city in Èkìtì State of southwestern Nigeria, comes up often in the literature of art history on two principal accounts: first, its art and architecture, and second, its major annual festival. These are the two central concerns of this paper. In the first part, the unique architecture of the *àfin* and the traditional sculptures that were its central feature present the opportunity to examine the interconnectedness of continuity and change, tradition and modernity, and the centrality of art in the Ọba's quest for political pre-eminence. Ìkẹ́rẹ́ came to international attention through the virtuosic sculptures of one of Africa's master carvers — Ọlọ́wẹ̀ (ca. 1873–1938), who lived in Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì, a town about 15 miles east of Ìkẹ́rẹ́. In addition to offering new insights into the relevance of Ọlọ́wẹ̀ to Ìkẹ́rẹ́, this essay posits a re-examination of the birth year of Ọlọ́wẹ̀. In the second part, this essay dissects the Ọlọ́sunta festival, which remains central to the collective identity of a people who subscribe to different religious doctrines. The early history of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ acknowledges the city as a site for the simultaneous reign of two rulers, the Ògògà and the Olúkẹ́rẹ́. But it is the annual celebration of the Ọlọ́sunta festival that serves as the rallying point for the indigenes of the city at the same time that it provides a time-honored structure for handling potentially explosive cultural and political contestations.

I

Introduction

It has been more than five decades since the wind of political change that blew across Africa brought independence to the continent. How can we

particularize this change? Ìkéré-Èkìtì (which will be referred to for the rest of this essay in its shorter form of Ìkéré) has been narrated into history principally on account of its art. Specifically, the critical prominence of Ìkéré stems from the high visibility that the work of Ọlọ́wẹ̀, the itinerant sculptor from neighboring town of Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì, has conferred on it. Of course, a consideration of Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s sculptures in Ìkéré is not complete without recourse to the architecture of the *ọba*'s palace.

At issue in the pre-eminence of Ìkéré are the seemingly antipodal mantras of continuity and change, tradition and modernity, and the extent to which art, politics, and social change become indispensable strands of the narrative. In the first part, this paper examines the work of the virtuoso carver Ọlọ́wẹ̀. While so much about him is known and so much is as yet unexamined, this much remains incontestable: Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s art drew global attention to Ìkéré. But his work must be read within the context of the political and sociocultural milieu in which he functioned. This is what draws attention to the role of the Ògògà (the *ọba*) of Ìkéré as principal patron of the arts. As a corollary, this paper examines the way that a succession of Ògògà has employed modern architecture and spectacular traditional sculptures as critical handmaidens in their quest for cultural splendor and political visibility and relevance. The second part of this paper is a detailed anatomy of the Ọlọ́sunta festival. It offers a detailed, sequential description of one festival, which serves as a template for understanding the role of traditional ceremonies in promoting social cohesion and corporate identity. The Ọlọ́sunta relativizes the concept of tradition and modernity. On the surface, the Ọlọ́sunta festival is the only annual pan-Ìkéré festival that unites all indigenes of the town. Undergirding this cultural pageantry, however, is the significant symbolism of continuity that the Ọlọ́sunta festival affirms as it provides the only platform for the yearly meeting of the two rulers of Ìkéré: the Ògògà and the Olúkéré.

Ìkéré-Èkìtì in the Colonial Era

At its height, colonialism in Africa and elsewhere raged with an attitude that privileged European missionaries and administrators over their Queen's "subjects." Colonial administrators exuded a Victorian imprimatur that brooked no questioning by the "natives," who were presumably unworthy of being acknowledged even in their own territories. There was an authoritative finality to promulgations over those whom British colonialists encountered and subjugated. Describing the attitude of the British in Mauritius and India, for example, Ballhatchet writes that the officials "preened themselves on their differences from the people subject to their authority — in language, traditions

and morals."[1] Chinua Achebe's characterization of the district officer in *Things Fall Apart* could not have been more apt. The colonialist's ineluctable persona has been captured by contemporary Cote d'Ivorian sculptors in their satiric miniature sculptures of the colonial figure in Africa, affectionately called "colo," who is distinctive for his pith helmet and tobacco pipe. As a town in the old Ondo Province of Nigeria, Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì was not exempt from the consequences that attended the arrogance and hauteur of the colonial District Officer. As we shall see later, interactions of the colonial officer among the people of Èkìtì are some of the key subjects that the master carver Ọlọ́wẹ̀ focused on in some of the exquisite door carvings for the palace of the Òǵòǵà of Ìkẹ́rẹ́.

Long before my encounter with Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì in the rich literature that abounds on its art and architecture, I had formed my own impressions about the city. My formative years were remarkable not the least for what I would later realize was the clash of ideas, which were marked by the interplay of two distinctive particularities: colonialism and cultural resilience. It was customary to run through the dusty streets of the town with the motley crowd as it expanded and contracted in response to the mesmerizing performance of a group of Egúngún performers. At the end of the Egúngún outing, it was also not incongruous to go directly to another crowd — now much smaller and calmer but no less exciting — to listen to the catechismal commands by the missionary, a white man in a black frock who spoke to a big book and taught the children about God. Although I was too young at the time to comprehend that I was a participant in the arena where the cultural battle raged, I would later learn that the arrival of the missionary and, soon after, the District Officer — the much-revered D.O. — in the locality marked the official flag-off of the colonial enterprise in the town.

An article written in 1956 by Ọba Adégoríọlá the Òǵòǵà of Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì (1949–1968) offers a firsthand account of the administration of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ prior to the arrival of the British.[2] In this essay, the Ọba provides a succinct appraisal of the social organization of Ìkẹ́rẹ́, one that has continued to be used although with appropriate modifications. Holders of principal traditional chieftaincy titles in Ìkẹ́rẹ́ belong to a group known as the Ìyàres. The Ìyàres are divided into three: the Ìyàre Mẹ́fa (Six Ìyàres); Ìyàre Àrín (Middle Ìyàre); and Ìyàre Ẹ̀hìn (Ìyàre of the Rear). Collectively, these entities constitute the Àjọ Ìyàre (Ìyàre Council). Ìyàre Mẹ́fà is comprised of six principal chiefs, two each from Ìrò, Odò-Ọjà, and Òkè-kẹ́rẹ́, which are three of the seven domains into which the

1. Kenneth Ballhatchet, "The Structure of British Official Attitudes: Colonial Mauritius, 1883–1968," *The Historical Journal* 38, no. 4 (December 1995): 989.

2. Ọba Adégoríọlá. "A Note on the Administration of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ Before the Advent of the British." *Odu* 3 (1956): 19–24.

town is divided.[3] The six principal chiefs constitute the Inner Council. The town is also organized into various age-grades for the purpose of community service and the inculcation of healthy social norms. At the apex is the Ọba, who presides over all meetings at the palace. The responsibilities assigned to these chiefs in precolonial times included defense; maintenance of law and order; enforcement of social discipline; budgetary allocations; sustenance of cultural regimes and practices; consultation with the Ifa oracle at appropriate times; and organization of annual festivals. In addition, the chiefs were also the jural, political, and cultural heads in their respective quarters, or *àdúgbò*.

Since independence, these responsibilities, including the role of the *ọba*, have been revisited, modified, and codified into law by a succession of administrations. For obvious reasons, the state government remains the sole authority responsible for issues pertaining to defense in the town in the first instance. Lawmaking, law enforcement, and budget allocation are no longer within the authority of the chiefs or even the *ọba*. These are now the exclusive responsibility of the appropriate government departments at the local and state levels. The power of the chiefs lies mainly in the exercise and enforcement of moral principles, affirmation of sociocultural norms, and leveraging of institutional memory on critical occasions, such as the installation of a new *ọba*. Often times, altercations arise among cultural, political, or religious power blocs. Perhaps the most persistent contestation is between the Ògògà, who is acknowledged as the Ọba, and the Olúkẹ́rẹ́, the high priest of the Ọlọ́sunta deity, who is acknowledged as the founder of the settlement that eventually became known as Ìkẹ́rẹ́.

The Ògògà's Palace as Emblem of Change

Since 1960 when Nigeria attained independence from Britain, the pace of change in the country has accelerated—at the social, cultural, religious, economic, and political levels. Change has brought progress and initiated new norms and practices, even as it has also engendered certain unwholesome practices, launched new institutions, and inaugurated new traditions, some of which are deemed inimical to entrenched mores. With regard to architecture, the palace of the Ògògà is the visual evidence of the inexorability of change; it constitutes, in its physicality, an architectural archive through which we are able to witness the vision of some of the town's rulers with particular regard to issues of perception and preeminence. For at its core, this is what architecture symbolizes. There is the inescapable reality of function: a palace has to provide for the requirements of the Ọba in his capacity as the foremost citizen

3. The remaining domains are Àfaọ̀, Àré, Ìlúọmọba, and Àgbádó. These domains were originally populated by immigrants from other districts in Èkìtì.

of the town. But architecture also has to address the issue of perception: its aesthetics has to reflect the majesty of the *ọba* as a preeminent ruler; its opulence projects to the outside world the common wealth of the people. The palace becomes the standard by which others measure the height to which they have elevated their *ọba*.

The Ògògà's palace is deemed as the pinnacle of the people's cosmology. As the physical attestation to the reverence that the Yoruba have for their *ọba*, the palace in precolonial times was the cynosure of celebratory architecture. In size, location, and opulence, the palace asserts a presence, with sprawling, commodious enclosures to host the plethora of events and enactments by the citizenry. The many courtyards of a typical palace are designed to handle an assortment of events and functions: shrines and sites of offering, sacred ancestral sites, domains for specific deities, accommodation for the teeming population of palace residents, meeting halls, and numerous inner chambers and courtyards, with a public square or courtyard for the numerous religious, cultural, and political activities that often culminate there. In this regard, the archaeology of the architecture of the palace of the Ògògà provides a rewarding glimpse into the efforts that successive *ọbas* invested in reifying the esteem in which their people held them. The palace of the Ògògà of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ has undergone a series of iterations, which combine to give a visual montage of the resilience, adaptations, and appropriations of the Ògògàs and their citizens. The palace is the arena where the contestation between tradition and modernity is reified in its physicality (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Aerial view of the Ògògà Palace and the surrounding community. Photo credit: Arc. Ablodun Bamidele.

Ulli Beier's copiously illustrated 1954 article provides an excellent overview of the palace of the Ògògà, including a picture of the main entrance, which had an arched doorway at the apex of which the head of a royal animal was positioned.[4] On both sides of the arched entrance, balustraded walls added to the enchanting visage of the palace. The main entrance itself was a projecting balcony, which set the two-storey building into a visual recession. As with the archway, rows of concrete balustrades served as guardrails on three sides of the balcony. Standing atop each of the two prominent ends of the balcony were cement sculptures of two sentries whose presence announced the magisterial aura of the palace. The façade of the palace, with its enchanting décor of balustrades, two sentries, and a cement sculpture of the head of a royal animal at the top of the archway, was conceived and executed during the reign of Ọba Solomon Adéwùmí Arómọláran (1937–1948)

In Beier's article, there is the picture of yet another military figure at the Ògògà palace. Carved in wood, it is a veranda post—one of the many posts that once adorned the reception courtyard (*ọ̀wá àjẹ́*) in the palace (Fig. 2). The two sculptures that Beier published clearly demonstrate elements of continuity and change. While both sculptures deal with an identical subject matter, namely military personnel, they were executed in different media and by two different artists. The woodcarving was that of a mounted warrior by Ọlọ́wẹ̀, prominent carver from the neighboring town of Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì. First photographed in 1937 by Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, this sculpture is now in the collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art.[5] Unfortunately, extant records are silent on the name and identity of the artist who made the sculptures of the two cement sculpture sentries, save that he too was from Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì. Furthermore, we learn that both artists died around 1952. This cannot apparently be true, since current research has placed the death of Ọlọ́wẹ̀ at 1938. In 1954, when Beier published his article, he had estimated that the cement sculptures of the two sentries were less than twenty years old. This estimate places the date of manufacture for the wood sculptures by Ọlọ́wẹ̀, and the two cement sculptures of the two sentries around 1935, which was a mere twenty-one years into the amalgamation ordinance that gave birth to Nigeria as a nation. What we know of Nigeria's embrace of a Western approach to art-making at this time has been credited to Àìná Ọnàbólú, generally regarded as the pioneering artist of the modern era in Nigeria. His career took off in the 1920s upon his return from Europe where he had undertaken formal studies in art.

4. Ulli Beier, "The Palace of the Ogogas in Ikerre," *Nigeria Magazine* 44 (1954): 303–307.

5. See Roslyn Adele Walker, *Olowe of Ise: A Yoruba Sculptor to Kings* (Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution 1998), 22, 64–65.

Figure 2. Ọlọ́wẹ̀ of Ìsẹ̀, *Mounted Warrior Veranda Post* (*ope ile*), The New Orleans Museum of Art: Museum purchase, Ella West Freeman Foundation Matching Fund, 70.20

While we are quite familiar with the work and biography of Ọlọ́wẹ̀, we know very little about the artist of the cement sculptures at the Ògògà palace. Despite what we are able to glean from Beier's article, the identity of the designer/architect/builder of the façade of the Ògògà's palace, with a staircase that was, according to Beier, a magnificent piece of "Portuguese" architecture, remains unknown. Regarding the identity of the builder of the façade,

Beier writes: "The bricklayer who was responsible for the erection of this building with sculptures, staircase and all, had never been abroad or even very far from his home town. A man who was his apprentice told me that he had no models but 'worked from head' all the time. He never used a plan."[6] In light of the work by this designer/architect/sculptor from Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì, there is need for scholars to reconstruct the entire gamut of Nigerian modernism. Were there more modern artists in Nigeria in the 1920s than we know of? Who was this architect who built such an opulent palace and handled the artistic décor? Where did he train? Specifically, how did he acquire the artistic skills that led to the successful execution of the cement sentries on top of the balcony? What exposure, if any, did he have to Western art, architecture, and other sources? How many apprentices did he have, and what do we know of them and their work?

Analysis of the Òǵògà Palace Sculptures

The media of wood and cement in which the two artists from Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì worked are quite contrastive, not only in the varying degrees of malleability and sturdiness that they possess, but also in the way that they highlight the distinctive stylistic characteristics of mimicry and representationalism. Since Leonardo da Vinci popularized the *Vitruvian Man* in the 1490s, the notion that the length of the human body is equivalent to eight heads has been regarded as the ideal canon. The yet-unidentified mason/architect/sculptor of the Òǵògà palace seemed to be familiar with the Western ideal of proportion. The two sentries undoubtedly hearken to the Western aesthetics of depicting the human body. On the other hand, Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s horseman represents the Yoruba ideal of proportionalism, which privileges the head over the body because it is the seat of power and the domain of the intellect. A close consideration of Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s oeuvre presents varying degrees of articulation of aesthetic specificity with regard to proportions. Generally, his depiction of the human figure ranges from between six heads to four heads per figure. In the case of this particular figure, the head of the warrior dominates the figure. This is a classic example of Yoruba aesthetics, which equates the human figure to four heads, although this is a formula that Ọlọ́wẹ̀ violated at will in some of his sculptures. It is generally assumed that the Yoruba have a mode of depicting the human body that is antipodal to the method favored by Western artists. This is because the aesthetic regimes that condition artistic production in these two cultures could not have been more different.

Regardless of Beier's uncorroborated dating, it is remarkable that apart from the fact that the two artists who lived contemporaneously also came

6. Beier, 311.

from the same town, they displayed astounding skills. These two artists present a study in the exceptional skills that Yoruba artists and craftspeople — masons, sculptors, carvers, and designers among others — displayed. A look at the equestrian figure by Ọlọ́wẹ̀, and the sentries by the Ìsẹ̀ cement sculptor, enriches the discourse of tradition and modernity in Nigeria. These two artworks are excellent representations of the concept of warfare rendered by Yoruba artists who espoused different creative sensibilities. Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s sculpture was a veranda post, one of the numerous posts that adorned the courtyards of Ọbas and eminent chiefs in towns and communities. Its basic function was to serve as a load-bearing post for a lintel that ran across the lower end of the roof. The sculpture depicts a bearded, fully engaged Yoruba generalissimo, adorned with a befitting cap that sweeps back and terminates between the scapulae. He is wearing a grooved, warrior's garment that looks intimidating on account of its assumed medicinal powers. The horse rider's elbows, chest, lower garment, and other appurtenances with humanoid faces at the back and on his right hip, all appear to ooze with medicinal weight. He holds a sword and a spear in his left hand, and a machete in his right. To the left of his horse is a flutist, portrayed on a hierarchical scale. Perhaps nothing conjures fear more than the sheer size of the warrior's neck. Adding to the sense of visual busy-ness are the numerous geometric designs that are organized in directional sweeps to break the surface of the sculpture.

Prior to the construction of the façade by Ọba Arómọláran, another Ògògà, Ọba Olókùngboyè Amùdípòtẹ̀mọ́lẹ̀ (1928–1937) had undertaken the construction of the private chambers that faced the visitor upon passing through the grand portal to the large courtyard. This was the first modern extension to the palace. In addition to serving as the private chamber of the Ọba, there was also a large balcony, with a balustrade, from which the Ọba could acknowledge salutations by his subjects. Three archways that led visitors to a lobby supported the balustraded balcony. The royal insignia of two snakes, created in relief sculpture, wiggled across the entire surface-wall of the arched lobby. This tradition of innovativeness as a complement to tradition especially in the architecture of the palace continues apace in Ìkẹ́rẹ́. Shortly after he ascended the throne in July 2015 as the Ògògà of Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì, the Ọba, Adéjìmí Samuel Adú Alágbàdo, embarked on the aestheticization of the palace, a good part of which had fallen into disuse. Rather than refurbish the existing building, the same one that Ọba Amùdípòtẹ̀mọ́lẹ̀ constructed during his reign, the new Ọba chose to tear it down completely and erect in its place a structure that announces the lofty premium that the Ọba seems to place on construction projects as an index of prestige (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. The new palace of the Ògògà of Ìkéré-Èkìtì, designed by Arc. Abiodun Bamidele. Photo credit: Olawumi Adeyemi

The event that projected Ìkéré-Èkìtì into the global orbit occurred during the rule of Ọba Oníjàgbó Ọbọ́sọ́rọ̀ Aléólódù I (1893–1928) whose reign was coterminous with the onset of modernism in Ìkéré. He was the Ọba who effected a major change in the role of the Ìbédó, the age group of 32–36-year-old able-bodied men in the town, who traditionally provided security to the Ògògà on important occasions. They were responsible for effective maintenance of law and order in the town, performed community service, and had responsibility for effective maintenance of the sprawling palace. It was members of the Ìbédó age-group that used to carry the Ọba in a hammock to the *pelúpelú*, the periodic conferences attended by sixteen Ọbas of Èkìtì. Ọba Aléólódù put a stop to this aspect of extra-township responsibility of the Ìbédó when he bought his first car in 1921, reputedly the first Ọba in Èkìtì to do so. Significant as the introduction of the automobile was for the locals at that time, Ìkéré's global status came only in 1924 with the exhibition of Ọlọ́wé's spectacular work at the Nigerian Pavilion at the Empire Exhibition in Wembley, England. One of his carved doors, which had been borrowed for display at the exhibition, caused considerable consternation on account of its incredible virtuosity Walker quotes T. C. Lawrence as writing that the door was "the finest piece of West African carving that had ever reached

England."[7] The door was never returned to Ìkẹ́rẹ́. The door, which was on loan for the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, is a tour de force. It commemorates the historic visit to Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì by Captain Ambrose, who was the Queen's representative as the District Officer. This was during the reign of Ọba Oníjàgbó Ọ̀bọ́ṣọ́rọ̀ Aléólódù I (1893–1928). This door is comprised of two unequal halves, with each half divided into five uneven registers. It is a creative record of a diplomatic encounter between Ọba Aléólódù and Captain Ambrose, Traveling Commissioner for Ondo Province in 1897. According to John Pemberton, who has done critical work on Ọlọ́wẹ̀, the door offers a historical narrative of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ at the end of the nineteenth century.[8] On the first register of the right half, a horse rider leads a group of porters. Pemberton has suggested that this rider was probably Reeve Tucker, who was Captain Ambrose's assistant. On the second register of this same half, Captain Ambrose is seen seated in a palanquin carried by two muscular men. The remaining registers below that of Captain Ambrose depict Captain Ambrose's retinue, including four shackled, load-bearing prisoners in prison uniform. The left half shows the company of the Ògògà with him on the second register directly lined up with Captain Ambrose. Standing behind the Ògògà, who is seated resplendent in his beaded crown, is one of his Olorìs. Many more of the Ògògà's palace team, including other Olorìs, palace attendants, and slaves, occupy the other registers. The door offers an impressive study in the role of the artist as a chronicler of events long ago in colonial times. As Pemberton has noted, Captain Ambrose looks "a bit haughty, very uncomfortable, and rather small in comparison with the king, who is seated in the opposing panel."[9] This door presents history from the perspective of the Ògògà. His own side of the door contrasts remarkably with Captain Ambrose's side: one side projects royal calmness, while the other captures the uneasiness of a visitor, who is cramped and awkward in the totally unfamiliar culture that he finds himself in.

The Ingenuity of Ọlọ́wẹ̀

It is commonplace to see the name of Ọlọ́wẹ̀ of Ìsẹ̀ in the same context as Ògògà of Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì. This is because the Ògògà was one of Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s prominent patrons. As an itinerant sculptor of prodigious talents, Ọlọ́wẹ̀ moved in kingly and chiefly circles in the old Ondo Province — in towns such as Ìsẹ̀, Ọ̀gbàgí, Ìdànrè, and of course Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì. He was a Yoruba avant-garde sculptor who translated political developments during his time into art. With its

7. Walker, 13.

8. John Pemberton III, "Art and Rituals for Yoruba Sacred Kings," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 15, no. 2 (1989): 105.

9. Ibid.

gorgeous colonial architecture whose impluvia and facades were embellished with virtuosic sculptures, the Ọba's palace in Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì has become inextricably and eternally linked with the reputation of one of Africa's most acknowledged sculptors. Ọlọ́wẹ̀, itinerant sculptor to several Ọba in Èkìtì and environs, with ancestry that has been traced to both Ẹ̀fọ̀n Alàyè and Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì, was a prodigiously creative sculptor who has been acknowledged by scholars as an exemplar: William Fagg referred to him as "the best and most original Yoruba carver,"[10] while several scholars and museums continue to extol the genius of the artist. Rosalyn Walker, who has written extensively on Ọlọ́wẹ̀, has published his catalogue raisonné. Ọlọ́wẹ̀ undoubtedly deserves all the accolades that he has continued to attract from scholars. This recognition appears to serve as a compensatory gesture — a sort of collective scholarly atonement — for the racial arrogance of early "collectors" and students of African art, who simply did not bother to ask questions about makers of African material culture. The compelling presence of Ọlọ́wẹ̀ in art-historical narratives places him within a very small group of Yoruba carvers of the colonial era whose recognition ruptures a canon that once posited that the "tribal" artist was anonymous. Indeed, the subtitle to an article by Walker is emphatic: "'Anonymous' Has a Name."[11] It used to be theorized that the traditional African artist worked exclusively within his own domain, and his style was circumscribed by the immediacy of his environment. This, as the work of Walker has shown, is no longer a tenable position in African art history. In various sources, Walker provides a detailed biography of Ọlọ́wẹ̀ and an enlightened consideration of the range of work that he produced.

Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s style is compared with that of other Yoruba contemporaries, such as Aréóògún of Òsi-Ìlọrin (c. 1880–1954). Exquisite as Àrẹ̀ògún's sculptures are, they have to be considered on their own without the implication of cross-stylistic influences between him and Ọlọ́wẹ̀, who singlehandedly invented a classic Yoruba style that no other Yoruba carver has equaled either for its creative exuberance, innovative subject-matter, stylistic inventiveness, sheer power of artistry, or commanding elegance. Ọlọ́wẹ̀ broke whatever creative rules were supposed to be operational during his time, whether in the compulsiveness of his figures and virtuosic historicization of critical events and social practice, or the deftness of his chisel and self-assuredness of his aesthetic choices. As has been aptly observed by Walker, Ọlọ́wẹ̀ had no chronicler during his time. Unlike current practice that promotes instant stardom, especially in an age marked by a surfeit of platforms for self-glorification, Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s

10. William Fagg and M. Plass, *African Sculpture: An Anthology* (New York, 1964), 90.

11. Roslyn Adele Walker, "Olowe of Ise: 'Anonymous' Has a Name," *African Arts* 31, no. 4 (Autumn, 1998): 38–47, 90.

prominence is secured principally through his work. Did he have apprentices? Did he serve any apprenticeship? Did he come from a family of carvers? How did he manage to be so copiously productive if he worked alone, considering that he worked in such places as Àkúrẹ́, Ìdànrè, Ọ̀gbàgí, Ìkòlé, Ijù, Ọ̀wọ̀, and of course Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì? If he did not work alone, why have we not had any body of work that can be attributed to someone with a style similar to Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s?

The eldest daughter of Ọlọ́wẹ̀, Madam Ògúnbùsọ́lá, disclosed that her father had six wives and thirteen children but no apprentices.[12] Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s father was from the Ajalemo family in Igbehin Street in Ẹ̀fọ̀n Alàyè. Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s mother, who was from the Awẹ́lóyè family in Òtígbà, Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì, had had a son, Atoyé, before she was captured during the Kírìjì War (1877–1893) and taken to Ẹ̀fọ̀n Alàyè, northernmost town in Èkìtì, where she gave birth to Ọlọ́wẹ̀ and a daughter, Bọ́lájí. At the end of the war, Ọlọ́wẹ̀'s mother went back to her Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì home.[13] Based on this information, we must review the hypothetical 1873 birth date attributed to Ọlọ́wẹ̀ by Walker. Since his mother was captured and taken to Ẹ̀fọ̀n Alàyè during the Kírìjì War, Ọlọ́wẹ̀ could not have been born earlier than 1877, more likely 1878. Ọlọ́wẹ̀ had a contemporary in Ìsẹ̀, named Àòyọ̀, about whom the literature has remained silent. Although he was not as famous as his colleague, Àòyọ̀, who was from Ẹrinwá in Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì, was also an acknowledged carver who died around 1947. Ọlọ́wẹ̀, beloved of many Èkìtì Ọbas, chiefs, and warriors, worked in secrecy, his "atelier" located in a grove marked by palm fronds and hidden from prying eyes. He was a light-complexioned stammerer, a blacksmith and devout worshipper of Ogun, the deity of iron implements, to which he often offered the obligatory sacrifice of dog. At the end of such sacrifice, Ọlọ́wẹ̀ would take prolonged gulps of palm oil. He was said to be so ravenously creative that he could fashion small household utensils under his big *agbádá* gown during any casual gathering. He was generously remunerated by his patrons, the Ọbas, who gave him cash, big garments, and roosters, among other items. He was appreciated at the highest echelons of several Yoruba towns, and his sculptures are known to have drawn women into composing appreciative songs. At the Ògògà palace in Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì where women customarily sing praise-songs for note-worthy events, one song valorizes a set of three house posts by Ọlọ́wẹ̀. According to the song, "Regarding the three house posts in [the Ọba] Ọ̀wá Àdìmúlà's court yard, one is seated suckling her child; one is seated applying camwood cosmetics on her child; the third is decked like the Ọba's olori; behold, the Owa

12. From author's 1977 field notes.
13. Ibid.

was here!"[14] Ọlọ́wẹ̀ the veritable visual chronicler, died as a result of the burglary that he suffered at the hands of robbers, who stole mainly cloths.

II

The Ọlọ́sunta Festival: History of a Town

The palace of the Òǹgòǹgà is located in the western part of Ìkẹ́rẹ́. Between the Ìrò and Òkè-kẹ́rẹ́ quarters is Odò-Ọjà, one of the seven core quarters into which the town is divided. This is where Odò-Ilé, the residence of the Olúkẹ́rẹ́, principal leader and chief priest in the veneration of Ọlọ́sunta, is located. According to oral traditions, the first Òǹgòǹgà of the town was known as Ìgónigà.[15] He was a brave hunter. It was not uncommon among the Yoruba in precolonial times for statesmen to be either very good hunters or powerful herbalists, or both. According to this myth of origin, Ìgónigà was heir-apparent to the Benin throne. But the throne eluded him because the announcement of the birth of a junior half-brother had preceded the announcement of his own birth. This priority of announcement gave the younger half-brother seniority over Ìgónigà. Seeing that his claim to the Benin throne was weak, Ìgónigà left Benin City with his elder brother, a man who also could not become an Ọba in Benin because, so the legend goes, his birth had occurred before his father ascended the throne. This man, born of the same mother as Ìgónigà, would later become the Deji of Akure, a city that is now the capital city of Ondo State.

Walking in the direction of the forest that has now become Ìkẹ́rẹ́, Ìgónigà shot an elephant. He trailed it towards Ọ̀gbẹ̀sẹ̀, in the eastern part of the town. But the elephant turned into a massive rock, Utámọ̀rajerin. Ìgónigà retreated and sought more medicinal powers. On his return to the site, he camped at Àgàmọ̀, between Ìjàrẹ́ and Ìkẹ́rẹ́. Again, he shot another elephant, which he tracked until he saw smoke on the horizon — a clear indication that there was human habitation. On getting to the source of the smoke, he met Ọlọ́jẹ̀ with whom he exchanged pods of kola nuts. Ìgónigà thrived as a hunter. As was customary at that time, he sent the tusks of the elephants that he killed to his half-brother, the Ọba in Benin. Impressed by this gesture, the Benin

14. Ibid.

15. The traditional title of the Ọba of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ is Ogoga. This version of the myth of origin of the people of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ was narrated to me by the late Ọba, Samuel Adégboyè Akáiyéjọ II, at Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì on July 29, 1977. This section of the paper relies considerably on the draft of an unpublished paper, which was presented by this author at a workshop under the aegis of the Nigerian National Commission for UNESCO, July 1986.

Ọba sought and obtained authority from Ife and accorded Ìgónigà the right to wear a beaded crown.

This version of the foundation myth is the one widely subscribed to by the people of Ìkẹ́rẹ́. But Beier presents another version, which credits Ọba Ewuare of Benin with the installation of Ìgónigà as the Ọba in Ìkẹ́rẹ́. Citing Father A. Oguntoye's *Short History of Ado Ekiti*, Beier writes that "... during a war with the neighboring Ado Èkìtì, Olúkẹ́rẹ́ sought and received assistance from the elephant-hunter Ìgónigà, who, in turn, consulted with Ọba Ewuare of Benin. With the help of Ewuare, Ìkẹ́rẹ́ won the war against Ado. But then Ewuare turned around and installed Ìgónigà instead of Olúkẹ́rẹ́ as king."[16] From this narrative, Beier surmised that Ìkẹ́rẹ́ was founded in the middle of the fifteenth century.

Adébáyọ̀ Àjàyí introduces yet another version of the myth. According to him, Ọlọ́jẹ̀ was a leper whom Ṣìnṣìngúnrinṣìn had cured. Out of gratitude, Ọlọ́jẹ̀ apprenticed himself to the *babaláwo* (diviner) and successfully took over the rites performed by his master when the latter disappeared.[17] Citing Ìkẹ́rẹ́ mythology, Àjàyí writes that Ṣìnṣìngúnrinṣìn brought his Ifa oracle to Ìkẹ́rẹ́ from the Elesun of Ado-Èkìtì. But the popularity of Ṣìnṣìngúnrinṣìn over Alawe, another *babaláwo* who had already settled in the area, led to an attempt on Ṣìnṣìngúnrinṣìn life by Alawe. Although Ṣìnṣìngúnrinṣìn continued to enjoy the patronage of a majority of the community, this did not discourage some hunters from mounting attacks on him. They perfected a plot to murder Ṣìnṣìngúnrinṣìn by setting his cave on fire using bunches of dried palm leaves. Enraged, he placed a curse on the community and escaped into the bowels of a huge rock known as Ọlọ́sunta.

But Ìgónigà intervened and a sacrifice was offered for appeasement. After Ṣìnṣìngúnrinṣìn disappeared, his people deified him, referring to him as Ọlọ́sunta, the resident lord of the rock. Ọlọ́sunta is one of a series of boulders that define the topographic uniqueness of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ (Fig.5). The boulders, including Ùgèlè and Ọ̀rọ̀ílẹ̀, appear to form a protective encirclement around Ìkẹ́rẹ́. After the deification of Ṣìnṣìngúnrinṣìn as Ọlọ́sunta, Ọlọ́jẹ̀ (the former leper) led the community through the sacrifices prescribed by his Ifa. The rain that followed the drought ushered in the festival now known as Ọlọ́sunta, with Ọlọ́jẹ̀ becoming known as the number one high priest and chief farmer, the Olúkẹ̀ràn, a title that would later become Olúkẹ́rẹ́. What began as a religion encompassing all members of the Ìkẹ́rẹ́ community would later become a commemorative gesture, annualized as a festival that continues to serve as the rallying symbol for all indigenes of the town regardless of their religious

16. Beier, 304.
17. Adebayo Ajayi. "Olosunta Festival." *Nigeria Magazine* 84 (March 1965): 17–30.

bent. Since then, the Ọlọ́sunta festival has become an annual festival for indigenes of Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì, one that is celebrated in the months of July and August with the Òǵògà and the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ as co-equal participants in the rites, rituals, and appeasement ceremonies for the town.

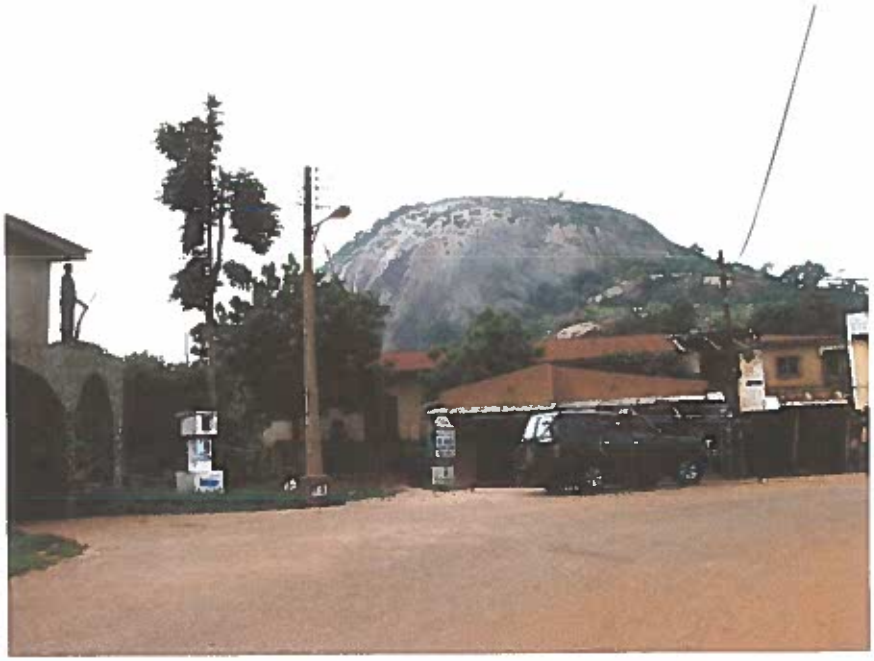

Figure 4. Ọlọ́sunta — The Protective Deity of Ìkẹ́rẹ́. To the left is the latest iteration of the palace with a sentry. Photo credit: délé jẹ́gẹ́dẹ́

As an epic ceremony that is observed at the peak of the rainy season, Ọlọ́sunta continues to cope with changes that have been brought by the exigencies of the times. In the political arena, the current Olúkẹ́rẹ́ has embarked on a campaign for official recognition as an Ọba of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ by the state government. The notion of an Olúkẹ́rẹ́ that was confined to his abode in Odò-Ilé — a beaded Olúkẹ́rẹ́ but without government sanction, who emerged only once a year during the Ọlọ́sunta ceremonies and festivals — appeared to have gone with the last incumbent without Western education. The inevitability of change began with the last but one Olúkẹ́rẹ́, who was an engineer and a devout Catholic. His successor, Gàníyù Ayọ̀délé Ọbáṣọ̀yìn, who was installed as Olúkẹ́rẹ́ in July 2014, is also addressed as His Highness the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ of Ìkẹ́rẹ́. He promptly declared that his agenda was to internationalize the appeal of the Ọlọ́sunta festival, market its importance as a destination for tourists, and promote its cultural import without compromising its traditional significance.

The determination to rebrand Ọlọ́sunta as a revenue-generating event and a source of empowerment for the people of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ is in accord with the espousal of modernist tendencies by the new Olúkẹ́rẹ́.

Ọlọ́sunta: The Festival

Let us examine a typical Ọlọ́sunta festival and focus on some of the critical acts and performances as a way of comprehending the extent to which the festival reveals the inner workings of the town and at the same time oils the wheel of peaceful co-existence between the two ruling Ọbas, promotes interactivity among people of diverse religious inclinations, and re-affirms corporate identity. Ọlọ́sunta has the capacity to sustain any rebranding. Its adherents do not proselytize, for they are free to keep their own religion. In this respect, Ọlọ́sunta remains a formidable platform that brings all religious adherents — Christians, Muslims, atheists, and traditional religionists — together. Ọlọ́sunta is seen as a deity with a pervasive protective might and, as attested to by its various epithets — Ùfí, Ẹlẹ́ẹ́yọ̀, Àmọ̀yè, and Olúayé — it is regarded as the omnipotent owner and protector of Ìkẹ́rẹ́. The Ọlọ́sunta festival creates a forum for all indigenes and visitors to fuse as one and actively participate in the series of rites and rituals and ceremonies involved, or simply observe from safe distances. In this regard, the festival becomes an effective tool for social cohesion, spiritual rejuvenation, and corporate mobilization. The series of activities marking the festival is spread over a number of days. Although several communities and interest groups are involved, two core activities bear historical significance. These activities occur at the palace of Ọba Ògògà on the one hand, and the homestead of the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ on the other. The current location of these two sites confirms the narratives in the legends of creation of the town. The Ògògà's palace is on the western fringe of the town, while Odò-Ilé, the location where Ìgónigà spotted smoke, is the current residential site of Ọlọ́jẹ̀, the Olúkẹ́rẹ́. Activities revolving around these two central locations at once complement and overlap. While the rituals and ceremonies at the Ògògà's palace are anchored on the new yam festival, *ìjẹ̀ṣu*, those at the Olúkẹ́rẹ́'s end are tied to the festival of the drums, which is dominated by the mother drum, *àgbá*. In both instances, the performance of rituals and sacrifices, *etùtù*, is involved. A central theme to these two critical events is peace and concord. While the ìjẹ̀ṣu focuses on celebrations and rituals commemorative of the arrival of the new yam, the *àgbá* is the forum for sending supplications for peace, prosperity, human and agricultural fertility, growth, and increase.

The ìjẹ̀ṣu begins at the Ògògà's palace. Principal actors at the day's ceremonies are the Ògògà, his traditional chiefs, and the Ìbẹ́dó age-group. Age grades were traditionally organized in five-year groups, with the Ìbẹ́dó and

the traditional chiefs as the main actors at the palace for the day's ceremonies. The Ìbẹ́dó age-group comprises men and women 32 to 36 years old. In the past, this age-group constituted the vocal, active, and militant spirit of the society. This was the group to which the community looked for service and leadership. They were the equivalent of the country's present National Youth Service Corps, except that the duration of their service was longer. Early on the morning of ìjẹ́ṣu, the Ìbẹ́dó, clad in identical social wear, *aṣọ ẹgbẹ́*, leave for the Ọba's farm to bring home his new yams. In the interim, traditional chiefs from all the seven quarters of the town troop to the palace to pay homage to the Ọba.

An important aspect of the morning's events pertains to the role of Chief Sàò of the Ìrò quarter. As one of the principal traditional chiefs, he is the prime minister and the Ọba's confidant. He is the only one who enters the Ọba's room at will, discusses any agenda with him freely, and without whose approval no chief, regardless of his status, may go to the Ọba. On the morning of the ìjẹ́ṣu festival, the Sàò makes three trips to the Ọba's palace. On the third trip, the Sàò emerges with a huge ram, which is then sacrificed at the *ikíbí*, one of the shrines in the Ọba's palace. These events must be completed before the Ìbẹ́dó arrive from the Ọba's farm with the fresh yams of the year. After the Sàò has slaughtered the ram at the *ikíbí*, he splits kola nuts and then proceeds to bless the new yams brought in by the Ìbẹ́dó. The splitting of the kola nut is done at *ìjòkè*, and it is known as *ùpobìjẹ*. The Ìbẹ́dó and the chiefs — the two important groups in the morning's activities — must not see each other. The Ọba remains the common factor around whom events revolve. He is the one who sees all and knows all, who serves two interests without ruining either: "*A sebi meji ma ba'kokan je.*" This set of activities involving the Ìbẹ́dó during the ìjẹ́ṣu is referred to as "*eó béó reé*!" which translates to "what a fortune!" This is in apparent reference to the huge and impressive yam tubers, which the Ìbẹ́dó have brought from the Ọba's farm amidst drumming and singing supplied by their womenfolk. They sing "Oh what a fortune! Our Lord's tubers have grown marvelous in diverse ways!" ("*Eó béó reé o olele, uṣu abá ta o àbùlà!*")

The significance of *eó béó reé o* lies in the fact that it paves the path for all to bring their first yams of the year from the farm without having to cover them up. Prior to this, all first yams of the year, including those being transported by outsiders passing through the town, must not be exposed to the naked eye. However, the town must wait until the fourth day after *eó béó reé* before it can exercise this liberty. This fourth-day event is called *ìdáṣu* — yam assembly. But selling of the fresh yams cannot commence until after *ìnáṣu*, yam pricing, which is an interesting enactment a few days later. On the evening of the day of ìjẹ́ṣu, a colorful spectacle unfolds in the Ọba's palace as the chiefs return in company of their various drummers to finish up the day's

events. On leaving the palace in the morning, the chiefs are expected to go to their respective quarters to make their own sacrifices and perform their own *ètùtù*. Throughout the town on the day of ìjẹ̀ṣu, all the *ìdílés* (lineages) are expected to offer their own sacrifices to their ancestors at the designated shrines. Just as the Ọba entertains his chiefs, so do the chiefs in return entertain all the *olórí ilés* (lineage heads) within their respective *àdúgbò*. The day after ìjẹ̀ṣu is referred to as *ùwá un ẹbọ*, that is, sharing the sacrificial stuff. On this day, the Ògògà assembles all his palace staff (the *ọmọwá*) at the *ojúmòrun* (eye of the sky) shrine in the palace, where he shares the bits and pieces of the animals and kola nuts used for the previous day's offerings. Since the Ọba regards the whole of the town as members of his family, his wives, the *olorìs*, are sent out during the *ùwa un ẹbọ* to distribute the parts of the sacrificial items to his chiefs.

The third day after ìjẹ̀ṣu is the *ijèro*. This is the only day in the year when the two most important citizens of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ — the jural and political head as well as the cultural and priestly head — meet with each other at the Ògògà's palace. The meeting between the Ògògà and the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ is a symbolic re-enactment of the mythological meeting of Ìgónigà and Ọlọ́jẹ̀. At this meeting, the Ògògà and the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ jointly offer prayers to their ancestor. The Ògògà then offers the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ an unbroken pod of kola nuts, just as Ìgónigà did to Ọlọ́jẹ̀ during their first meeting. The two heads then dance together to the tune of Ògògà's drum called *ikàràkárá*. We must emphasize that activities are by no means confined to the Ọba's palace. Indeed, the Olúkẹ́rẹ́, as the cultural and religious head, is equally deeply involved. His domain, Odò-Ilé, constitutes the second focal point in this all-embracing festival. Conceivably, some of the activities from *àfin*, the Ọba's palace, and Odò-Ilé, the Olúkẹ́rẹ́'s domain, overlap. For example, before the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ leaves Odò-Ilé to meet the Ògògà for the *ìjèro* ritual, he performs the ìrúbọ, the sacrifice, with the assistance of his own retinue of priests and Ọlọ́sunta devotees. As they leave the venue of the *ìrúbọ*, the priests and Ọlọ́sunta votaries go to their respective homes, also to offer their own ìrúbọ. Later in the day, ìjèro takes place.

On the third day after ìjèro, the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ formally harvests his own first yams. This practice is known as *ùpekele*. It is a significant part of the festival because it creates a spectacular fusion of essential ceremonial aspects from the two important centers in the town: the *àfin* and the Odò-Ilé. First, the ceremonial drum of Ọlọ́sunta (the *àgbá*) makes its first outing for the year. As the voice of the gods, *àgbá*'s outing is usually preceded by a series of rites. For example, the whole town must have performed the *ògun òyè*. This is a three-day event during which the citizenry is permitted to compose lurid songs, break into short but vulgar on-the-spot street performances, and taunt members of the opposite sex with regard to their supposedly weak libido. Men and boys

fling accusatory witticisms in the direction of women and girls. Everyone is in on the witty and sarcastic ribaldry, plying it boldly and remorselessly. The whole town is giddy with the exercise of this yearly license until the evening of the third day when the town congregates at a traditional spot at *erẹ́jà* to ask the gods to annul all the profanity. The town then resumes its regular cultural proprieties until the following season.

In the early hours of the morning three days before the ceremonial drum makes its first outing for the year, *ùwẹmọ*, which is an offertory for new babies, is observed. The *àgbá* is struck three times, signaling the nursing mothers and all women present at Odò-Ilé to begin their loud supplication. At the same time, the three beats from the *àgbá* alerts the rest of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ still in bed to join in the society's entreaties. During the evening of the *ùpekele*, the *àgbá* finally makes its debut. The mother drum bellows a deep, booming rhythm. This was the moment and sound the whole town had been waiting for, and they respond in unison. The Olúkẹ́rẹ́, resplendent in his traditional wear and bedecked with a spectacular crown, assumes his traditional posture at *ẹrẹ́jà*, on a concrete platform specially designed for him. The festival is underway. At the Ògògà's palace, the second aspect of *ùpekele* is no less colorful, no less memorable. It is, in fact, a form of exhibitionism involving the numerous wives of the Ògògà — the Oloris. They proceed from the palace to *ẹrẹ́jà*, venue of the formal outing of the *àgbá*, in a single file, which is not to be broken, under threat of a stiff penalty. A woman who breaks the line automatically becomes the Ọba's wife; if a man, he becomes a ward in the palace. The Ọba may of course impose other penalties as circumstances warrant.

A three-day lull follows the *ùpekele*, after which the festival resumes in an outburst of energized tempo. Activities now occur simultaneously in the two principal sectors at a more fervid tempo. The whole town has been primed to expect the impending crescendo. This is the day that the *ìdúpẹ́ ìjẹ̀ṣu*, (new yam thanksgiving), the *àgbá alẹ́* (evening drumming), and the *apoporo* (musical event) all take place. The ìdúpẹ́ ìjẹ̀ṣu is the prerogative of the Ògògà. It is a vibrant, kaleidoscopic event involving a tumultuous crowd gathered at the Ògògà's palace to watch the chiefs, the hunters, and the *babaláwos* perform for their Ọba. The administrative and war chiefs arrive at the palace, each heralded by his own retinue of gorgeously dressed women, men supporters, and *bàtá* drummers. The groups come one after the other, at respectable intervals that will allow the Ọba, now seated in his imposing majesty in the midst of his wives at the àfin, to absorb and appreciate the mesmerizing peculiarities of each of his chiefs. The war chiefs attempt to capture the people's admiration and steal the show from their administrative counterparts by their daring performances. In the background, on a well-decorated table, an assortment of crowns of past and present Ògògàs is on display. After all the groups have

arrived at the *àfin*, usually by the evening, they dance one after the other according to their ranks; later, they all dance together. The *babaláwos* and the hunters, too, participate in the dance. The ìdúpẹ́ ìjẹ̀ṣu ceremony provides the occasion for all to thank their ancestors for giving them bountiful harvest and for safeguarding the community from pestilence.

As these ceremonies are concluded at the *àfin*, the center of activities shifts to *ẹ́rẹ́jà*, the venue for *àgbá*'s outing. This usually takes place late in the evening, and stretches far into the night. This is why it is called *àgbá alẹ́*. A primer to this ceremony entails the brandishing by everybody — youths, adults, men, and women — of lighted torches made from dried bamboo and palm sticks. With this the streets bubble at night with throngs of lighted torches with people singing about how the torches neither burn nor hurt people. This performance is a gesture that symbolizes the attempt on Ṣìnṣìngúnrinṣìn's life. Between eight and nine o'clock in the evening, all those who have personal requests to make of Ọlọ́ṣunta as well as all those who have come for thanksgiving assemble at a part of the *ẹ́rẹ́jà*, the market square. They expect the emergence of the chief priest, the Olúkẹ́rẹ́. In attendance are specially dressed children, believed to be the gifts granted by Ọlọ́ṣunta on the strength of requests made by their parents in the past. They sport special haircuts known as *ègbósà* — haircuts that may leave the head bald except for a small tuft of hair, òṣù, at the center-front of the head although the number of òṣù could also be three.

This is the night that features women, some of whom are apparently overjoyed that Ọlọ́ṣunta has given them children at last. Such women distinguish themselves in a number of ways: excessive body decoration and ornamentation often using local pigments and papaya straws shaped into coral bead forms. Such women are also known for musical hyper-activity or sheer theatricality. Meanwhile the crowd swells by the hour. Respectable pockets of young boys run rings around the center of *ẹ́rẹ́jà*, their tall, specially decorated whips pointing threateningly into the sky. These are support members of the *aláàgbá* (drum carrier), who is a very young man elected from any of the three quarters designated for this role. The *aláàgbá* is forbidden from tasting fresh yam until he has proved his mettle. He is the one to carry the *àgbá* on his bare shoulders from Odò-Ilé to all the traditional spots at *ẹ́rẹ́jà* on all the occasions that the *àgbá* is out. In particular, he is statutorily mandated to carry the *àgbá* and circle the *ọdán* tree at the center of *ẹ́rẹ́jà* no fewer than seven times. This is where the *aláàgba*'s youthful prowess, nimbleness, and muscularity are challenged. It is great taboo for the *àgbá* to fall. Thus, his family spares no efforts in ensuring that all physical and spiritual impediments on his path are removed.

When, at about nine o'clock, the *àgbá* finally reaches its traditional stand, three heavy, commanding, monotonic sounds are pounded out. The huge crowd responds with a million choruses that soon become a prolonged hum. Each person uses the opportunity to send his most pressing requests to Ọlọ́sunta. Barren women ask for children, farmers ask for rain and rich, bountiful harvest. The Olúkẹ́rẹ́, now the focus of attention, emerges in his regalia in the midst of his ceremonial aides including his traditional flutist. He remains in his ceremonial niche awaiting the sacrificial cow to be used for the night's *ètùtù*. Before it reaches the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ at *ẹ́rẹ́jà*, it is taken to the Ògògà in his palace for blessing. The youths at the palace, anticipating the arrival of the sacrificial cow, dance to *apoporo* music, which emanates from logs of hollowed timber struck with two sticks. Finally, around eleven o'clock at night, the cow reaches the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ at *ẹ́rẹ́jà*. He leaves for the Ọlọ́sunta grove where he spends the night in company of his aides who include the *aláàgbá*. The sacrifice completed, all of them return the following morning trailing the *aláàgbá*, whose drum now bears the fresh flesh and dripping blood of the sacrificed animal. This is known as *ìrọ̀kè*: descent from the hills.

This is the grand finale day. It is the day that the *àgbá* makes its last outing for the year, and the day that the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ retires to his Odò-Ilé till yet another festival the following year. All roads leading to *ẹ́rẹ́jà* are sealed off as early as 3 o'clock when the evening's events begin. They remain sealed until well past midnight. The spectacle is now at its most colorful. All necessary sacrifices have been performed and all rituals completed. Once again, a surging crowd sways to the rhythm of the *àgbá*, now at *ẹ́rẹ́jà*. All the ritual motions are made and the usual chorus spontaneously supplied. The *aláàgbá*, now in a show of strength, carries the *àgbá* round the *odán* tree. Enthusiastic salutations rend the air. Everybody retires. The festival is over for the year. We may now end with a humorous drama that is enacted on the afternoon of the day by wives of the Ògògà on the one hand, and those of the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ on the other. This is called the *ìnáṣu* (yam pricing) ceremony. At about 3 o'clock, all the Ọba's wives depart the *àfin* for *ẹ́rẹ́jà* under the leadership of Anasin, the Ọba's most senior wife. All the women are specially coiffured and beautifully dressed. They go to *ẹ́rẹ́jà* with "bags" of money with which to buy first yams for the Ọba.

Awaiting their arrival at *ẹ́rẹ́jà* are the Aya Olús (Olúkẹ́rẹ́ wives) who are equally gorgeously attired for the event. They go to *ẹ́rẹ́jà* with the choicest of their husband's yam tubers. The climax is that in spite of all the fuss and glamor that accompany this mock marketing, the Olorìs return home at the end of the day empty-handed while the Aya Olús also go back with their unsold yams. The Olorìs refuse to buy yams because they go to the pricing occasion determined to be critical and dissatisfied regardless of the quality and wholesomeness of the Aya Olús' yams. They pour scorn on the Aya Olús' yams and price them

with deliberate contempt. The yams are either too lean to be worthy of their husband's (the Ògògà's) taste, or if the yams are robust and hefty, they are not the species that would glorify their cooking. The Oloris may refuse to buy the yams on the flimsy excuse that the yams are not well displayed, or not very well washed, or that the yams have been touched by too many hands. The Aya Olús, on the other hand, trade banter with the Oloris. Their complaints, no less frivolous and comical, range from a suspicion that the Oloris indeed came to the market with empty bags instead of bags of money; that their money is too dirty for the Olúkẹ́rẹ́'s hands. They insinuate that the Oloris are stingy and are therefore undeserving of yams from the Olúkẹ́rẹ́'s barn. The end of the *ìnáṣu* ceremony signals that the market is now open for all to begin dealing in new yams.

From the anatomical examination of the Ọlọ́sunta festival above, the inference that can be made pertains to the resilience of culture and the innate capacity of peoples to adapt, appropriate, and resolve incongruities in the way of corporate identity. The Ọlọ́sunta festival is a channel for the reification of the worldview of the people of Ìkẹ́rẹ́. In this regard, the people of Ìkẹ́rẹ́ confirm a pervasive tendency among the Yoruba to embrace new concepts, assimilate or defer to other religious precepts not by discarding their own indigenous beliefs but through synthesis. A popular saying among the Yoruba insists that Christianity and traditional practices are not mutually antagonistic. The Ọlọ́sunta festival has tempered the incursion of modernity; it also has the tensility and cultural wherewithal to survive the onslaught of unbridled religiosity by over-enthusiastic ministers.

III

Conclusion

The developments in Ìkẹ́rẹ́-Èkìtì, where two rulers, each with legitimate claim as primal force in the myth of creation of the town, throw into high relief the popular Yoruba maxim that while there may be six chiefs in the palace, there can only be one Ọba. While this maxim is true in its literal sense with regard to the situation in Ìkẹ́rẹ́, its principles are violated in the metaphorical sense. Still, as the enduring relationship between the Ògògà and the Olúkẹ́rẹ́ attests, the peaceful co-existence of two rulers in Ìkẹ́rẹ́, one as the paramount ruler, the other as the cultural overlord, is testament to the power of oral history and cultural practice in sustaining corporate identity. As we have seen, the power of art and architecture is inestimable in debunking notions of racial superiority. The palace of the Ògògà becomes a living archival space for excavating information not only about the visionary role of a succession of Ọbas who embraced modernity without undermining tradition, but also in

showcasing the inimitable creative temper of indigenous artists, architects, and builders. In addition to filling critical gaps in our knowledge of the work of Ọlọ́wẹ̀ of Ìsẹ̀-Èkìtì, this paper also provides a detailed participant-observer perspective on the Ọlọ́sunta festival. The events and performances highlighted in this essay highlight ebbs and flows as Ìkẹ́rẹ́ continues to retain its core traditional practices at the same time that it embraces modernity.

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