Celebrating a Heterogeneous Community: The Èbìbì Festival of the Èpè People

Babatunde Olanrewaju Adebua
Babcock University, Nigeria
adebuab@babcock.edu.ng; badebua@yahoo.com

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

Introduction
Festivals are public celebrations staged usually by local communities, to commemorate some unique aspects of the lives and mutual existence of the people. They are also used to meet specific socio-cultural needs of the people as well as provide entertainment. In southwest Nigeria, festivals such as Òsun Òsogbo festival, Ògún festival, or Èyò festival are celebrated to ensure the health, unity and the general well-being of the people. They also serve as a way of preserving the traditions of the people and reminding them of their respon-
sibilities to the society to which they belong. Robertson, Gerson, and Enekwe all opine that festival celebrations offer a sense of belonging for religious, social, or geographical groups, contributing to group cohesiveness. They may also provide entertainment, which was particularly important to local communities before the advent of mass-produced entertainment. Festivals that focus on cultural or ethnic biases also seek to inform community members of their traditions; the involvement of elders sharing stories and experience provides a means for unity among families within a community. Illustrating how community and belonging are mobilized by the Òbìbì festival in Òpẹ̀, this article argues that festivals contribute both to group cohesion and to the delineation of group boundaries.

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

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

1. Noel Robertson, Festivals and Legends: The Formation of Greek Cities in the Light of Public Ritual (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992).
2. Ruth Gerson, Traditional Festivals in Thailand, Kuala Lumpur (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
3. O. E. Enekwe, “Myth, Ritual and Drama in Igboland,” Drama and Theatre in Nigeria, (1981): 140–155.
4. This term refers to the people in the central and eastern part of the old Ọjọbú kingdom.
5. The modern Ọjọbú-Rèmọ do not derive traditional authority from the Awújalé of Ọjọbúland, who is the traditional authority in the Akilè-Ọjọbú area of Ọjọbúland. However, like other Ọjọbú people, the Rèmọ people celebrate Orò and Agémọ. They also celebrate Èlikísì, see Insa Nolte, Obafemi Awolowo and the Making of Remo: The Local Politics of a Nigerian Nationalist (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); idem, “Colonial politics and precolonial history: Everyday knowledge, genre, and truth in a Yoruba town,” History in Africa, 40.1 (2013): 1–40.
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study seeks to redress, by examining the Èbibi festival with particular focus on the heterogeneous and plural nature of the Èpè community, participation in the various communal events, and comparison between the history and cultural practices of coastal and upland Èjębú communities. Other areas of focus include the aesthetics and didacticism of oral performances, moral codes and communal self-reliance. This study purposively selected the Èpè variant of the Èbibi festival performances for several reasons. Èpè is very rich in artistic forms which unfortunately have been greatly unexplored. The few researches on Èjębú festivals have consistently left out the Èpè variant of Èbibi from their studies. This can be adduced to the fact that for political exigencies, Èpè has been carved out of the mainstream Èjębú, who are predominantly in Ògùn State, and added to Lagos State of Nigeria.

Origin of the Èpè People

Èpè is a small town on the north side of the lagoon and about 32 kilometers south-west of Èjębú-Òdè. It is bounded in the north by Odómólá, and in the south by the lagoon and a string of islands called Etiósà Islands. To its east and west are located the small Èjębú settlements of Ìráyè-Òkè and Témú respectively.² Beyond that, the town is linked by water to market towns such as Ikósì and Ejirin to the west, and the riverine areas of the eastern Yorùbá, the Igbo and the Kingdom of Benin in the east.

Lying between Latitude 6.37°N and Longitude 3.59°E, Èpè is situated within the rain forest belt. The northern part of this area is a mountainous landscape with about 250km of fertile land while the southern parts lie within the mangrove swamp forest.³ Èpè enjoys the copious rainfall typical of the rain forest belt of Nigeria and has a well-drained soil suitable for agriculture, and a forest that provides the raw material for a veritable boat building industry. Its geographical location in a fertile area of the rain forest, the easy means of communication afforded by the lagoon and the opportunities it provided for agriculture, fishing and the boat-building industry made the Èpè area attractive to the people from its immediate hinterland as well as to others from both the western and the eastern lagoon areas of Southwestern Nigeria.⁴

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6. O.A. Disu, “The History of Epe,” (B.A. Project Essay, University of Lagos, 1987).
7. R.K. Udoh, Geographical Regions in Nigeria (Los Angeles: UCLA Publishing Co., 1970).
8. G.O. Oguntomisin, The Transformation of a Nigerian Lagoon Town: Epe, 1852–1942 (Ibadan: John Archer, 1999).
There are two main versions of Òpẹ tradition of origin; the more popular of the two being the Húrakà tradition.⁹ In his account, Avoseh claims that Húrakà was a hunter from Ilé-Ifẹ and was the first settler in Òpẹ. He had founded Pòkà before he came to Òpẹ. While Húrakà was in Pòkà, his hunting grounds extended to a place he called Oko-Ọpẹ (Ọpẹ forest). The name Òpẹ was derived from certain black ants which infested the forest. Oko - Òpẹ has since been corrupted to Òpẹ. Gradually, Húrakà left Pòkà to settle at Òpẹ, where he was at different times joined by other settlers like the Alárá, an Ọba who came from Ilé-Ifẹ, Lúgbàsà, Ágbajà, Ôfùtên, Alárò (a woman) who all came from Ôbù, Ôgùnmudè, Rámòpẹ and Ôlójà Sàgbàfàrà from Òjěbú-Ọde. These people settled in different locations in Òpẹ. While Húrakà, Alárá and Lúgbàsà settled at Apá Kini, Ôfùtên and Ágbajà settled opposite Húrakà’s settlement which is called Apá kejì (Second Quarters). Though Alárá did not remain in Òpẹ for long, he left his son behind before proceeding to the nearby town of Òlárà where his descendants remain today.

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

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

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

¹⁰. RG/c5: "A report on the administrative reorganization of Epe District Native Treasury Area of the Colony" by H. Childs and E.J. Gibbons, 1939, National Archives, University of Ibadan.
Ejinrin port, but its people also traded with towns further east, such as Makun Omi and Atijere. The high demand for Òpê fish attracted Ijaw and Òjàjè fishermen to fish in Òpê waters. The trading activities attracted the attention of both Lagosians and the people in the interior, and several of these people settled in Òpê fishing villages and the shores of the town itself.\(^\text{11}\)

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

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

\(^{11} \) Prominent fishing villages are Òmàgbọn-Aládè, Abomiti, Emina, Orímedú, Òlàgbó, Òmógò, Òbẹjoyè and Erese, to mention a few.

\(^{12} \) Inter-ethnic conflicts arose on account of fishing and trading rights between the Òjebú-Òpê, and and Makun-Ômi communities

\(^{13} \) Kosoko’s arrival in Òpe on exile changed the socio-political and economic landscape of Òpe.

\(^{14} \) Robert S. Smith, *The Lagos Consulate 1851–1861* (Macmillan: London, 1978).
including its Òbìbì festival, also exist in constant competition with the Eko-Òpè. Moreover, the Eko-Òpè are predominantly Muslims who perceive the Òbìbì festival as ritual worship, which went against the tenets of Islam. However, it was observed that Eko-Òpè indigenes were prominent and accepted in the various audiences of Òbìbì.

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

The Awùjalè placed the overall administration of the town in the hands of the Oṣùgbó, whose members held meetings in the palace of the town’s ruler and, like a parliament, discussed and legislated on behalf of their ruler and their town. The Awùjalè had messengers called Agurin who closely supervised the Oṣùgbó council and reported to the Awùjalè whenever it exceeded its power. The traditional ruler of Òpè was the Òlójà who ruled with the advice of the Chiefs of the Oṣùgbó society. The Oṣùgbó, which was the governing Council in Òpè, settled cases that were not resolved within the Òtùn or wards, though its authority did not extend to quarrels with other towns. These were referred to the Awùjalè.\footnote{In Òpè, the head of the Oṣùgbó Chiefs is known as Olúwo. Others are the Akónilórò and the Apènà. Other members of the Òlójà’s administrative council were the Balógun (War Captain), Òtùn Balógun (Commander of the right wing of the army) and Sèrìkì (Head of the Vanguard). These were the Chief military officers of the town. The Àgbòn (Head of the Young men), was also a notable member of the council. He was the custodian of the drums used for inter-community communication.}

Like the people of other Òjèbù towns, the Òpè people also divided themselves into associations according to their ages. This system is known as Règbèrégbè (age-grade association). They are sometimes called Ègbè Okosi.\footnote{The age-grades have their leaders headed by the Gìwá. Among others are the Jagunà, Baálè, Balógun, Òtùn.} It was the duty of the younger age grades to perform communal work such as building and repair of the Òlójà’s Palace, cleaning and clearing of the foliage surrounding shrines and building of roads and bridges. The older grades took
an active part in the political affairs of the town. At their meetings, they discussed matters concerning the welfare of the town and communicated their decisions to Olojá or the Osùgbó council.

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

**Traditional Belief and Worship in Òpè**

Bólájí Ìdòwú18 defines the Yorùbá worldview as theocentric. He writes of the Yorùbá that

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

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

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

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

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17. See Avoseh, *Short History of Epe*.
18. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Ibadan: Longmans, 1962).
performance. Among these festivals, the Òbìbì falls into the category meant for cleansing and purification of the town as well as good health and general prosperity of the people of the community. It is also interesting to note that in Òpè, as in many other Òjèèbú towns, what sets out as a purification rite often becomes solely an occasion for singing satirical songs against evil doers, or those who have contravened accepted social norms. There is also plenty of symbolic action and the dramatization of short archetypal incidents from the experiences of the people in the outgoing year.

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

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

19. Oluyomi Philips “Origin and Development of Epe from Earliest Times to 1966,” (B.A. Project Essay, University of Ibadan, 1989).
20. See Disu, “The History of Epe”.
as well as people from other communities. Everyone is welcome to participate in the festival since it is a joyous celebration.

Preparing the Ground for Òbìbì Festival

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

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

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

21. These deities are part of the Yoruba pantheon of gods. They are celebrated generally among the Yoruba. Propitiations to these gods are deemed to be germane to the entire Òbìbì festival rites.
minates in the beating of Gbèdu royal drums which the king, his chiefs and the Òṣùgbó members all dance to.

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

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

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

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

²². This explanation was made by Pa Saaka Ajetunmobi, a prominent member of the Ìjì-Ǹlá Association. Evidence taken on October 14, 2016.
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Teen ancestral shrines in the community. All these activities are performed on the eve of the Òkòsí boat regatta. On the actual day of the Òkòsí boat regatta, six traditional boats appear on display at the Alárò shrine at a point on the Lagos lagoon. There are maneuvers and skirmishes in the waters to re-enact some of the battles that have been fought and won by the valiant Òpè warriors. There are also traditional rites, which include flogging to select those who have the physical capabilities to withstand the rigors of war.

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

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

Celebrating Èbìbì Festival

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

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23. The Ojú Alárò Òkè shrine is strategically located in the center of the town, while the Ojú Alárò Èsàlè shrine is located at the edge of the lagoon in the Lágbadè area of Òpè, which incidentally is in the Èko-Òpè area of the town. The Èko-Òpè, as earlier stated, do not celebrate Èbìbì.
cation are offered for the entire community for peace and tranquility to reign in the land. Prayers are also offered for the king so that his reign will bring goodwill and prosperity to the land. Sacrifices of appeasement are also offered to the ancestral spirits, since it is believed that they are required to watch over the land and intercede with the gods on behalf of the people.

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

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

**Post- Òbìbì Activities**

Three days after the Ìyònfòràn and plucking of Wórọ leaves, and the conclusion of the rituals attached to this rite, the Ĩjì-Ñlá perform rituals as well as a cultural display. Òpè happens to be the national headquarters of the Ĩjì-Ñlá association which is a version of the dreaded Awo-Ọpa society. All other members initiated into Ĩjì-Ñlá from other parts of southwestern Nigeria converge in Òpè during the Òbìbì festival to celebrate with the people. Other groups which participate in this public display are the Osugbo fraternity, age grades as well as Òkóòrò and Òpà masquerades. Like the Òṣùgbọ, the Ĩjì-Ñlá is
a secret society, which is restricted to initiated members only and often operates in secrecy. However, during the Ìta-Èbi procession of both groups, the members of the cult are identifiable.

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

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

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

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24. These masquerades appear a day apart, and that of Èbọdè normally appears on a Sunday.
The flogging practice continues all evening until it is time for Kílájolú to return to its grove. Meanwhile, Igóðò traverses the length and breadth of the town at the same time as the Kílájolú, though care is taken that the two do not meet until late evening. Once Igóðò meets Kílájolú, the latter masquerade must submit his mask and costumes to Igóðò. This in fact is a re-enactment of a war that occurred between Èpé people and an Èlajẹ warrior named Àkálajàlú. The Aláùsá family of Èpé were able to conquer Àkálajàlú and cut off his head. The capture of Kílájolú by Igóðò and the removal of Kílájolú’s mask are symbolic of this feat. At the time that this capture occurs, all women must have left the street because Kílájolú must return to the Èkú naked and no woman can see this.

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

**Difference and Unity in the Èbìbì Festival**

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

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

Èbìbì confirms the existence of many different forms of communal well-being: sacrifice to the deities and ancestral masquerades emphasize the importance of divine support, shared outings by the king and Ôṣugbo highlight the
importance of collaboration and power-sharing, the casting out of evil affirms
the importance of morality in the constitution of the community, peaceful
competition highlights the importance of collaboration for achievement. Ebibi
itself celebrates the king’s link to the foundation of the town, while the re-en-
actment of a historical victory celebrates self-reliance and military prowess.

Also, Ebibi presents the diversity of groups within the town not as a disad-

vantage but as a form of joint wealth or social capital. By bringing together
derent deities, the king and his chiefs, the town ‘parliament’ (Oṣugbo), the
age groups (Règbèrègbè), and the most important security group (ji-Nlá),
Ebibi celebrates the contribution of different interest or influence groups to the
making of the community.

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

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

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

25. Tejumola Olaniyan, “Festivals, Ritual, and Drama in Africa,” in F. Abiola Irele and
Simon Gikandi, eds, The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature (Cam-
bridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 35–48.
For instance in the Òṣùgbó aspects of Òbìbì, the Olúwo or any of his designates recites lines in a call and response format with a variety of tonal inflections of the voice, starting from a high pitch, and then moving to a mild pitch and then to a low pitch. This arouses great emotional excitement in the audience. The Olúwo walks around with gesticulation and dramatic movements that suit the sounds produced. In the text, allusion is made to the founders of the community. Homage is paid to these progenitors through veiled allusion and through potent choice and use of words. In praising the ancestors, the Olúwo uses words which enhance the thematic construct of Òbìbì as follows:

Épé Alárò, Ògúnmódéde
Kúkúrú lósàn-án, gbóro gbóro ló’ ru
Épé olúku ábátà
Épé má jẹ gi, má jẹ niyàn
Ọmọ oní wà mo fẹ ẹ san, ôfó
Ohun á hù ña
Ọmọ won ní ita àgàn bú
Ágàn bú rámú rámú

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

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

These groups also use the music and enactments for veneration and propitiation of the gods and the ancestral spirits at appropriate times. A mime of the attributes and mannerism of a specific deity or ancestral spirit is acted out with the appropriate music accompaniment. Such performances are deployed by the experienced oral artistes who have undergone tutelage and have a deep sense of art, history and the demands of the audiences and the community at
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large. They also affirm the role of the creative artists and performers, who conjure and add the different elements of the festival together to create its artistic ambience. The creative capacities of participating groups and individuals evoke in the people a sense of being in one accord with the spiritual realm and in this way contribute to the success of the festival.

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

Making Communities, Drawing Boundaries: The Èbíbì Festival in Ìjèbú and Èpé

Just as the multiplicity of Èbíbì highlights both difference and togetherness within Èpé, the shared celebration of Èbíbì in many Ìjèbú communities creates a shared identity. As pointed out above, all towns that celebrate Èbíbì do so after the completion of Èdèmùnù festival in Ìlesè Ìjèbú. All the communities involved in the Èbíbì in celebrations had the following common characters in their corpus: Jìgbò, Èpà, Òkóòrò, Alégbaga, Règbérgbè, Òṣúgbó Àjòji-Imalè and Wòrì/Òfòràn. Moreover, just as Èpé is considered the centre of the celebration of the Èjì-Nílá and attracts visitors from other towns to this event, so some other towns attract other visitors or performers to their Èbíbì celebrations.

But at the same time, variations in practice suggest that there are two different networks of Èbíbì celebration. In addition to Ìjèbú-Òde, Èbíbì is celebrated in its affiliate towns like Ìlesè, Èjèbú Èmuùn, Èsùrè, Èjèbú-Ife, Èwù-Ìkijà, and Ètèlè, all of which are situated close to and east of Èjèbú-Òde in the upland area of Ògun State. But coastal communities including Èpè, Èjìrin, Èwòpin, Èbíadé, Makun-Omi, Òde-Omi, Èmòbi, and Abigi among others. The tension between unity and difference is also visible in other aspects of the performance. While the song texts were all mainly rendered in the Èjèbú variant of the Èorúbá language, the themes and contents of song texts were mainly situated within the events and history of each community. The dances had a conspicuous difference given that it was observed that the dances witnessed in Èwù Èkijà and Èlesè were heavy and the music and movements appeared to resemble farming and hunting movements. This can be attributed to
the major traditional occupations of the upland Ìjèbú people, which are farming and hunting. On the other hand, in Òpẹ̀ and the other coastal communities where fishing is predominant, there was a degree of fluidity in the dance steps. The dancers were light on the feet and the hand and arm movements imitated the movement of canoes and paddling. The twists and twirls of most of the dances in the Òbìbì festival performances created a mental picture of dexterity at handling a canoe or a paddle.

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

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

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

In conclusion, the complex aesthetic, spiritual and political appeal of the Òbìbì festival is intrinsically linked to the celebration of the community, illustrated both by the assemblage of Òbìbì practices and art forms in Òpẹ̀ and by the different forms of community created by the towns sharing the celebration of different aspects of the festival. Yet at the same time, the implicit exclusion of Eko-Ópẹ̀ from all aspects of Òbìbì in Ìjèbú-Ópẹ̀ confirms that the community is not created by accident, or simply on the basis of shared settlement: not every group can or does become part of the community celebrated by Òbìbì.
While Òbibì celebrates the community as constituted by a multiplicity of diverse styles, histories, and groups, it also affirms that despite its diversity, the community is based on choice and purpose.

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