

Beyond Aesthetics and Appearance: Epa Masks of Iyah Gbede

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Abstract

Epa masks are produced in order to enable the spirit of Epa deity (Elela in Iyah Gbede) to be felt and appreciated by the society and to appear as a visible form or dramatic representation of mythical actions. However, there are substantial differences between some of the most spectacular and complex Epa masks ever carved as far back as early to mid-20th century by some notable Yorùbá woodcarvers in southwestern Nigeria with those found nowadays in Iyah Gbede and some other Epa practicing communities. Craftsmanship and form were considerations in the aesthetic judgment of the masks and headdresses among the masqueraders and the devotees of Epa deity, but not necessarily the primary ethos. This paper therefore focused predominantly on visual element qualities and morphological presence in all Epa masks and headdresses found in Iyah Gbede. The paper explored brief history and proceedings of Epa masquerade tradition in Iyah Gbede as well as examining the visual content (thematic analysis) of the masks and headdresses to reveal a nexus between various creative traits and styles displayed by carvers in Iyah Gbede. Fourteen (14) major mask types found in the Iyah Gbede were identified from both conventional and unconventional (plastic) point of view. This paper concluded and affirmed that some new Epa headdress were reproduced in Iyah Gbede when some of the ancient headdress was stolen; while some other headdresses were refurbished with paint.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Appearance, Epa, Masquerade, Iyah Gbede, Masquerader, Epa Iyah.

Introduction

Iyah Gbede is a town located at the extreme northern part of Ijumaland of Kogi State; falls within the geographical belt described as the 'Middle Belt' or 'North Central. The town is strategically located at a point between Aiyetoro Gbede and Aiyegunle Gbede, on a flat high ground. And in spite of re-grouping, emigration, Nupe wars (Ijagbemi, 1982:61 and Olorundami, 1971: 10-11), epidemics or relocation to neighbouring town and villages (Ayinmode, 2003), and even to the present site; Iyah Gbede is still regarded as the third largest community in Gbedeland. Iyah Gbede is endowed with posterity in cultural and traditional values, religious, economic, educational and social developments and other natural endowments such as rivers, springs, streams, vegetation and landscape. They are mostly farmers, traders and educationist. Palm wine tapping is a great attribute to their credence.

Iyah Gbede is the cradle and custodian of Gbede culture and traditional values (Ayinmode, 2003). Despite the advent of imported or foreign religions (such as Christianity and Islam) that has made a tremendous influence on the people, an average percentage of them in the community are adherents and admirers of the traditional religion, most especially the *Ẹpa* festival. Fifty-two (52) dynasties and Twenty-two chieftaincy titles are noted among them. Dynasties such as *Ajigba Meleu*, *Ọmọlofọn Molodu Gele*, *Metilarodi* and *Maregun Mawo* are among the few prominent dynasties associated with *Ẹpa* masquerade tradition in Iyah Gbede. It is imperative to note that *Elewusu* (*Ẹpa* female priestess) and *Aworo* (*Ẹpa* chief priest) are the two chieftaincy titles obtained in *Ẹpa* tradition of Iyah Gbede (Ayinmode, 2004:24-86; Famule, 2004:227); and *Ẹpa* tradition of Iyah Gbede is commonly refers to *Ẹpa* Iyah.

Record has it that Iyah Gbede people kick start the *Ẹpa* festival annually between April and June among other Okun communities (Oloniyo, 1980; Ayinmode and Abokede, 2016). This festival features

various types of Masquerades characterized with highly adorned costumes. Generally, these masquerades are classified into three groups – the *Origis*, *Aṭes* and *Akorowos*. The *Origis* are distinguished with a carved headpiece on top of which is a superstructure figure(s), *Aṭes* identified with basket-like structured feathers and *Akorowos* with fabrics surmounted by certain decorative elements regarded as a fabric mask. Ayinmode utilizes weight of the mask type as a basis for classifying *Akorowo* as the flyweight, *Aṭe* as the middleweight and *Origi* as the heavyweight (Ayinmode, 2004:88).

However, academic publications are numerous on *Gelede*, *Egungun* and *Epa* masquerade tradition most especially Yorubaland. Nonetheless, very few scholars have written on *Epa* masquerade tradition in Iyah Gbede. The few known scholars are Oloniyo (1980), Olubiyo (1985), Ayinmode (2004), Famule (2004), Ayinmode (2005). Oloniyo (1980) examines *Epa* as an embodiment of oral literature among Iyah Gbede of Okun Yoruba. He focuses more on *Elela*, the goddess of *Epa* and its festival but lays little emphasis on *Epa* Mask type of Iyah Gbede, which is the focus of this paper. Olubiyo (1985) studies the *Epa* Cults in Ijumu and Yagba of North-eastern Yoruba with preference to the significance and position of the *Epa* Cult in Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post Colonial era. Olubiyo examines the functions and arts of *Epa* in the traditional society. Ayinmode (2004) in his published book “The Story of Iyah Gbede” attempts a classification of *Epa* Masquerades in Iyah Gbede by stating the historical development and analysis of *Epa* festival proceedings in Iyah Gbede. His book has unraveled sentimental notions about *Epa* Masquerade tradition in Iyah Gbede.

Famule (2004) in his work “Art and Spirituality: The Ijumu Northeastern-Yoruba Egúngún” examines the spirituality in the Ijumu-Yoruba *Egungun* traditions from an ethnographical point of view; an overview of the cultural practices of the Ijumu people of the Ookun Yoruba-speaking groups with respect to iconographical interpretations

of *Egungun* and the aesthetic implications with attention paid to the masquerade costumes, the performance contexts of the masquerades or masqueraders, drummers, singers, and more importantly, the aftermath of the ritual festival were all reviewed. *Epa* masquerades of Iyah Gbede were among Ijumu communities classified as masquerade whose costumes are a composite of palm fronds (*Moriwo*) and locally hand-woven cloths of which the *Aso- Ipo* (the red sacred hand-woven clothes).

Ayinmode (2005) in his unpublished B.Tech thesis titled “*Epa* masquerade costume in Okunland: An analysis of significance and forms”, analyses types, form and significance of costume in *Epa* masquerade tradition in Okun land. He reveals the origin and festival proceedings of *Epa* masquerade tradition in Okun land and as well as classification of *Epa* masquerade costume among Okun Yoruba. His discussion on the significance of *Epa* masquerade tradition from judicial, socio-political, religious and economical point of view reveals the fundamental position of *Epa* masquerade tradition among Okun Yoruba. All these academic contributions are convincing and applicable to the historical and development of *Epa* masquerade tradition in Iyah Gbede. But much work is yet to be done on the Headdress/Mask analysis of various *Epa* masquerades in Iyah Gbede. For this reason, the analysis of *Epa* masks in Iyah Gbede shall be examined and Analysed.

Beyond Aesthetics and Appearance of *Epa* Masks/ Headdresses

Generally, aesthetics is referred to as a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and appreciation of art, beauty and good taste. Most often, aesthetics is defined as the study of beauty, and its opposite, ugliness (Huron, 2008: 152). It is a discipline concerned with the perception, appreciation, and production of art. According to Piero (2013), aesthetics means ‘perceiving the beauty through senses’. In essence, any form of expression or application of human creative skill

and imagination or activities involving mental or physical effort purposefully and effectively done, typically in a visual form such as painting, textile, ceramics, sculpture, music, literature, and dance; which produces functional results or works of art to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. Of such creative works is the act of making masks and headdresses which are used in nearly every culture on the planet.

Mask is an artistic projection of a people's image of reality as perceived and conceived through masking performance and touches on the most important aspect of their universe (Aniakor, 1985:91). Olajubu (1972) describes mask (*ago*) as a symbol of the sacred (that is the spirit of the deceased) being mystified as not to be seen by 'ordinary eyes but one can only use the mask. Oladimeji (2008) explains that mask is visibly the institution of ancestral veneration and worship of deities, as it has some linkage with feelings or condition. Masks are generally the largest items physically seen among the most public of art forms; and their sect may involve the participation of virtually everyone in a given community (Rene, 1974:101-118). They either cover only the face or enclose the entire head as headdress.

Apparently, mask and headdress as a work of art can be regarded as an aesthetic object. An aesthetic object is an object that is thought of and watched at the same time. It involves human beings, not only because it is nice to the senses but also because it includes a meaning and carries value (Süzen, 2020: 338-339). However, the value of perceiving the object as the bearer of beauty (that is aesthetics) is used to describe the sensitivity and style of a work of art (Piero, 2013). Basically, artistic sensitivity to an aesthetic object is determined by individual's predisposition towards the aesthetic qualities of such works of art. This can be achieved by the manner in which the creator of the artworks portrays the subject matter.

Succinctly, the style employed, the method or technique used by the creator influenced the aesthetic qualities of the artwork. And for

any aesthetic objects or artworks to be appreciated, the form which is the overall structure must either be seen, heard or touched. The appearance of the aesthetic object or artwork that characterized all visual phenomena or elements such as color, shape, texture, pattern and value serve as the appealing factor to the beholder. Appearance in this context, often determines the acceptability of the aesthetic object or artwork. For instance, the acceptability of a mask to its maker, and ultimately to the masquerader or the bearer is determined by its appearance. The quality of the mask's appearance is psychologically related to its anticipated functionality performance and its usefulness, therefore determines its acceptance or rejection by potential passive onlookers or the mask bearer/masquerader.

Most importantly, any mask that is associated with tradition or culture can also be placed as a sacred object. For instance, the moment a devotee conceals himself within the mask costume, he is no longer seen a human being with limited powers; he behaves like a spirit, speaks in a disguised voice, and comes forth with solemn gait (Leuzinger, 1972:172-174), of such is *Ēpa* masks.

***Ēpa* Masks/ Headdresses in Iyah Gbede**

Birmingham Museum of Art reveals that *Ēpa* masks are used to acknowledge important roles within the community, and to honour those who perform the roles, as well as ancestors who performed those roles in the past. *Ēpa* masks are produced in order to enable the spirit of *Ēpa* deity (*Elela* in Iyah Gbede) to be felt and appreciated by the society and to appear as a visible form or dramatic representation of mythical actions. Sculptural figures are prominently noticed in most *Ēpa* masks of Iyah Gbede and they may connote different significance(s) during *Ēpa* festival. S.M.A. Fathers are of this view that:

“The masks and figures used in such rites were not worshiped, but rather believed that the world was inhabited by many unseen

spirits, each with its own powers and personality. These spirits involved themselves in the lives of human beings in a great many ways for both good and evil. The figures or masks were the vehicles through which these spirits made themselves seen and their presence known in the world of men. The objects themselves, however, did not embody or contain the spirit but though respected and honored, they were not worshiped. Masks representing spirit forces were particularly important at ceremonies marking the major changes in the lives of individuals or community events..... Masks also maintained social control in more subtle ways. Often masks served as teaching aids, augmenting the authority of the teacher himself and by symbolizing the ideas or values he wished to teach. While masks were always treated seriously, their appearance itself might be accompanied by great merriment, and humour was often built into their teaching roles” (S.M.A. Fathers, 1980:6).

From S.M.A. Fathers’ analysis, not all masks are consecrated; there are few ones that represent the spirit forces. For instance, *Arọ* (Fig 1) and *Ọtẹ* (Fig 2) headdresses from Iyah Gbede represent spirit force. They are consecrated to the deity (*Elela*) as mask-force. Akpaide (1982) defines mask-force as a vital force, a force (spirit) external to man and foreign to his ego. He believes that force is the spirit of the dead generally and the ancestors in particular. He explains further that the spirit force may be assumed by a person, it may be located or introduced into a locality and nurtured into a powerful cult or it may exist by itself in its own right.

However, these sculptural objects served to symbolize authority and played important roles in maintaining social control within any masquerade tradition. Each sculptural figure on the mask depicts icons derived from the sacred beings (that is the spirit of the deceased) and cultural ideology. Thompson (1974) corroborates that masking includes the transformation of icon into motion and act. The effect of

such motion (dancing or acrobatic display) and act (performance) make masking a highly desirable and useful facade from which one learns the complex meanings that underlie masking in our society. It provides considerable insight into the multiple levels and intersections of art, music, dance, cosmology, player-audience relationships and dramatic responses within the participatory process (Aniakor, 1985:90). Perhaps, then, the iconographic clue to the meaning of *Ēpa* masks is not to be found in their elaborate superstructures, but in the crude pot helmet itself as a manifestation of the efficacy of authority (*Ase*) for communal and personal well-being (Shelton, 1998:121-124).

Imperatively, soft wood such as *Afara*¹, *Ahun*², *Ayopo*, *Ọmọ* (*Cordia milienii*), *ire* (*Funtumia africana*) and *Arere* (*Triptochiton schleroxylon*) are used in carving *Ēpa* masks in Iyah Gbede (Obajemu, 2004)³. Most *Ēpa* masks in Iyah Gbede are majorly carved by Wojupe from Iluke-Bunu; Ajari from Aiyedayo-Amuro; and Adeyemi, Oregele (Beni-Eji) and Olushola Obajemu all from Iyah Gbede (Ibitayo, 2004). They are either “a born carver”, “made carver” or “carvers who make themselves” (Ayo, 1995). Abiodun (1983) corroborates that these carvers are not professionals but can carve because they possess certain degree of the Yoruba concept of aesthetic – “inner-eye” (*oju-ona*).

Evidently, there are substantial differences between some of the most spectacular and complex *Ēpa* masks ever carved as far back as early to mid-20th century by some notable Yorùbá woodcarvers (such as Arowogun, Bamgboshe, Bamigboye and Oshamuko) in southwestern Nigeria with those found nowadays in Iyah Gbede and some other *Ēpa* practicing communities. Example of such mask is *Ēpa* Headdress (Fig 7) of about 54 inches (137.2 cm) with intricate superstructures that featured dozens of finely sculpted individual figures, carved in Omu⁴ (native Ilorin Province) in 1925 by Moshood Olusomo Bamigboye (1885-1975), the Alaga of Odo-Owa.

The professionalism, craftsmanship and artistic imagination employed by the carver(s) in creating the complex *Ēpa* masks and the

dimension of the intricate superstructure headdresses depict the aesthetic qualities of most *Epa* masks found in museums across America and Europe. Though, Bamigboye types of complex *Epa* masks may be too weighty for masqueraders or bearers to wear during *Epa* festival most especially in Iyah Gbede. Against this background, Abokede and Ayinmode (2018) classifications is implored to identify fourteen (14) major mask types found in the Iyah Gbede from both conventional and unconventional (plastic) point of view. Therefore, identification of mask types shall be based on superstructure head mask, wooden face mask and fabric face mask.



Figure 1: Aro Headdress

Figure 2: Qte Headdress

Figure 3: Ologun Headdress

(All the masquerades are from Iyah Gbede. Photographed by: Ayinmode Stephen Ayodele, April 2004).

Superstructure Head Masks Type of *Epa* Iyah

This is a type of mask that is made up of two parts; upper and the lower part. The lower part consists of cylindrical form interplay with shapes like ring of spheres, triangle and rectangle representing the eyes, nose and mouth respectively (Abokede et al, 2018: 51). The upper part is made up of surmounted figures (human or animal) of different types.

Although, Yoruba figure carvings show certain very distinctive characteristics. The figures are lively and show great variety, every posture is attempted, and the trunk and body no longer remain in one axis, forms are rounded, but are kept clear-cut and decisive. The form of the head is usually unmistakable as the general shape of the face is naturalistic, with pointed chin and large brow. The eyes are long and pointed at each end, with the lower lip nearly as large as the upper and the pupil of the eye is gouged out. The nose is broad at both root and base, with well-marked nostrils, the mouth protrudes, thick-lipped and does not narrow at the ends, which are slightly upturned. The ears are set high and well back on the head; faces are scarified on the cheeks, and sometimes on the forehead with tribal markings (Olaomo, 2011:64).



Figure 4: Ode Headdress



Figure 5: Agbo Headdress



Figure 6: Omi Headdress

(All the masquerades are from Iyah Gbede. Photographed by: Ayinmode Stephen Ayodele, April 2004).

Eyo (1977:164) on the other hand, describes superstructure headdress as simple, abstracted Janus-faced helmet with large eyes; usually carved with a variety of figures and is secular. He further elucidates that superstructure serves as a record of episodes in the

area's history and to conceptualize aspects of the social community – the hierarchy of masks alluding to kings, chiefs, leaders, warriors, priests and to the role of women. Lawal (2012:22) says the figures on the superstructure are usually more realistic, representing deities (*òrìsà*), ancestors, culture heroes, prayers, aphorisms (among others), the motifs on the superstructure usually determine the name of a given masquerade.

In *Epa* Masquerade tradition of Iyah Gbede, headdress with superstructure of carved figures, which may be anthropomorphic or zoomorphic in nature, is literally called *Origi* or *Oriṣoṣon*. Headdress such as *Arọ* (Fig 1), *Ọtẹ* (Fig 2), *Ologun* (Fig 9), *Ọdẹ* (Fig 4), *Agbo* (Fig 5), *Omi* (Fig 6), *Ọlofa*, *Ọnoja*, *Olofosi*, *Agboru*, *Elewusu*, *Èha*, *Iyeṣomọ* and *Ọlomọyọyọ* are the most common superstructure headdress found in Iyah Gbede. These headdresses vary according to the choice of the masquerader. However, *Ologun* (warrior), *Ọdẹ* (hunter), *Ọlofa* (archer), *Iyeṣomọ* (Mother), *Ọlomọyọyọ* (mother with numerous children) and *Agboru* (medicinal pot carrier), are named according to their superstructures. And masquerades such as *Arọ*, *Ọtẹ*, *Omi*, *Elewusu*, *Ọnoja* and *Olofosi* do not have any link with the superstructure they bear. Thus, superstructure headdress of *Ọtẹ* masquerade and *Arọ* masquerade shall be analysed.

Ọtẹ headdress (Fig 2) can be regarded as a consecrated object in *Epa* masquerade tradition. Although, it does not serve as a link between *Epa* devotees and the *Epa* deity (*Elela*) but among those masquerades in Okunland that became combatants in quest to resist the Nupe's (*Ibons*) oppression (Ijabemi,1982:61). *Ọtẹ* headdress has an average height of 33 inches (83.82 cm) consisting of the upper and lower segments. The upper segment is made up of embellished human figure covered with white cloth tied around body and the hands; and a conical red cap with white cloth fastened around the head. At the upper anterior region of the hand lies a projected three red and black feathers picked from *Aluko* bird (*Tauraco erythrolophus*), otherwise signifying power,

authority and spiritual connection with the deities. The lower part of the headdress lies an embellish cylindrical shape with dappled red background pattern. It consists of two large bulbous eyes, angular nose, mirror shape at the left and right posterior ends depicting ear region, and the rectangular shape that serves as an opening for bearers' sight. No shape used to depict the nostrils, and the lower part is fused to the fabric costume (Ayinmode et al, 2016: 51).

On the other hand, *Arọ* headdress (Fig. 1) is regarded as the most scared and sacred among other masks of *Ēpa* in Iyah Gbede. Generally, *Arọ* was believed to be the king of *Iye*, a royal intermediary found in a farmland close to Iyah Gbede (Abokede et al, 2018: 51). The people (devotees) believe the headdress serves as a link between them and the *Ēpa* deity (*Elela*). The 33inches (83.82 cm) in height headdress consists of two parts (i.e the upper and the lower parts). The upper part of headdress is made up of a figure-like sculpture consisting the head, body and leg. The head is exaggeratedly sculpted into an oval shaped form with protruding eyes, distorted triangular nose and shortened convex mouth with black line running from one end of the ear through the chin to the other. The latter may simply connote "whiskers". However, the head is covered with turban-like red cap outlaid with white cloth. Perhaps, this turban-like headgear may suggest the influence of the Islam on *Ēpa* Masquerade tradition in Iyah Gbede, since it resembles the turban used by Islamic Clerics. On Contrary, the three red feathers found around the headdress indicate the likelihood of African ritual element than that of Islamic turban. According to a former *Ēpa* custodian in Iyah Gbede (Olusegun, 2004), the red cap signifies authority while white wrappers on the head and body signify purity.

The body and the leg components of the upper part of headdress is wrapped with white cloth from the neck region to the feet, with an intercepting black, white and red colour patterns shield-like structure held on the figure's two hands. This shield-like structure is adorned

with three red feathers at the upper anterior and the lower anterior ends respectively. These feathers are picked from *Aluko* bird (*Tauraco erythrolophus*) which probably serve as a spiritual connection between the deity and the bearer. Although, there may be more functions attributed to *Aluko* feather by the devotees. Also notable is the long red staff wrapped with white cloth probably signifying hexed object for protection.

The lower part is a decorated cylindrical shape with branch-like pattern (floral motif) spread in a linear form on a red background. It consists of two large bulbous eyes, angular nose, sphere shape at the left and right posterior ends, distorted ears, and the rectangular shape that serves as an opening for bearers' sight. The lower part is fused to the fabric costume.



Figure 7: Yoruba *Epa* Helmet Mask by Bamgboye (1895-1978), Odo-Owa Ekiti, Nigeria
Source: Cleveland Museum of Art (2022)

Wooden Face Masks Type of *Epa* Iyah

This category of mask belong to *Eye*, *Mistress*, *Esu-Obaba* and *Apa* masqueraders from Iyah Gbede. These masks are generally sculpted from soft wood most especially *ire* (*Funtumia africana*) and *Omo*

(Cordial *milienii*), to form a hollow cavity that covers the masqueraders' face. The masks are either adorned with anthropomorphic or theriomorphic figures sculpted in abstract, stylized or naturalistic forms. Notably, there are four types of wooden face mask found in Iyah Gbede, which are a semi-holed face mask with superstructure headdress, semi-cylindrical face mask, semi-hollowed theriomorphic face mask and semi-hollowed hornbill face mask.



Figure 8:
Apa Mask



Figure 9:
Esu-Obaba Mask



Figure 10:
Mistress Mask



Figure 11:
Eye Mask



Figure 12:
Eye Mask

Source: Ayinmode Stephen, S. A. April, 2004

A typical example of semi-holed face mask with superstructure headdress is found on *Apa* masquerade. The mask type is made up of flat or semi circular hollowed structure meant to cover the face of the mask bearer. At the top, certain carved stature of human figures are surmounted on the mask. *Apa* mask (Fig. 8) is regarded as a female masquerade type reflecting stereotypical portrayal of priesthood. This mask is about 23 inches (58.42 Centimeters) in height, made up of the superstructure of two human figures (male and female) at the upper region. The male figure at the right side possesses a black elongated cap and bead necklace signifying royalty, and black spheres at its chest indicating breasts. The female counterpart at the left side possesses a black bead necklace and bulged hair-like shape painted in black colour with an exaggerated hanging breasts are located at the chest region. Both figures have black band tied around their waist, hand fans at either

the anterior left or right hands, while and the other hands are joined together, which may signify unity in diversity. They are however embellished with red and dappled white colour, and inscribed black lines across the figures' face probably signifying *Nupe* facial marks. The lower part of the mask is oval form and other four circular shapes at both anterior top and bottom. The upper shapes suggest the eye while the nose is represented with triangular shape. At the centre lower region lies a rectangle that allows the masquerader to see (Abokede et al, 2018: 52).

The semi-cylindrical face mask is a convex-like hollowed semi-cylindrical wooden mask. *Esu-Qbaba* mask (Fig 9) falls into this type category. From the frontal anterior end lies a centralized circular hole conceivably suggests the only outlet for breathing, sighting and mimetic patterning of sounds by the masquerader. The surface of the mask lies a black bulge linear pattern seen around the circular hole, and a sequentially carved white and red coloured semi-circular patterns at the anterior edge of the mask. At the peripheral part of the mask lies an alternated starkly juxtaposed diagonal and horizontal stripes design of white and red colour. At the posterior end lies a convex structure with attachment of an enormous load of medicinal preparations surmounted on the mask (Abokede et al, 2018: 52). The mask, which is about 30 inches (76.2 cm) long, appears in a slanting form. Imperatively, *Esu Qbaba* masquerade was the most senior of all the masquerades before losing the number one position to *Arọ* who now performs it role. Oral tradition suggests that after the extermination of the *Ibọns* (Nupes), *Esu Qbaba* disappeared for one year and reappeared the following year (Ayinmode, 2003).

However, the semi-hollowed theriomorphic face mask type is skillfully sculpted to resemble human facial outlook. A good example of such mask is *Mistress* mask (Fig 10) from Iyah Gbede. The mask is considered as a female mask with seducing facial outlook. It is made up of oval shape further emphasized by the convex shape of the fore

head. The fore head further extended to the concave eyelid joined in the centre with protruding kite-like nose. At the edges of the nose lie the chopped holes suggesting an orifice for sight. Below the nose is the coloured bulged mouth in white lipstick. Two parallel lines are inscribed at the cheeks of the mask. These may signify tribal marks of the *Abinu*, a sub Okun Yoruba kin-group. Perhaps, the facial outlook suggests pride and prestige.

Under the category of semi-hollowed hornbill face mask are the two types of *Eyẹ* mask of Iyah Gbede. The semi-hollowed hornbill face mask has a chiselled feature of protruding long beak extended to bulged triangular shape suggesting a human nose; and mirrors used as decorative patterns on the frontal surface of the mask. At the sides of the bulged triangular shape lies two square openings suggesting the eyes or holes for the masquerader to see through, and the opening below the bulged triangular shape suggests the mouth. For instance, the first *Eyẹ* mask (Fig 10) has a perfect oval shape with blue colour background dotted with white colour spread across the surface of the mask. It has seven irregular mirrors symmetrically arrange on the frontal surface of the mask. While the second *Eyẹ* mask (Fig 12) has an elongated oval shape usually red colour background with dotted yellow. It also has four regular mirrors asymmetrically arrange on the frontal surface of the mask.

Fabric Face Masks Type of *Epa* Iyah

Akorowo (Fig. 13) and *Agba* (Fig. 14) are the two *Epa* masquerade types associated with fabric face mask in Iyah Gbede. The mask is an overall garment made of fine fabrics surmounted by certain decorative elements. It is designed purposely to hide the face of the masquerader. Obviously, the fabric used for the dual differ from most fabric seen on typical Yoruba *Egungun*. Most of the fabrics used on Yoruba *Egungun* are silk, damask, velvet and Indian madras and seldomly printed cotton.

But for *Akorowo* and *Agba* masquerades, varieties of Ankara and plain cotton fabrics are used respectively.

Akorowo mask (Fig. 13) is one of the simplest designed costumes of *Epa* Masquerades. The mask is made up of upper part and the lower part. The upper part consists of a cap surmounted with collection of feathers. This feather appears like that of *Eye Etu* (wild guinea fowl). A strip of fabric is then used to hold the feathers firmly. The lower part is made up of a long fabric attached to the upper part. This attachment is done deliberately to create an orifice for the sight of the masquerader. A strip of rope stretched from the upper part is also tied along the chin to make the head shape of the bearer more visible (Abokede et al, 2018:53).

Meanwhile, *Agba* mask (Fig. 14) is a red overall garment made in form of an *Agbada*. At the anterior top end lies a red cap known as *Odi* and a strip of white cloth tied around it. A whitish-cream net that cover the face serves as a connector between the cap and the overall garment. This garment is then tied at the chest region. Seemingly, the mask may signifies an influence of the Islam since it resembles that of a Moslem *purdah* dress (Abokede et al, 2018:52-53). It is important to state that *Agba* masquerade was a recent creative ideology of the *Meti Larodi* family in Iyah Gbede, of which the writer emanated from. Precisely, *Agba* masquerade is among the newest masquerade found in Iyah Gbede as far back as 1990.



Figure: 13
Agba Mask



Figure: 14
Akorowo Mask



Figure: 15
Ate Mask

Source: Ayinmode Stephen Ayodele, 2004.

Basket-like Headdress Type of *Ẹpa Iyah*

Ate Mask (Fig. 15) is regarded as the most fascinating of all masquerades in Iyah Gbede. The mask type is basically made up of feathery basket-like structure that is divided into three sections, the base, the side and the top. The base consists of a circular wooden surface of about 24 inches (60.96 Centimeters) in diameter called *Apapala* (a wooden tray). At the centre of the *Apapala* lies two closed rectangular holes used in connecting the fabric mask (a mask with two holes for sight made of cotton) and the head of the masquerader. This is done by tucking a rope between the two holes to tie the long garment fabric in form of *Agbada* (a loose-fitting robe worn by men) to the neck of the masquerader.

Equally, two tiny holes are drilled simultaneously around the base of the *Apapala* repeatedly to allow pegs known as *Owọ* (broom) to form the basket-like structure. The *Owọ* stand erect, while *ikan* (raffia) is used to weave around the edge of the *Apapala*. *Ikan* (raffia) is later covered with velveteen materials of different kinds depending on the masqueraders' choice or a Formica surface material (usually laminated plastic products). Palm fronds is equally attached to the base edge of the *Apapala* to conceal the face of the masquerader. At the top edge of

the woven raffia, long but wide feathers of an eagle called *Idi-unla* are fixed to enhance aesthetic beautification of the headdress (Abokede et al, 2018:51). Famule (2004:207) argues that the assemblage of bird feathers into the masquerade costumes of *Atẹ* is an artistic device for making the invisible masquerade spirit beings become visible.

Comparative Analysis of Visual Elements of *Epa* Mask Types of Iyah Gbede

Size, line, shape, pattern, texture, color, and value are visible elements that form the visual structure of *Epa* mask types of Iyah Gbede. It is the arrangement and mutual relation of all components that form the mask or headdress. The totality of these elements expresses the physical qualities and morphological presence in all *Epa* masks in Iyah Gbede. For instance, the size of superstructure headdress (*Origi or Oriṣṣo*) of most masquerades such as *Arṣ* (Fig 1), *Oṭẹ* (Fig 2), *Ologun* (Fig 9), *Oḍẹ* (Fig 4), *Agbo* (Fig 5), *Omi* (Fig 6), *Ọlofa*, *Onoja*, *Olofosi*, *Agboru*, *Elewusu*, *Ẹha*, *Iyeṣomṣ* and *Ọlṣmṣyṣyṣ* are all the same. And the lower part of most headdresses is cylindrical shape with two large bulbous eyes, angular nose, distorted ears, and the rectangular shape that serves as an opening for sight.

Obviously, dots, lines and colour are visible elements used in the painting of all categories of wooden *Epa* masks and headdresses in Iyah Gbede. Painting is very significant to *Epa* masking tradition. It offers the artist the greatest possibilities of realistic representation of their thought. Drewal and Mason (1977) has rightly observed that the dot is a kind of sanctifying and sacred pointillism that conveys transformation and transcendence of worldly entities united with other worldly forces. They further observed that the dots are points of light and blessing, and are also profusely used on *Egungun* costumes, *Epa* headdresses, walls of shrines, and other sacred objects to initiates as signs of power uniting their destinies with specific divine forces in the cosmos. Dots create brilliance and as well as spiritual points of

brightness, and symbols of the rebirth and transformation of a human soul.

A line is regarded as a long thin mark on any surface. Lines impose human order into the disorder of nature (Thompson, 1973). In Yoruba worldview, Lines (*Ila*) are clear imprint used for decorating art objects and humans. It is not only peculiar to masks but also for body decoration and body markings (linear scar cut into human body) known *Ila*, used as a means of identifying and clarifying the ethnic subgroup, lineages or religious group of an individual. Areo and Kalilu (2013:28) describe intersecting lines as a representation of the crossroad which in Yoruba rhetoric symbolically implies a state of confusion; hence the saying “*Ikorita meta tii da’mu alejo*” that is the T- junction confounds a visitor to a strange location. It is also taken to be the meeting point between the physical and the spiritual realms. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that sacrificial objects as propitiation to the gods or deities till date are largely placed at crossroads in Yoruba spiritual practices. Drawing these lines is an act of connection between different realms in human and spiritual experience.

Colour is defined by its hue, chroma and tonal value. It is generally in different shades of red, blue, yellow, black, white and so on. They all have a symbolical meaning. For instance, white may be observed as the symbol of holiness and dignity, bliss and purity but often, black is linked death, evil, calamity or sorrow. The symbolism of white and black is not antagonistic because both colours are sacred. Ojo (1978:455) notes that red colour is associated with spiritual Powers or forces. Red symbolizes danger, disapproval or bravery; blue as love, friendship and sincerity, and yellow as hope, joy, success or heartedness. All these colours are supposed to enhance the surface quality or beauty of the masks, as they are synonymous with beauty.

It is worthy to note that the Yoruba understanding of colour is different from the Western thought of colour theory. Drewal and Mason (1998:88) observe that the Yoruba word for colour is *Awo* and is mainly

grouped into three divisions, based on their temperatures or temperaments; white (*Awo-Funfun*), blue or black (*Awo-Dudu*) and red (*Awo-Pupa/Pipon*). The white colour (*Awo-Funfun*) are white, light gray, pale gray, silver, and so on; blue or black color (*Awo-Dudu*) are colours of dark shades such as black, blue, dark brown, purple indigo, green, and dark gray, among others. While red colour (*Awo-Pupa/Pipon*) are red, orange, pink, deep yellow, yellow, brick red, and other similar colours that is characterized by warm and hot temperature.

However, most of the super-structured headdress (*Origi or Oriopon*) such as *Arọ* (Fig 1), *Ọtẹ* (Fig 2), *Ologun* (Fig 9), *Ọdẹ* (Fig 4), *Agbo* (Fig 5), *Omi* (Fig 6), *Ọlọfa*, *Ọnọja*, *Olofosi*, *Agboru*, *Elewusu*, *Eha*, *Iyeomọ* and *Ọlomọyọyọ* and the wooden face mask with superstructure such as *Apa* mask (Fig 8) and *Esu-Ọbaba* mask (Fig 9) all had red background surface, white dots or lines and black demarcations painted on them except *Agbo* (Fig 5) that has black background surface and white dots or lines. The lines are either thick or thinning while dots vary in size and proportion. On the contrary, blue serves as background colour on the *Eyẹ* mask in (Fig 11) and white dots spread across the background surface. *Eyẹ* mask in (Fig 12) has red background surface with yellow dots covering the entire mask.

Conclusion

This paper has focuses predominantly on visual element qualities and morphological presence in all *Epa* masks and headdresses in Iyah Gbede. In totality, *Epa* masks and headdresses are an embodiment of the Yoruba people's ideals and mythologies. Craftsmanship and form were considerations in the aesthetic judgment of the masks and headdresses among the masqueraders and the devotees of *Epa* deity, but not necessarily the primary ethos. The paper explores brief history and proceedings of *Epa* masquerade tradition in Iyah Gbede as well as examining the visual content (thematic analysis) of the masks and headdresses to reveal a nexus between various creative traits and styles

displayed by carvers in Iyah Gbede. This paper concludes and affirms that some new *Ēpa* headdress were reproduced in Iyah Gbede when some of the ancient headdress was stolen; while some other headdresses were refurbished with paint. It ultimately deduced that the shield-like structure found on *Arọ* headdress, the three red and black feathers projected outward from upper anterior region of *Ọtẹ* headdress and the broom-like decorated incantation-horn at the right hand of *Ologun* headdress iconographically illustrates *Asẹ* (power, authority) and its mystical nature of the spirit force. *Asẹ* is described as a word generally translated and understood as ‘power’, ‘authority’, ‘command’, ‘scepter’, ‘vital force’ in all living and non-living things and as ‘a coming-to-pass of an utterance’ in the Yoruba cosmos. Thus, concepts of *Asẹ* are more practical and instantaneous since it is believed to inhabit and energize the awe-inspiring space of the deity and all their objects, utensils, offerings and including the air around them (Abiodun, 1994:309-310).

Notes

1. *Afa* is another name in Okun dialect for *Afara* wood. It is a soft wood for carving.
2. *Ahun* wood (Okun pronunciation) is also known as *Ayun*, *wawan* in typical Yoruba language. It is tough but soft.
3. Pa Olushola Obajemu (2004): Oral Communication. Iyah Gbede, 62+ Years. He is a talented carver, who was influenced when he was in Standard seven (7) those days as a result of craft making. He started carving since 1960. Some of the masks carved were *Elewusu*, *Ote*, *Agboru*, *Aro*, (Those that were stolen in 1967) *iyawo* and several others.
4. *Omu* may probably be Omu-Aran, a prominent Igbomina town in Irepodun Local Government Area of Kwara State.

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