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THE MEANING OF YORUBA *ASO OLONA* IS FAR FROM WATER TIGHT

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While researching the ritual meaning of cloth among the Eastern Ijo of the Niger Delta, I examined the contents of a number of family owned trunks in which were stored old and much valued cloths traded from elsewhere in Africa, Europe, and India. One type of cloth which I frequently found in these collections was this one (See Fig. 1) made up of three, or sometimes four, woven strips that are sewn along the salvage and decorated with supplemental weft-float design. The Eastern Ijo regard this cloth as a valuable heirloom for its trade value and for the fact that its designs evoke spiritual powers associated with the sea. The Eastern Ijo refer to this particular cloth as *ikaki* or tortoise, a water spirit (*owu*) known in Ijo lore for his combination of trickery and wisdom. Not surprising, *ikaki* cloth is standard attire for kings in certain Eastern Ijo communities.

This textile, like all Ijo cloths, is not indigenous to the Ijo area. Rather, it comes from the Ijebu area of Yorubaland, a region separated from the Eastern Ijo by more than 100 miles of interconnecting rivers and streams (See Fig. 2). The history of its trade to the Eastern Ijo may very well stem from its ritual meaning to the Ijebu Yoruba who are the initial producers of it and in whose culture, the cloth is deeply rooted. This paper will examine the ritual use of this cloth among the Ijebu Yoruba in an effort to determine why it would have been traded outward as it was.

The Yoruba proverb “Eniyan l’aso mi” helps us to explain what cloth means to the Ijebu and other Yoruba peoples. Translated as “People are my cloth”, the proverb explicitly equates cloth to the warmth, closeness, and concerns of things that are human. So it is with this weaving from the Ijebu Yoruba area of Nigeria. The Ijebu refer to it generically as *aso olona* meaning “cloth with patterns, a name derived from its characteristically rich array of weft-float designs. Bearing images of water spirits and other power-laden symbols, the cloth serves as emblems of chieftaincy, priesthood and membership in the ever-powerful Oshugbo society. Thus, it lies at the very core of Ijebu power and leadership as it eventually came to be, albeit on a lesser scale, among the Eastern Ijo.¹

The delta environment in which the Ijebu Yoruba live is key to our understanding of the meaning of this cloth if not also its eventual spread outward. For the Ijebu Yoruba in particular, the riverine delta is an important source of their spiritual powers. In ceremony, it is not uncommon to see the Ijebu navigating boats in which masked dancers representing water spirits are being carried to shore. The delta is also the eventual avenue

¹ For more detailed information on *aso olona*, see Aronson, 1992.

through which Ijebu cloth was traded elsewhere. In his study of Ijebu masquerades, Henry Drewal writes:

Ijebuland occupied the coastal plain between the Yoruba kingdoms of the interior and the lagoons, creeks, and rivers along the coast. Prior to the arrival of Europeans more than 500 years ago, these coastal waterways served as highways for the exchange of goods, ideas, and arts. With their strategic position, bountiful supply of fish, and trade with other Africans and later with Europeans, the Ijebu prospered (Drewal, 32, 1986)

One indicator of their prosperity is the power and extent of their kingdom. The Ijebu kingdom was said to have been founded in the late fourteenth century when, according to Ijebu myth, Obanta son of the God Oduduwa, was sent from Ile-Ife to reign as king of the Ijebu nation. Today the Ijebu are best described as a federation of states combining a divine king, known as the Awujale, with a more decentralized form of government. The Awujale, based in the central town of Ijebu-Ode, rules over a series of lesser crowned rulers located in a number of outlying towns such as Ijebu-Ife where I did my work. These lesser crowned rulers are expected to honor and serve the Awujale at the same time that they exercise some degree of autonomous rule over chiefs and others below them. In other words, similar to the Yoruba elsewhere, the Ijebu are essentially hierarchical in nature. A separate but not unrelated system of rule is known as Oshugbo (or Ogboni in other Yoruba areas) which functions, among other things, as a check and balance system on Ijebu royalty. Essentially a judiciary society, Oshugbo is made up of male and female elders who oversee court cases at various levels, decide the punishment of criminals who have been condemned to death, and tend to all affairs concerning the king from the time he is selected and installed to his burial. In contrast to Ijebu royalty, Oshugbo is more egalitarian but with the authority to oversee the power of the King and his lesser chiefs.

This paper will show that *aso olona*, through its symbolism and ritual use, serves to identify and mediate between these three ruling sectors of Ijebu society, the crowned rulers, the chiefs below them, and members of Oshugbo. Its ritual use may also suggest the relative history of these ruling bodies.

But, first, a detailed description of *aso olona* is in order. The category of cloth in question is woven by Ijebu women on an upright loom with a continuous warp (See Fig. 3). The loom is typical of the type women use throughout much of Nigeria. The upper cross beam is adjustable to allow the weaver to alter the length of the cloth. The width, however, never exceeds twenty inches; anything wider requires that more than one panel of cloth be sewn together along the selvage.

Using this technology, Ijebu women weave *aso olona* in two basic sizes. The larger one, intended as a wrapper, requires four individual panels sewn together along the selvage to create a cloth measuring approximately 1.8 by 2.5 meters (See Fig. 4). Referred to as *aso iborun-nla*, meaning “big covering cloth” it is worn toga style with one

corner flung over the left shoulder. The Ijebu name for the smaller cloth is *itagbe*. It is constructed of only one panel of cloth approximately 1.2 meters in length (See Fig. 5). Depending on its use, the *itagbe* is worn either over the left shoulder, over the right, or on the head. This man wears it on his right shoulder because he is a chief rather than a member of Oshugbo, a point to which I will return later in this paper.

Whatever its dimension, *aso olona* is known for its rich array of weft-float patterns and shag textures, all created through the insertion of supplemental threads into design sheds as the weaver works. Much of the meaning of this cloth is conveyed through its surface treatment. An Ijebu priest interviewed by Henry Drewal said that the presence of weft-float patterns on the cloth symbolizes “long lives well lived” (Drewal, 1992), in sharp contrast to the plain white cloths the Ijebu Yoruba are said to wear when they first come into the world. Thus the patterns and colors represent the richness and diversity of an individual’s experience in life, including acquired knowledge of the spirit realm.

Most of the specific designs woven into *aso olona* are associated with leadership or the spiritual powers by which it is exercised (See Fig. 6). Several represent water spirits -- the crocodile (*ooni*), frog (*opolo*), fishhead (*agbarieja*), and snake (*ejo*) -- all of them important components of the Ijebu cosmology. Furthermore, each is represented from a bird’s eye perspective as though humans, or the divine, are viewing them from above as they typically float in or near water.

We can see this with the image of a crocodile (*ooni*), the backside of which is shown as a series concentric diamonds with four out-stretched legs and two heads, one at each end. Of all the designs on *aso olona*, the crocodile motif appears most frequently in accordance with its all-encompassing role as guardian of the spirits. Crocodiles typically float on the surface of the water as though to be hovering in a liminal space between the living world above and the spiritual one below. Given its all-encompassing nature, the crocodile image, whether represented through cloth or sculpture, is frequently placed in shrines for protection. Its omnipresent role might also explain why in woven form the crocodile is shown bearing two heads, one at each end, as if to suggest its all-seeing powers.

The fishhead or (*agbarieja*) is another common water-spirit motif appearing on *aso olona* (See Fig. 5 & 7). This image is best read as an abstract rendering of two interlocking mudfish. This curious sea creature, known for its flat head and multitude of whisker-like projections, may very well symbolize Olokun, goddess of the sea, on whose power royalty and Oshugbo greatly depend. In woven form, it is represented as a head with projections emanating out and downward. This image is also seen in a variety of Ijebu sculptural forms such as brass armlets, carved doors, and, as we see here, royal drums (*gbedu*) played to honor kings, lesser crowned rulers, and chiefs (See Fig. 8).

On the theme of projections, a curious design feature of some *aso olona* is the shag motif, referred to by the Ijebu as *shaki* (See Fig. 9). The weaver creates it by weaving supplemental threads through a small grouping of warp threads with their ends left

hanging in front. Some of you may know the technique as *rya* knotting. Not unlike other patterns on *aso olona*, the shag is associated with power, prestige, and things that are good. The word *shaki* means tripe, or the inner lining of the cow's stomach. Those who are familiar with tripe know that, like the effect of the woven design it imitates, tripe has a series of projectiles extending from its surface, a quality that makes it less than desirable for many of us. For the Yoruba, however, tripe is regarded as one of the tastiest and most desired foods. It also has a deeper meaning in Oshugbo cosmology. Robert Thompson argues that within Oshugbo, *shaki* serves as a metaphor for one's inner vulnerability and transparency to what he calls the "minions of the earth" from whose gaze nothing can be concealed (Thompson, 1971: ch. 6/2).

It is not only the patterns or texture from which *aso olona* derives its meaning. Equally important is its ritual use. Worn by lesser crowned rulers and chiefs as well as members of Oshugbo, the small shoulder cloth functions as a highly personalized symbol of one's status or identity. In this capacity, it is not uncommon for individuals to present their *itagbe* to their deities as an expression of their gratitude. The backs of Ijebu shrines are frequently adorned with *itagbe* that people have presented to their gods as a kind of visual equivalent of prayer (See Fig. 10). I myself arrived at this conclusion by observing the recent Ijebu practice of weaving actual words (in Yoruba or English) on the cloth together with more traditional ideographic symbols. The words woven on one *itagbe* read *Jebemi Oluwa* meaning "God, answer my prayer".

Such cloth continues to mark its owner's status after death. Chiefs and other high-ranking individuals must be buried with their cloth to affirm their status within the spirit realm. Not surprising, the cloth may appear as an encasement for a deceased elder in *Egungun*, the Yoruba masquerade performance that brings the dead back to the living (See Fig. 11). As evidenced by the cloth he wears, this *Egungun* performer represents that of a deceased Oshugbo elder.

Note that the cloth he wears is replete with surface patterns, colors, and textures. The explosive visual display so typical of Oshugbo attire contrasts with the relative simplicity of chieftaincy garb (which I will discuss momentarily). It also stands in stark opposition to the garments of Oshugbo initiation. The Ijebu say that plain white cloth is what the Yoruba are believed to wear when coming into this world and when being initiated into secret societies such as Oshugbo. They also wear white when engaging in rituals within the secret chamber or "house" (*Iledi*) in which Oshugbo rituals are carried out. It is outside of this sacred domain – in the more public space – that the richly decorated dress (particularly the large wrapper) is displayed for public consumption and for the purposes of identity. This photograph of a photograph of an Oshugbo member shows him adorned with all of the visual opulence befitting an Oshugbo member (See Fig. 12). Note that he wears the *iborun-nla* on his body, an *itagbe* on his left shoulder and yet another *itagbe* on his head, that latter being a reliable indicator of Oshugbo membership. When important decisions are made at Oshugbo meetings, members drape the cloth over their heads so that the fringed ends rest on the chest. In public they wear the cloth turban-style, with the fringe falling toward the face. It creates an effect of fullness that alludes to

spirituality, just as, according to Henry Drewal, the bulging eyes and forehead of the figures on Oshugbo staffs “evoke the moment of possession when... the head swells (*ori wu*) and divinity dwells within the devotee”. In Yoruba art in general, projections from the head, such as we see with the fish head symbol discussed earlier, give visual form to spiritual power.

The cloth fringe, and in particular the way it is finished, also embodies the power of the office it represents. Often the *itagbe* fringe is divided into seven sections, each of them wrapped in an intricate way to create seven elaborate tassels (See Fig. 13). Or, the weaver may create six vertical slits at each end of the cloth to create seven woven sections (See Fig. 14). The number seven alluded to in each case suggests the delicate balance of power between Oshugbo and the ruling royalty. I was told by the Ajalorun, or crowned ruler, of Ijebu-Ife that six of the seven tassels refer to the six ruling figures (Iwarefa) of Oshugbo, and the seventh to the divine king (Awujale) over whom they officiate in certain matters.

This example illustrates that *aso olona* in its symbolism reflects the balance between Oshugbo and the divine king. Likewise, it illuminates the king's relationship to his lesser crowned rulers and chiefs during whose installment, the king ceremonially presents them with an *itagbe* as their sign of office. Thus, the *itagbe* serves as a symbol of their designated power at the same time that it reminds them of their subservience to the king. Chieftaincy attire is considerably less ostentatious than that of Oshugbo members. Chief Adesina Adeyemi of Ijebu-Ife, both a high-ranking chief (Orangun) and head (Apena) of Oshugbo, demonstrated this by modeling the modes of dress required for each of his roles. As the Apena of Oshugbo, he wore an *itagbe* on his left shoulder, another on his head and an *aso Iborun-nla* around his body, each richly embellished with the frog motif and shag in brilliant colors (See Fig. 15). As chief, he just wears just the *itagbe* component of *aso olona* (See Fig. 16).

Other differences are also noted. In principle, although not demonstrated by this photograph, those belonging to Oshugbo carry their *itagbe* on the left shoulder to distinguish themselves from chiefs who carry it on the right. The Ijebu associate the left side of the body with Oshugbo, as numerous practices substantiate. When society members assume the ritual gesture of clenched fists, it is always the left that rests on top of the right. They also shake with the left hand and dance in the direction of the left.

Some of the differences I have noted may suggest the history of *aso olona* and its related systems of rule. Morton-Williams (1960) and others assert that Oshugbo predates divine kingship and related chieftaincy. Marilyn Houlberg argues that the *itagbe* in its miniature size, may be a metaphor for the large *iborun-nla* implying among other things that the latter is historically older (Houlberg, 1992). Since chiefs only wear the *itagbe* and not the larger wrapper, might we conclude that chiefs appropriated Oshugbo's title cloths albeit in miniature form.

The question of the history and appropriation of *aso olona* becomes all the more complex when one realizes the extent to which it spread to groups living beyond the Ijebu Yoruba area. As early as the late eighteenth century, *aso olona* was being transported by canoe to the hands of the Eastern Ijo who then acculturated it and assigned meaning specific to their own beliefs (See Fig. 1). Identified as *ikaki* or tortoise, regardless of the configuration of its designs, it became and remains the official attire for political leaders and for spirits when manifested in masquerade. A late nineteenth century photograph of King Jaja of the Opobo shows him wearing *ikaki* cloth as his official royal attire (See Fig. 17). It is also shown being worn by an *Owu* masquerade, possibly that of a water-buffalo, illustrated in Talbot's 1926 ethnography of the Niger Delta (Talbot, 1969).

One has to question why a cloth so spiritually endowed and so deeply rooted in Ijebu's political history would have made its way to the Eastern Ijo some 100 miles to their east. Trade may not be the only answer. Igor Kopytoff, in his discussion of commoditization, argues that we must address the "cultural biography" of goods in order to understand their place in economic exchange (Kopytoff, 1986). Following this line of argument, it is reasonable to assume that the Ijebu brought *aso olona* into the delta for their own use and for reasons linked to its associations with power and authority. Could it be that they presented it to Ijo chiefs as gestures of good will or as mediums of exchange? We may never know the answer to this question. What we do learn from this is that the ritual meaning of cloth is forever in flux as it moves both within a culture and beyond it.

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Fig.1 - *Ikaki* (tortoise) cloth traded from the Ijebu Yoruba area and now in a Kalabari Ijo collection.

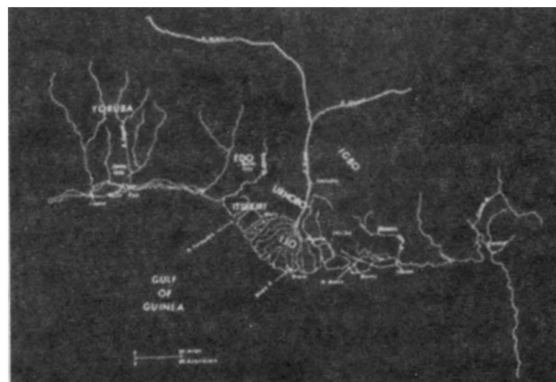


Fig.2 - Map of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.



Fig.3 - The upright frame loom Ijebu Yoruba women typically use to weave *aso olona*.



Fig.4 - *Aso-iborun-nla* (big covering cloth) with its typical construction of four weft-float decorated panels sewn together along the selvage.



Fig.8 - *Gbedu* drum bearing the typical Ijebu motif of a figure with projections emanating from their head, much like the fish-head motif. University Museum, U. of Penn.

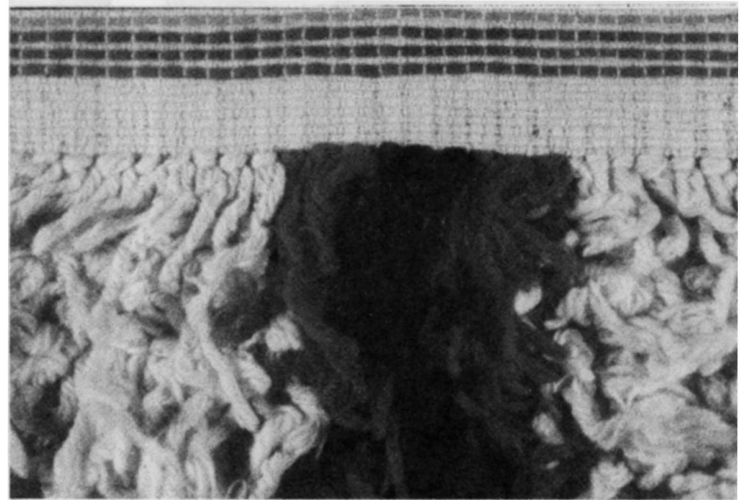


Fig.9 - Detail of the shag motif the Ijebu refer to as *shaki* (tripe).



Fig.10 - *Itagbe* are hanging at the back of this *Oduduwa* shrine in the town of Ijebu-Ife. Photo compliments of Marilyn Houlberg.



Fig.11 - Egungun masquerade of an *Oshugbo* member who has returned from the dead. Photo compliments of Marilyn Houlberg.



Fig.12 - Photograph of a photograph of an Ijebu man in his official Oshugbo attire. Photo compliments of Marilyn Houlberg.

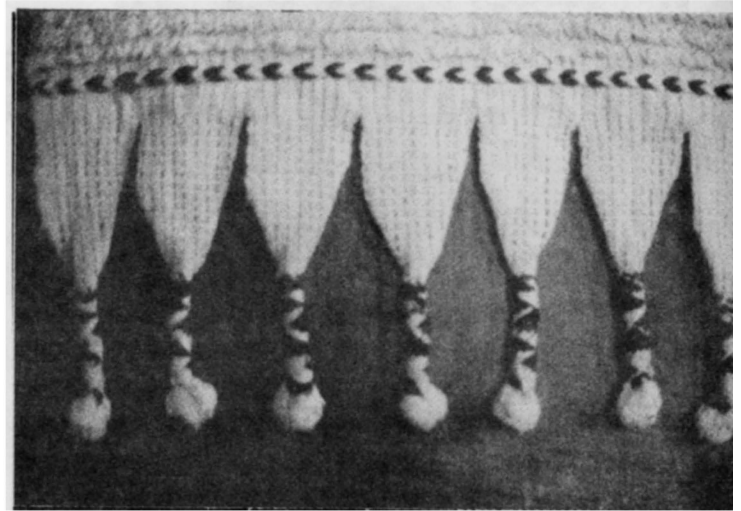


Fig.13 - Detail of seven-tasseled fringe on an *Itagbe*.

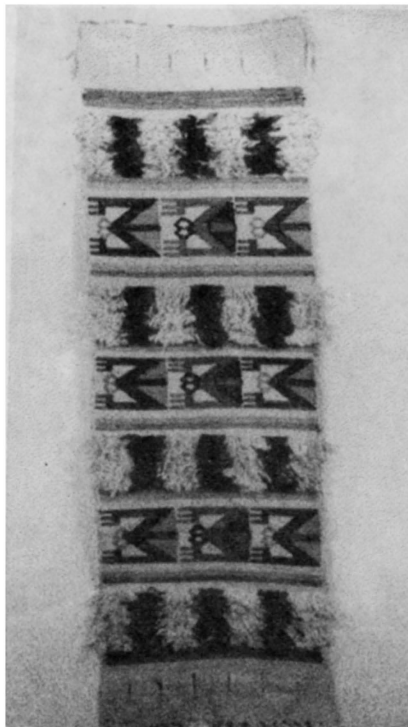


Fig.14 - *Itagbe* with six open slits to create the required seven sections.



Fig.15 - Man from Ijebu-Ife wearing his official attire as an Oshugbo member.

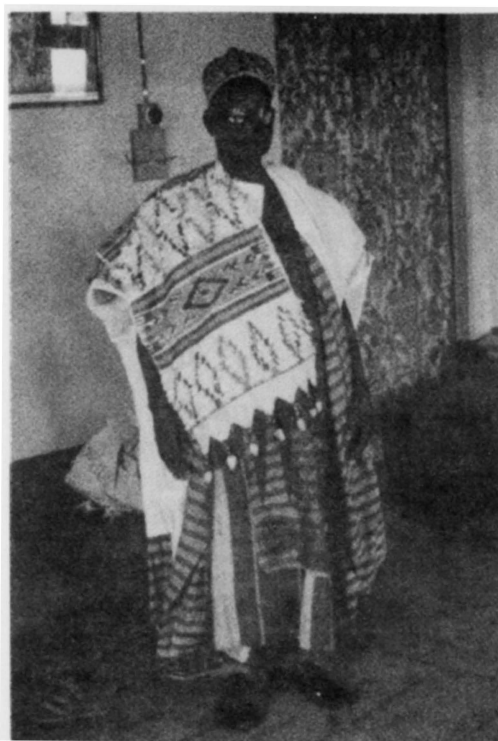


Fig.5 - A chief from Ijebu-Ife wearing an *itagbe* on his right shoulder.

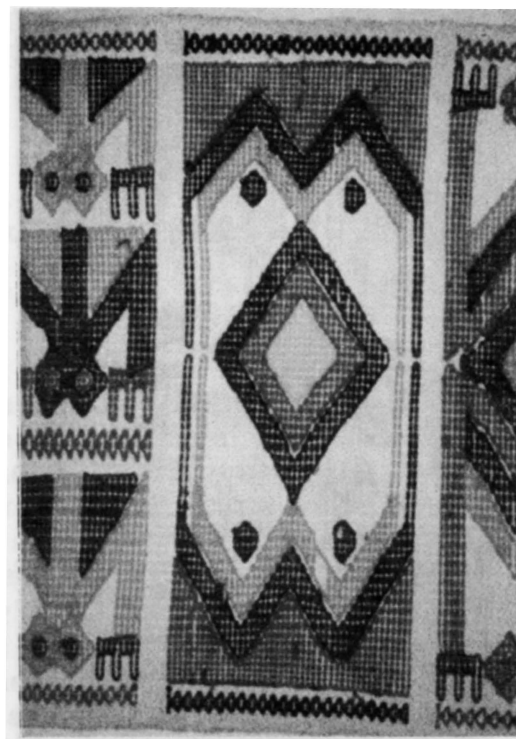


Fig.7 - Detail of the *agbarieja* (fish-head) design.

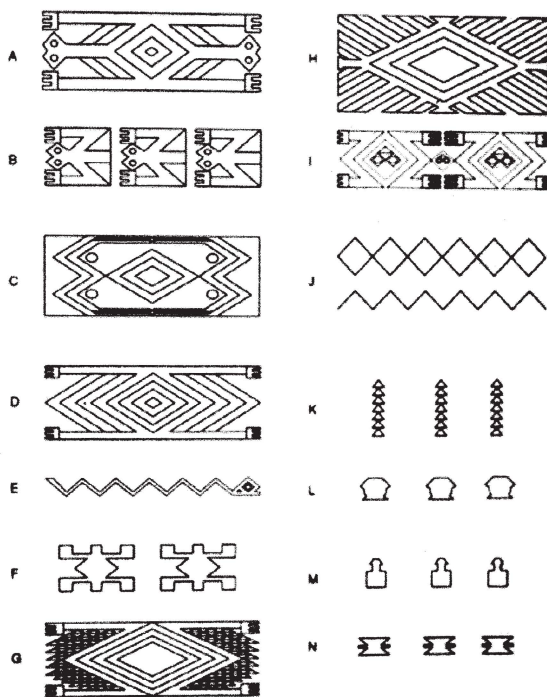


Fig.6 - Weft-float patterns used in Ijebu *aso olona*.

- A. *Ooni* (Crocodile)
- B. *Opolo* (Frog)
- C. *Agbarieja* (Fishhead)
- D. *Erin* (Elephant)
- E. *Ejo* (Snake)
- F. *Alangba* (Lizard)
- G. *Gbedu* (Large single-membrane drum) and *Gangan* (Talking Drum)
- H. Unidentified
- I. *Fowoboju* ("Pass the Palm over the Face," a gesture that accompanies prayers or certain ritual ceremonies)
- J. *Abalaye* (Hooked ceremonial staff)
- K. *Eekono* (Fingernail)
- L. *Atapo* (Stool)
- M. *Waala* (Koran board)
- N. *Omolobe* (Knife)



Fig.16 - Same man wearing his chieftaincy attire.



Fig.17 - Late nineteenth century photo of King Jaja of Opobo wearing *ikaki* (tortoise) cloth as his official royal attire.