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1996

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Cloth and the Corpse in Ebira

John Picton.

Abstract. Ebira-speaking people inhabit a region to the south-west of the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers in Nigeria. The social environment is dominated by Islam, with a Christian minority. Nevertheless, in the late 1960s, when I began the research drawn upon in this paper, much of the pre-Islamic/pre-Christian ritual tradition remained intact; and all three religions presuppose a continuity of human existence beyond death. Yet the question of what persisted, and how, beyond the corpse and the grave remained unanswered in local metaphysics; and none of the Ebira words used of 'body' or 'person' were used of the deceased. Rather, the link between living and dead, enacted in rite and performance, was manifested by means of cloth; for the one index of that continuity was a textile woven by local women of hand-spun cotton with the indigo and white stripes, one pattern for the corpse of a man, and another for a deceased woman. This kind of cloth would be draped around the doorway of a house signifying the presence of the deceased, and later it would be taken down and used to wrap the corpse for burial. The lineage of the deceased's mother supplied the cloth, this constituting one of the means whereby relationships between lineages subsisted. The only other use for this kind of cloth, and then only if striped as for a man, was in the clothing of masked performers. It was as if people entered the world of the dead and returned, re-embodied in masquerade, wearing the same kind of cloth; and it was this, more than any other single aspect of social practice, that manifested the continuity between living and dead. Masked performers also enabled access to a healing energy determined by (male) ancestral precedent. Indeed, masquerade was an aesthetic, structuring, therapeutic and cognitive locus of much of Ebira social practice, a locus in which a form of textile was essential in the gathering together of ideas-and-practices wherein the relationship between living and dead was constru(ct)ed.

I

Um'okuku um'obooba - iruvo pit'aci : 'time past, time present - bottom tells the story of cloth': this is one of the best-known and most often quoted proverbs of the Ebira-speaking people of Nigeria. It summarises notions of time and tradition, making use of cloth as both artifact and metaphor in order to provide an understanding of ancestral precedent. The present is an inheritance. Current practice is legitimated by placing its inception in the past. It was established by others, and they have handed it on to us.¹ This is the point of juxtaposing the first two terms of the proverb: *ume* = time + *okuku* = old in the sense of having come into existence in the past; and *ume* + *obooba*, a word that in my experience was not in common use other than in this proverb where the sense is dependent upon its juxtaposition with *okuku*, thereby emphasising the status of modernity. In other words, the intention in placing these two words

¹ In the invocations that accompany any ritual activity, following the invocations of God, Earth, ancestors and so forth, there is characteristically the invocation of the person to whom the inception of the rite is attributed. If this is not known then the invocation is addressed to *onipaapa*, the generic term for the very first person to do whatever it is that is being done. The invocation would typically take the form: 'the very first person [to do this], and it was good for him, and he profited thereby, and he had children as a result of doing it, this is your kola [or ram/palm wine/whatever is the sacrifice determined through prior consultation with a diviner]'.

together is to emphasise the dependence of the present on the past.² The juxtaposition is then explained in the second part of the proverb: *iruvo* = under, base, bottom, reason, buttocks, root (with literal, temporal and metaphorical implications); *pa + ita = pita* = to tell a story; *aci* = cloth. The durable quality of a piece of cloth is determined most effectively by means of that part of the human body that subjects it to the greatest amount of wear, by the bottom that sits on it.³ So too the value of an element of practice ('cloth') will be tested in terms of its basis ('bottom') within a given tradition. '

II

Ebira-speaking people inhabit a region to the south-west of the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers in Nigeria, with a "diaspora" throughout Nigeria at differing social and economic levels. On the one hand, there are the migrant labourers on Yoruba cocoa plantations, and the traders in textiles; while on the other are the participants in the public service institutions of post-colonial Nigeria. In the late 1960s, when I began the research drawn upon in this paper⁴, the local social environment was dominated by Islam, but with a Christian minority. Nevertheless, the pre-Islamic/pre-Christian local ritual tradition remained substantially intact, if in an attenuated form, and masquerade was certainly its dominant public manifestation. The year was punctuated by the festivals of each of the three traditions, but whatever one's affiliation and level of participation therein, it was masquerade that provided the most distinctive vehicle for an Ebira [male] cultural identity within Nigeria; and this was manifest by the manner in which elite Ebira people would return home from other parts of Nigeria at these times, by the way in which surrounding non-Ebira peoples had taken up Ebira forms of masquerade, and in the weekly broadcasts on the Northern Nigerian public radio of recordings of the songs of the most popular performers.

III

Woven textiles provided the other domain of an Ebira identity in Nigeria. Okene was the administrative headquarters of the area with a market every other day. Cloth was on sale from the crack of dawn until about 7am when the sellers of foodstuffs and other commodities arrived. The cloth sellers were mostly the weavers themselves, arriving at the market with a headload of recently-woven cloth, while the buyers were either men from many parts of Nigeria (especially the regions to the north and south-west) or certain rich local women traders who worked all the local markets, Ebira and non-Ebira.

² In this view, modernity derives from antiquity. In reality, of course, this sense of tradition entails a social amnesia wherein innovative practice, or innovative elements within accepted practice, have been incorporated into that tradition such that the memory thereof is erased.

³ This was a material environment that until the present century did not include sleeved garments.

⁴ I was an employee of the Nigerian government department of antiquities from 1961 to 1970. I express my gratitude for the opportunities to live and work in that country. For support of various kinds I wish to thank Professor Ekpo Eyo, the late Alhaji Sanni Omolori, the Ohinoyi of Ebira, Dr Alexis Makozi, now Bishop of Port Harcourt, (but previously of Lokoja), my field assistant, the late Andrew Ogembe, the British Museum, the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University and the British Academy. The research on which this paper is based was carried out at various times from 1965 to 1969 with subsequent visits. At my last, in 1990, I learned that masquerade had been abolished two years previously. I'm particularly grateful to Elisha Renne for sending me press cuttings since then with reports of illicit masked performance.

As a result they could be relied upon to have a wider range of textiles than those habitually woven by Ebira women. They also bought cloth from the weavers in the market as well as selling it to traders from elsewhere; and they would always have a supply of the distinctive shroud cloths that are the subject of this paper.

The region comprising the eastern and northeastern Yoruba-speaking peoples, the various northern Edo groups, and Ebira, was characterised for among other things, the active household production of hand-spun cotton textiles. In the 1960s women continued to spin and weave locally-grown cotton using an upright single-heddle loom. The cotton itself was mostly white, though a natural brown variety was also available, and some women were adept indigo dyers, producing cotton yarn in lighter and darker shades. Making use of these, weavers produced hand-spun cotton cloth in a range of patterns always with a wide variety of stripes in the warp. These cloths were largely intended for household consumption, but with a Nigeria-wide focus upon 'Okene cloth' much of this production found its way to the market. The generic term for these fabrics was *ikitipa* (clearly cognate with the Yoruba *kijipa*), though cloths only in white were known as *uba*. They too were a basic tough domestic fabric although they might also be employed with ritual implications. In particular, a woman afflicted by witchcraft might be told by a diviner to wear white cloth, white being a colour, in this context, associated with hardship. The afflicted woman would thereby be asking the witches to release her. (Without knowing the personal circumstances of each woman it was impossible to tell simply from her wearing white that that was her reason.) Industrial dyes as well as ready-dyed machine-spun cotton, and rayon and other lustrous yarns, were also available; and, of course, by the late 1970s, lurex, the laminated plastic fibre. Machine-spun cotton yarn seems to have been available in the area from the 1930s onwards; and also in the 1930s, a tradition of weaving in silk was established in one particular household of Alhaji Ibrahim, the Atta of Okene.⁵

This paper is concerned especially with a hand-spun cotton textile called *itokueta*, literally 'the cloth [*ita*] that gathers [*ku*] three' [*eta*], ie it is made of three pieces.⁶ The distinguishing features were an indigo-dyed weft, and one or other of two distinctive sets of warp stripes, one for the corpses of men the other for women. I was given no explanation for this, and suspect there is none beyond a simple contextual association.⁷

⁵ Alhaji Ibrahim was established within British colonial rule as the 'Native Authority'. His reign lasted from 1917 until the late 1950s; and although ousted by a rival local oligarchy he was a major cultural innovator instituting the dominance of Islam, the importance of literate education, the building of a water reservoir, and so forth; and he also introduced silk yarn to the women of his household. Possibly under the influence of decorative techniques associated with women in Ilorin (but no longer extant there though it continues to be a flourishing centre of narrow-strip weaving on the horizontal double-heddle loom) the women of Ibrahim's household established supplementary-weft float-weave patterning quite distinct from the warp striping of hand-spun cotton, attracting publicity and establishing 'Okene cloth' as a distinctive, elite fashion textile among women in many parts of Nigeria. With the demise of Ibrahim's authority, these techniques spread throughout Ebira households and encouraged the cloth trade as already described.

⁶ Cloth of three pieces is an odd designation as almost all Ebira cloth was woven in three-piece sets for sale in the market. (Its name could also be said to be 'three-piece cloth for a corpse [*oku*]', but this was always denied.) *Itokueta* were not included in the category of *ikitipa*.

⁷ By the 1980s, as handspun cotton was more difficult to obtain - the usual story: young girls did not want to learn how to spin! - women were now weaving *itokueta* in machine-spun yarn, though still keeping to the distinctive patterns of warp-striping, and, as important, the indigo weft.

A more expensive shroud cloth was known as *itogede*, literally 'banana cloth', and was distinguished by a simple indigo and white pattern of warp stripes together with bast fibres, also in the warp, giving the cloth a slightly shiny texture.

By the late 1960s most of the textiles woven by Ebira women used machine-spun yarns. This was hardly surprising given that it was this that had focussed attention on Okene and Ebira in the first place. In any case, the regular texture of machine-spun yarn made it easier and quicker to weave. Moreover, the greater part of the output of Ebira women was directed to the market place. These fabrics did not have any special name, however, other than the names of individual designs and the two generic terms for cloth, *aci* and *ita*.⁸ Other kinds of textile were available to Ebira people, as result of either trade or travel. These included the widesleeved embroidered gowns of Nupe, Hausa or Yoruba origin, and factory-printed textiles. Once upon a time, moreover, it had been the practice to purchase a particular form of funerary cloth from the Abinu (or Bunu) a northeastern Yoruba-speaking people near Kabba to the north of Ebira. Known as *ubanito* in Ebira, and *baleton* in the Kabba area, this fabric was woven of hand-spun cotton with geometric supplementary-weft patterns in red (said to be unravelled hospital blankets) and other colours. It was displayed on the roofs of houses where the corpse of an elite man was awaiting burial; and also used in masked costume. By the 1960s Ebira people no longer purchased them, but there were plenty in circulation.

IV

Life and death. In Ebira tradition there were two domains of human existence: *ehe*, life, the world of living people; and *eku*, the world of the dead. Someone passed from the one to the other at death leaving behind a corpse. All the religions of Ebira people presupposed a continuity of human existence beyond death; but the *eku* of local tradition is not like the vision of God that constitutes the Christian heaven, or the paradise of Islam. It was evident that Muslims and Christians were using the term (sometimes qualified as *eku-oyiza*, the good *eku*) with considerable disadvantage, in my view, to an understanding of eschatological distinctiveness. Within local tradition *eku* was a place of shadow and uncertainty, very far from the sky that was a visible manifestation of God; yet there were means of coming back from it to revisit and reinhabit *ehe*, life, the world of living people.

Revisiting the world took the form of masquerade performance. The generic term for masquerade was *eku*, ie the same word as 'world of the dead'. The obvious implication is that masked performance was in some sense a manifestation of that other domain to which we pass at death. People often used the term *idaneku* to refer to the location rather than the performance; and this is made up of *idi*, place + *ani*, inhabitant of, + *eku*. Two masked types will figure in this discussion: the deceased elder and the usually unnamed servants of the world of the dead.⁹ Masked performers were both entertainers and mediators of a healing energy that could be tapped through consultation. Indeed, the whole apparatus of divination, sacrifice and medicine was regarded as a mediation of

⁸ I do not think that *aci* and *ita* had different particular semantic fields; and I had thought that *ita*, cloth, and *ita*, story, (two low tones in each case as with the possibly cognate Yoruba word *itan*) were homophones (until I began to think about that proverb).

⁹ The *dramatis personae* of masquerade was more complex than merely elders and servants, but that is enough explanation for now.

energy in ways established and sanctioned by ancestral precedent; but although revisitation and mediation were overlapping, they were clearly not the same.

I use the term 'reinhabiting' to explain phenomena that were very different from masquerade in the sense that one was not now talking of a presence hidden by cloth, but the way in which a living person was in some overt manner the re-embodiment of someone who had died. Thus, a deceased person would come 'on the head' of a recently-born person; and the deceased in some sense live again. The titled man of a lineage embodied and represented the founding ancestor. When he died the title was said to enter the forest, to re-emerge only when a new man was installed. This distinction between revisiting and reinhabiting will be considered a little further later in this paper.

In the meantime, while these aspects of ritual, performance and status presupposed a continuity between the two domains of human existence, an important question remained: if at death someone departs leaving behind a corpse, and some kind of continuity is taken for granted, what was it that constituted and manifested that bond of the continuity? what persisted? The Ebira language, however, provided no answer: there was a continuity and an identity, the proof was in the practices and assumptions as summarised, and that was (almost) that. The semantic fields of the Ebira words we translate as body, self, person, breath and life do not include the world of the dead. For them the one term *an'eku*, 'inhabitants of *eku*' sufficed. When speaking English, people might use the phrase 'dead people', and of course one can translate this literally into Ebira; but such was not the habitual usage of Ebira speakers. The question of what persisted beyond the corpse and the grave remained unanswered in local metaphysics.

V

What cannot be put into words can, nevertheless (sometimes), be suggested visually; and in Ebira the link between living and dead, presupposed and enacted in status, rite and performance, was made plain using cloth. For in the context of revisiting, the one index of that continuity was *itokueta*, the textile woven by local women of hand-spun cotton for use as a shroud. As already noted it had an indigo weft, and two standard sequences of warp stripes proceeding across all three pieces, in light and dark indigo, and white, one sequence for use with the corpse of a man, the other for that of a woman. The only variation in that I noted was that sometimes in place of the lighter indigo in the male sequence a commercial red or purple dye (purchased in the market) would be used.

It was the responsibility of the family of the deceased's mother to supply the *itokueta* to wrap the bodies of the deceased ready for burial; although if the person had been a Muslim white cloth ought properly to be used.¹⁰ For Christians, a wooden coffin might be used in place of the white cloth, though to some extent that would also depend on the economic and social standing of the family. If the death was premature, which in Ebira tradition would mean that the deceased had not achieved the status of grandparent, or if the deceased was otherwise a man or woman of no particular status, a grave would be

¹⁰ Sometimes in that case, *itokueta* would be wrapped around the body first and then covered with white cloth. If the family of the deceased was predominantly Muslim the corpse would probably be so treated even though the deceased him/herself had not been a Muslim.

quickly dug, behind the house of the deceased elsewhere and the body buried the same day as the death itself.¹¹

If, however, the deceased, whether man or woman, had achieved what was regarded in Ebira tradition as a good death, ie as a grandparent and dieing in birth order (it was socially difficult for a senior to mourn a junior, for example) the process of burial would be rather more elaborate. The body would be on view in the house preferably overnight laid out on a platform in the main passageway, or in a room, and the walls and doorways hung with *itokueta*. Anyone passing by would see immediately that someone of importance within that community was awaiting burial, and they would see whether it was a man or a woman. The family might also have invested in some *itogede*, indigo and white handspun cotton cloth and with undyed bast fibres. It was more costly, and thus prestigious, but not gender-specific in its patterning. The body itself would lie on *itokueta*, covered or dressed in the deceased's clothing, leaving the face and arms visible. Sometimes a cloth of machine-spun yarn, with float-weave patterns, would be placed over the clothing, but still leaving at least the face visible.

Within the house women relatives would sing all night long. Outside there would be musicians playing for people to dance, and if the deceased were a man masked figures might appear. Women and masquerades might even dance together. During the day that followed people would rest, though there might be some musical and masking activity, until late afternoon when people would reassemble for the burial procession. The body would be wrapped in the deceased's clothes, then in the *itokueta* and *itogede* that had been draped around the walls and doorways. By the 1960s it was usual then to wrap the corpse in a more brightly coloured cloth, sometimes factory-printed, sometimes locally-woven of imported yarns. In the past it would have been expected that a senior man should be wrapped in the patterned red *ubanito* from the Kabba area, which had perhaps been displayed on the roof. Once wrapped, the corpse would be tied with strips of white cloth to a wooden door (ie the kind of broad plank placed unhinged across doorways to prevent animals entering). It would be paraded around the village (or in Okene to the graveyard) carried on a man's head and accompanied by the women and young men of the household and lineage, with drummers and, if the deceased were male, by masked performers.¹²

If the deceased and/or his/her household were Muslim, as already noted, little of this would be done as the body, wrapped in white cloth would have been buried as quickly as possible. If they were Christian, the adaptations and/or denials of these traditions were much less predictable. Masked performers might or might not appear, or perhaps only after the priest or minister had done his part and gone; and *itokueta* might or might not be used. The use of a coffin had become more commonplace, however, although the body was not placed in the coffin until the point of burial; and the procession with the corpse might well include a man carrying the empty coffin on his head following the man carrying the wrapped corpse. The grave for someone of importance would be dug during the morning of the burial. In the villages outside Okene, this would be in a

¹¹ At Okene, the deceased were buried in the graveyard just outside the town. If the deceased was Muslim same-day burial was the requirement irrespective of status; and the tradition was in the process of other transformations during the 1960s and since, but the details go beyond the requirements of this paper.

¹² The masked performers at burials were always un-named servants in the world of the dead. Mask forms re-embodying a deceased elder would appear at post-burial commemorations.

prominent part of the house such as the front veranda, or the main passage, or its principal public room. What is most important to remember at this stage is that the corpse would enter the ground wearing, among other things, the appropriate form of *itokueta*. Whether visible or not under various layers, most people would have seen the corpse and its cloth during the night wake, and would know that *itokueta* was there, or at least would suppose it to be there.

VI

Dressing for death: *Itokueta* was the clothing within which a person's *oku*, corpse, was consigned to the earth at his or her departure to *eku*. The only other use for it, and then only if striped as for a man, was in the clothing of masked performers. Ebira people had ¹³ several differing categories of these, each with its particular formal characteristics, contexts of appearance, and relationships to and within *eku* (world of the dead/masked performer). Masked figures of the generic, servant type were known in Ebira as *ekuecici*, literally 'masquerades of rubbish'. They wore tunics and trousers typically of *itokueta*, as the basis of an otherwise often highly individualised costuming, together with a wooden or fabric mask. Current practice throughout the period of my research, however, was that this was one among many options, but that it was regarded as the basis of the tradition. Indeed, it had seemed a tradition so secure that people were free to be creative within it in terms of the textures and colours of the fabrics and the nature of the mask actually employed. As a result, whether or not *itokueta* was used in any specific example, each masquerade costume was a referral to its use as the basis of the tradition.

However, in answer to the question 'where is the world of the dead?' (*eku*, *idaneku*) one was likely to be told 'all we know is that the corpse is buried in the earth'. Burial thus provided an image but not the literal truth of the matter. Indeed, one theory of masquerade, for the benefit of women and small children, is that they come out of the ground to inhabit the costumes we have got ready for them. Nevertheless, there was a rite, performed in relative secrecy, that was intended to re-establish once a year the link between *eku*, world of the dead, as if it were within the earth, and *eku*, masked performance.¹⁴ The word *eku* clearly and literally determined the identity of masquerade with that other world. Yet it was the use of *itokueta* that determined the identity of what had once been a person living in this world and the manifestation of that other domain of existence in masked performance. Dressing in *itokueta* was the manner in which one entered *eku* and revisited this world as *eku*. It was this particular form of textile whether directly as artifact, or indirectly as an idea about an artifact subsisting within an innovative tradition of practice, that manifested the continuity between living and dead, between *ehe* and *eku*.

¹³ As previously noted, masquerade was proscribed some eight years ago for reasons of excessive violence.

¹⁴ This rite took place at the *ireba*, a sacred place marked by a small heap of stones, and located just outside the community. This, in turn, marked a point of contact between the two domains of existence. The elders responsible for masking affairs would uncover whatever was hidden within the stones and listen; for it was only when they heard the voice of *eku* within the earth 'shout' that *eku* on the earth could 'shout'. This rite in fact opened the season and cycle of masked performances. (There is no doubt that these apparently differing senses of the term *eku* are not unrelated homophones.)

Apart from *ekuecici*, the ‘masquerades of rubbish’, there was the *ekuoba*, the *eku* ‘that stretches up’; and these two categories stood in relation to each other as servant to master, respectively. An *ekuoba* took the form of an animated shroud in that it consisted of a rather lengthy (something approaching three yards/metres) tube of cloth made up of *ubanito*, the red-patterned Abinu cloth from the Kabba area to the immediate north of Ebira, with a single panel of either *itokueta* or some other fabric to complete the tube. In preparation for its appearance, the tube would be pinned together at the top, this orientation determined by a stitching into the costume at one end of relics cut from the body of the deceased before burial. *Ubanito* is a very heavy cloth with a multiple cotton weft, and predominantly faced in red woollen (?unravelling blanket) supplementary weft floats, and the performer had to see by peering through the weave of the single panel of the other fabric. In contrast to the ‘masks of rubbish’ there was neither a face, nor arms and legs, but, and also in contrast to *ekuecici*, each *ekuoba* provided for the supposed re-embodiment of a particular named senior male elder in virtue of his relics sewn into the costume.¹⁵

VII

On colour and context. *Itokueta* were noticeably different from other Ebira textiles; and not just because they were indigo and white. In regard to their particular formal properties, as far as I could tell, **that** they were different was what mattered. First, they were not like everyday cloths (the indigo weft), and, second, gender was clearly marked out (the two sequences of warp stripes). There was a habitual contextual association which, in terms of form, was complete in itself without further referral to some hidden “symbolic” or metaphoric code.

As to some further implications of colour, the discussion runs in a different direction, however. Firstly, red and white were contrasted in the proverb *oz’o vu d’o vi*, ‘a person is white before s/he is red’. The red/white contrast constitutes ideas of the relationship between success [red] and suffering [white], the latter term including both the affliction hopefully capable of healing, and the hard work needed in order to succeed. Secondly, black, a term that includes the colour of indigo dye, is a colour with varied associations: the prestige of owning an indigo-dyed gown; the disgusting sight of soot on the face of the smith in his smithy; the dangers of the night as a time of metaphysical activity, including masquerade and also witchcraft. ‘Night’ was indeed sometimes used as a euphemism for witchcraft, and sometimes as a metaphor of death; and night is black.

The distinctive properties of *ubanito*, as the fabric once used for high prestige burials and ancestral re-embodiments, seem to fit in well here. Red, the colour of the fabric, marked the success in life of the deceased whose departure from life was celebrated in that way. On the other hand, the red of *ubanito* was a product of the colonial engagement (the hospital blankets), and such limited evidence as we have (bearing in mind that ancestral costumes were buried with a son of the deceased whose re-embodiment it had allowed) suggests that the use of *ubanito* was very probably a novel

¹⁵ By the time I began my research in the late 1960s, the invention of *ekuoba* had long since ceased (for reasons I am still not altogether clear about) but there were still many extant examples that appeared at the appropriate time in the annual cycle of masked events; and it will be evident that the relationship between living and dead, manifested by means of *itokueta*, would for the most prestigious of deceased men have also been manifested in the use of *ubanito*..

development of the early 20th century. Its qualities were apt; but so too was the the more recent use of any brightly coloured cloth to catch the eye of a bystander.

In contrast to the black and white of *itokueta*, titled men often wore, among other things, bunches of feathers in their [normally] red caps. These included red and white feathers as well as the breeding plumes of the Standard-winged Nightjar.¹⁶ Titled men were not like other people. At their rites of their installation they were given charge of magical things prepared by the ancestor to represent and constitute the title. Title-taking was indeed a rite parallel to the post-burial celebrations of a deceased elder. The death of a titled man was not marked by the usual rites, for, as a titled man, he had not died: 'the title/chief ¹⁷ had entered the forest'. The titled man through his installation was the living presence of its founding ancestor. The ancestor responsible for founding the title reinhabited the world in virtue of the title he had established.

Then, in the other case of reinhabiting referred to earlier, someone would wear red and white feathers in their cap or hair if the deceased elder who had 'come on his head' was to appear re-embodied, though hidden, in masquerade. This 'coming on the head' was a relationship established in the infant child through the consultation with a diviner. It was not a transmigration of souls (the soul is a notoriously difficult concept to deal with cross-culturally) nor was it a reincarnation; yet it was a relationship considered to enable a deceased person to live again in the world. Both of these examples of the use of red and white feathers suggest a visual marking more subtle than a simple red/white/black contrast: rather a contrast between revisiting and reinhabiting, black and white contrasted with red and white, each with its differing implications for the life and health of the household, the lineage and the wider community.

VIII

Returning to the *itokueta*, there were also its more immediate and overt social dimensions. The expectation that the lineage of the deceased's mother supplied the cloth constituted one of the means whereby relationships between lineages subsisted. Then, the display of *itokueta* when a corpse was awaiting burial placed the household in a very particular relationship to the rest of the community. In advertising the fact of a death, the cloth also marked out the transition within the composition and perhaps the status of the household, and it invited the wider community to participate in the grief of the household at least by visiting to greet the close relatives of the deceased.

The two forms or categories of masquerade brought into the discussion a little earlier each came into existence in the post-burial commemorations of senior deceased men, the elder now *in'eku* [in the world of the dead] revisiting his wives and children with his servant, the latter an entirely generic representation however.¹⁸ Thereafter each had its time of appearance, the elder at the inception of the masking cycle, the servants especially at the final event of the cycle; and each had very different modes of behaviour. Each, however, quite apart from other aspects of performance, enabled access to a

¹⁶ The standard-winged nightjar and its breeding plumes have markedly liminal implications.

¹⁷ Another example in which one Ebira word covers concepts that are separated in English.

¹⁸ It will be clear from my descriptions that the generic shroud-like costume re-embodied a specific person, whereas the servants had a merely generic identity in the world of the dead although with often highly individualised costuming.

healing energy determined by (male) ancestral precedent and located as its source in the world of the dead. Each masked performer could act, in other words, as an oracle speaking with ancestral authority in the diagnosis and healing of affliction; and this aspect of masquerade was at least as significant in the lives of people living within these traditions as the dramatic, temporal, and eschatological aspects of performance.

Itokueta was the basis for dressing a corpse **and** a masked performer. More than any other kind of artifact or, indeed, any other element of Ebira social practice, *itokueta* provided and constituted the marking out and summation of this complex of ideas-and-practices. *Ekú*, as word, concept, category and practice, was a key institutional locus in the constitution of Ebira tradition. The actions, implications and presuppositions of masquerade could be listed as aesthetic, dramatic, structuring, social, ritual, therapeutic, cognitive, epistemological, etc. Yet here was a locus in which a form of textile was essential in that gathering together of ideas-and-practices wherein relationships between people and between living and dead were constru(ct)ed.

* * *

For illustrations of Ebira and related textiles and masked performances described see:

Picton J & J Mack, 1989 [2nd ed], *African Textiles*, British Museum, London,
pp 14, 16, 20, 30, 45, 68 - 79

For further accounts of Ebira masquerade and material culture see the following papers by John Picton:

- 1988, Some Ebira reflexions on the energies of women,
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