

1985

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African Studies Center

1985

WORKING PAPERS
NO. 103
AFRICAN STUDIES CENTER
Boston University
270 Bay State Rd.
Boston, MA 02215

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THE IDOMA ANCESTRAL MASQUERADE AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

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The use of artifacts as historical evidence was advocated some time ago by Africanist historians,¹ but has gained adherents only recently in the Benue region.² J.B. Webster has scrutinized the ethnolinguistic origins of Jukun masquerades for the evidence they might give of Kwararafa political history, and his former students R. Sargent and E.O. Erim have investigated the political role of certain masquerades in Igala and Idoma history respectively.³ It is the purpose of this essay to demonstrate the method of using ritual artifacts as historical evidence while at the same time cautioning of their misuse. The latter is unfortunately very easy to perpetrate, given the frequent absence of specialized training in art history as part of the preparation of becoming a historian.

Most historians today prefer to think of themselves as social scientists. They are taught, like anthropologists, to examine content, but to regard form as irrelevant. Furthermore, they have not as a rule acquired any expertise in the technology of visual documentation (photographing, filming, videotaping, measuring), and even when they have, they tend to regard it as far from central to the historian's enterprise. An unfortunate result of this is the study in which an artefact or group of artifacts are essential to the historical argument, but the interpretation ignores their form and instead treats them as if they were "texts" (which they certainly are, but not exclusively or even primarily), indistinguishable from oral narratives or written documents. Visual analysis, whether of style, iconic content, or technology, is a powerful tool for documentation, but too often it is overlooked altogether.

Despite this neglect, artifacts offer a unique point of entry into the historical process. While created in the past, they survive, unlike long-ago events, in the present. They do not depend upon reconstruction for their existence, since they already exist.

The potential of art objects to a better understanding of social history is so great that we could align example after example of different conclusions that can be drawn from such evidence and have not been, whether it be about the growth and spread of ... institutions, ... or about changing social strata, ... statuses or roles, or ... expressions of ethnicity.... But beyond their value even as documents about social history, works of art are unique as crucial data about ideology, legitimation and worldview.⁴

It is in the latter set of categories that this essay resides, for I would like to consider here the origins and propagation of the ancestral masquerade cult in central Nigeria, and in particular its history among the Idoma-speaking peoples.⁵

The Ancestral Impersonation Cult

The ancestral impersonation cult is widespread in Nigeria, from the Southwest to the eastern Benue. It encompasses the Yoruba, Igala, Anebira (Igbira) of Okene, Idoma, Gwari, Alago, Onitsha Igbo, Afo, Gade, Koro, Abakwariga, and certainly others.⁶ I am referring here to a very specific form of ancestral masquerade in which the reincarnated ancestor appears in a long burial shroud, commonly with a projection underneath which elongates its height. It is known variously as "tall ghost," "hooded cobra," and "the mask that leans." While other authors have claimed its origin as Yoruba⁷ or Igbira,⁸ I will suggest that it is in fact of Hausa (Abakwariga) origin, based upon morphology, linguistic evidence, and the mythical journey of the masquerade found in Idoma ancestral chants.

It must be kept in mind that until the eighteenth century, the Idoma-speaking peoples (that is, Idoma, Alago, and Etulo) shared a common boundary with the Jukun and Abakwariga. This ended with the Tiv advance into the Benue Valley from the southeast, forcing a wedge between the Idoma and Jukun and turning the Etulo (Utur) into an enclave. The argument for the masquerade's diffusion westward therefore must presume that this took place before the arrival of the Tiv, who do not reincarnate their ancestors in this masked form.

The ancestral cult is the central institution of Idoma religion. To know its innermost workings is to comprehend the Idoma attitude toward authority, hierarchy, and the cosmos. Unfortunately, such understanding is not easily accessible, as much of it falls within the domain of secret knowledge, held only by initiates who have resurrected their own fathers. But it is not necessary to know the body of ritual associated with such resurrections to study the cult as a historical institution with links to similar cults among neighboring peoples of the Benue region. Nor is it necessary to comprehend every aspect of the mask's symbolism in order to make morphological and linguistic comparisons to other masquerades. But to appreciate the importance and power of the cult as an institution, we must begin with what it means to be an ancestor in Idomaland.

The multi-layered Idoma belief system reflects the complexity of its history and demography: it is not "of a piece" and is therefore elusive to the outsider's grasp.⁹ While Earth (Aje), God (Owoico) and the Ancestors (Alekwu) form the core of Idoma religious thought, there are also innumerable spirits of a more specialized or localized nature. Nonetheless, Anyebe convincingly argues that the ancestral cult is the cornerstone of Idoma religion.¹⁰ Certainly if the degree of elaboration or its rituals, the level of secrecy, and the social importance of the cult are considered primary, then the ancestral cult outweighs all others in significance.

In the commonest sense, an alekwu is the spirit of an ancestor, or in its corporate meaning, the spirits of the "collective elder dead."¹¹ Ancestorhood has three manifestations: the corporate body of alekwu, the alekwu ogboogba, and the alekwuafia. The alekwu, who correspond most closely to the European notion of "ancestor," are propitiated regularly. They are thought to remove evil from society and to keep a perpetual

vigil over the living. In reciprocation they are offered sacrifices as a symbol of the patrilineal ties which bind together the living and the dead.¹² The alekwu are the recipients of prayers and supplications in a hierarchically ordered chain of existence in which the ancestors as a corporate body serve as intermediaries between mortals and the higher supernatural forces.

Yet they are dependent upon earthly ties for their power to be invoked. The alekwu ogboogba are those ancestors who no longer have living children to offer them food and libations directly. They can be summoned only by other alekwu who still have ties in the world of the living. The expression omoyi gele, odoma geje ("whilst the one with child eats, the barren one remains in sorrow") explains not only the predicament of the father who has died without a son to make sacrifices to his spirit, but also that of the alekwu ogboogba who has lost this privilege.¹³

Finally there are the alekwuafia themselves. These are the resurrected ancestors in their bodily form, appearing as masquerades. While referred to by anthropologists as an ancestral impersonation cult,¹⁴ it is of course not an impersonation from the Idoma perspective, but the actual resurrected ancestor himself, "making a physical appearance in his spiritual structure."¹⁵ In an elaborate set of rituals over a period of weeks, the new alekwuafia is born: coming forth physically in the prescribed masquerade ensemble and symbolically in the oyioje ceremony which is the birth or bringing forth of the new alekwuafia.¹⁶

These rituals are important for the evidence they provide of Idoma history, for during the period of preparation for the appearance of a new alekwuafia, those already in existence parade the land on chanting expeditions known as ablada. During these forays, they recite the genealogies of the relevant lineages, emphasizing heroic ancestors in the manner of praise-singers.¹⁷ The chants are also heard as songs of farewell prior to the interment of kings and other notables.¹⁸

For example, during the funeral of a king, all the past kings are resurrected in their masked form and in correct genealogical order. The chants which accompany this ritual are, in effect, regnal lists. Erim, in his study of precolonial Idoma history, asserts that they provide "a skeletal structure of history which is 'fixed' at a point in time like an early document."¹⁹ His basis for making this argument is the strong emphasis on the fixity of the texts over time, and on memorization rather than improvisation in their performance. Other chants recall the history of the land, aje (the basic geopolitical unit in Idoma society), and the routes of migration from the ancestral homeland, Apa. It is this latter type, rather than the genealogical chant, which concerns us in this essay. In using them as evidence, the major question concerns their historicity.

Though the ancestral chants appear mythological in many respects, they are supported by the concrete evidence of the masquerade itself. And since the mask's present distribution closely approximates the places described in one of the chants, it behooves us to examine this oral text closely, as well as the conditions under which it is propagated.

The Evidence of the Alekwu Chants

This chant, sung at Otukpo, has been translated by Oteikwu O. Amali as "what caused the trouble between Alekwu and the Abakpa" (Oda noo tebi naAbakpa mlalekw gb gba biela).²⁰ It tells of the wanderings of the

Alekwu through Igbira and Igala lands before coming to its present home in the Land of Otiya:

Where did Alekwu first come from?
 Before the Alekwu came to the Land of Otiya,²¹
 home of Odu, who digs scorpion holes and snake holes?

Alekwu came from Apa.²²
 Apa that originated guinea-corn, Apa that originated
 millet.

Where did the Alekwu first get to?
 Father who begot me!
 The Alekwu came to Ajitata,²³
 Ajitata the home of the dead.

When the Alekwu came to the Land of Ajitata
 The Alekwu was trying to get to Otiya, home of Odu
 Home of the father that begot both of us.

They quit the Land of Ajitata
 Then they came to the Land of Okene²⁴

A stream overflowed its banks in the Land of Okene

Since the stream had so overflowed
 The Alekwu-of-the-Litany could not pass,
 Then the Alekwu slept at Okene.
 The Alekwu understook Okene:
 This is the reason why the Alekwu speaks Igbira.

The same chant thus speaks of three earlier "homes" for Alekwu, who came from Apa and journeyed to both Igbira and eastern Igala before arriving in central Idoma. The text raises two very important problems of interpretation, which bear not only on the origin of the masquerade, but on Idoma oral history in general. How fixed has it remained over time? And in what sense is it history?

For example, four of the early kings of Otukpo are described thus in another chant:

Akunte who once lived in Ipagwu
 Ruled in Odu settlement, the father of
Ohukwo, great, great, great grandfather
 The poison which does not kill the elephant
 but depresses it, the father of
Ocheewo, also called Adinya, the runner,
 The puff adder that is pregnant
 And begot many snakes, and the father of
Ogabo who eats oil beans.... [emphasis added]²⁵

Is it safe to assume that "great, great, great grandfather" is genealogically precise, or is it hyperbole to accompany the praise-name which follows?

The training of a chant singer, divided into three periods, emphasized not only a sound voice, but a retentive memory. The second

period included contests of skill in reciting the traditions, and the final period involved the performance of chants in the company of experts at funerals or installations of new kings. The subjects of these recitations were the history of the land (clan) back to its ancestral homeland, the routes of migration taken, and as we have noted above, their list of kings or rulers.²⁶

While this would seem to indicate a core of fixed material in the texts, it does not rule out literary embellishment.²⁷ For example, in the first text the Alekwu is said to have travelled to "Okene," but it is known that the Igbira (Ebira) town of Okene is not an ancient settlement, and dates only from the nineteenth century. This reference is therefore either an addition to the text, or a modern substitution of the word "Okene" for some older Igbira settlement, if one assumes that the alekwuafia institution itself predated the nineteenth century. Fixity is thus a relative, not an absolute, feature.

As to their historicity, the remaining passages from the "Okene" chant lay the groundwork for an evaluation:²⁸

When the Alekwu set out from Igbira Land,

They journeyed on and on
Where did the Alekwu come to?
Idoma, Father who begot me,
The Alekwu came to the Land of Ankpa²⁹
The Alekwu slept at Ankpa till morning.
A stream overflowed its banks at Ankpa still

The stream washed the spear-grass down;

The water subsided from the river-bank, then
Ibegwoogboogba, the Alekwu passed,³⁰ ...

Then they came to Ajitata
When they came to this Ajitata
The stream overflowed in the Land of Ajitata still
Then the Alekwuogboogba went ahead, took a
different way³¹
They came to the land of the Ocoobo people,
the sons of Agbo,³²

Then they went to pass Akono
That Akono is the land of Abakpando who made
the costume for the Alekwu.³³

The striped pole-cat became the first child
of the Alekwu³⁴

Alekwu, rain began to fall,
The rain poured for a long time
Then the Alekwu-of-the-Litany began to feel cold.

The Abakpando who made the costume of the Alekwu³⁵
The Abakpa came, the Abakpa caught Onyanji.³⁶

Early in the dawn,
The owuuna-bird ... that shouts for alekwu,
Bird in alekwu, give me voice!

The Alekwu-of-the-Litany then does a chant.
He called Onyanjeeka-who-shouts
He said Onyanji should come;
The land was silent.

The Abakpa had murdered Onyanji in their house.

Abakpando that made the alekwu-cloth,
The Abakpa who are difficult and joke with things,

The people who were waging a war and were still
fighting a real fight (with each other)!
Abakpa, could they formerly be taken lightly?!

This is the reason why the Alekwu left Ocoobo ... before
it came to the Land of Otiya....
The thing that caused the quarrel between the
Alekwu-of-the-Litany and the Abakpa, there it is.

If the meaning of this chant were taken literally, it would give a path of diffusion for the Alekwu from Apa to the northern Idoma-eastern Igala border (Ajitata), westward across the Niger to the Igbira settlement at Okene, back across the Niger to eastern Igala again (Ankpa), past Ajitata southeast to Ochobo in Oglewu, and eastward to Otukpo (Otiya) (see map). While such a circular route seems at first both bizarre and unlikely, it meshes with a number of Idoma and Igala accounts of population movements during and after the founding of the Kwararafan dynasty at Idah in the late seventeenth century.³⁷

While masks can and do diffuse without any accompanying population movement, when the movements are thought to have taken place, it is not unreasonable to assume that they were vehicles for the spread of both institutions and artifacts. We must also remind ourselves that there are no great distances involved in these movements of proto-Idoma and proto-Igala out of Apa westward toward the Confluence, nor are there any major natural barriers. The River Benue, which is the dominant geographical feature of the region, seems to have been the primary migration corridor.³⁸

The one sojourn which seems out of place when the text of this chant is compared with the non-performative historical accounts collected by Erim is the Alekwu's journey to Okene. But as stated earlier, "Okene" may only mean Igbiraland, and it may be a more recent accretion to the text. This will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

But regardless of the "fit" of the wanderings of the Alekwu described in this chant with the oral accounts of Idoma population movements, it would be more than a little credulous to think that the ancestral chant, which is itself a work of art, could simply be "read" like a road map which plots the mask's diffusion. I am suggesting here that the encounters described in the text are true, but that they are true at a metaphorical, not a literal, level. By this I mean that they document actual historical interaction between the proto-Idoma and the Igala, Igbira, and Hausa, but neither the literal nature of the encounters nor

their chronological sequence can be inferred from the text. For example, it is quite clear from the non-codified oral traditions that the proto-Idoma left Apa for essentially political reasons. In the chant, none of these are mentioned, and all obstacles are reduced to the single metaphorical convention of a stream which overflows its banks.

Only the encounter with the Abakpa who "were waging a war" is at all explicit, and even this could refer either to the Abakwariga in the Kwararafan period or to the much later Fulani "Horse War" of the nineteenth century. The reference to Okene may well be a modern substitution for an earlier encounter with the Igbira on the Benue. The locations of Ajitata and Ankpa within the eastern Igala migration corridor could be interpreted two ways: as a diffusion path for the cult from post-Apa settlements into Idomaland, or as evidence of its origin in an Akpoto sub-stratum.³⁹ Finally, the reference to Ochobo and Otiya support Anyebe's contention that the alekwuafia institution passed from Ochobo to Otukpo.⁴⁰

The Claim for an Apa Origin: Linguistic and Morphological Evidence

One tradition which this chant upholds, in common with all other Idoma versions, is the ultimate origin of the ancestral cult at Apa. While this may be no more than a legitimizing myth, it is supported by linguistic and ethnographic evidence which lend it historical credibility. First there is the equine imagery associated with the form of the alekwuafia. The projection beneath the cloth is referred to as the "horse" (onya).⁴¹ If we compare its shape and elaborate trappings with those of a well-caparisoned horse from Kano or Bornu, we immediately recognize the parallel. The source of this image is not difficult to guess: horses were one of the main imports into Kwararafa/Apa from Hausaland. According to the Kano Chronicle, Sarkin Kano Kanajeji traded horses to the nobility of Kwararafa in return for slaves early in the fifteenth century.⁴² Adamu argues that the continued acquisition of horses by the Jukun, one of the Kwararafa member states, was one of the key factors in their rise to military power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴³ The horse thus came to symbolize both power and authority in Kwararafa/Apa. The potency of this symbol can be measured by the fact that in many parts of Idomaland, the sacrifice of horses has replaced the former sacrifice of human slaves on great occasions of state such as royal funerals.

Even more important, the horse metaphor occurs frequently in descriptions of pagan Hausa religion, particularly in relation to possession cults such as bori.⁴⁴ To be possessed means to be "mounted" by a spirit. Those possessed by bori spirits are often called dowakin bori, "horses of spirits." One sees the combining of these two symbols in the alekwuafia, which is both a spirit in tangible form and the most powerful of masquerades.

A more explicit clue lies in the term abakpa, used to describe the person who actually created the abo (masquerade costume). While the term means "Hausa" in Idoma, he is neither Hausa nor an actual tailor, but someone who is chosen through revelation in a dream. In one instance cited in Okwoga, the dreamer learns that he must find a needle stuck in the bark of a certain tree. On informing the elders of his dream, he is declared abakpa.⁴⁵ In Otukpo, a virgin is led blindfolded in the middle of the night into the itakpa, which has become a symbolic maternity for the new alekwuafia. She takes up a needle, and the abakpa hands her a

black thread, which, despite the darkness, she passes through the needle - the symbolic beginning of the alekwuafia.⁴⁶ Since the same word abakpa has both meanings in Idoma ("a Hausa"; "person who sews the abo of the alekwuafia"), it is very possible that the task of tailoring the masquerade was originally learned from the Hausa. Furthermore, we know from the chant that it was "Abakpando who made the costume for the alekwu" (Abakpando ki caabo lekwi).⁴⁷

While it is difficult to document non-Muslim beliefs among the Hausa today, it is known that ancestral cults have a very wide distribution in Africa. It is therefore not unreasonable to postulate the existence of some kind of ancestral religion among the pre-Islamic Hausa and those who later resisted Islam. Greenberg described such beliefs among the Maguzawa, pagan Hausa near Kano.⁴⁹ The Abakwariga, pagan Hausa of the Benue Valley,⁵⁰ constituted an essential part of the Kwararafa confederacy, which included Greater Doma, the congeries of Idoma-speaking peoples on both sides of the Benue. It is among the former that one must look for a possible prototype for alekwuafia.

There exists little published information on the Abakwariga, and in the past one had to rely on fragments which appear in Meek's 1931 study of the Jukun.⁵¹ Very recently, this lacuna has begun to be filled. We now have brief descriptions of the Abakwariga by Adamu and Unomah, which provide some of the historical context for the unpublished accounts by Rubin and Webster of Abakwariga masquerades.⁵² From Adamu we learn that the Abakwariga, in their political decline within the Kwararafa federation, created a place for themselves as ritual specialists to the emergent Jukun, and that the Ashamu [sic] cult was the focal point for these non-Muslim Hausa.⁵³ Meek spoke of the appearance of five "tutelary gods" (in other words, masquerades) at the festival honoring the arrival of a new Jukun king in the capital, one of whom was Ashama.⁵⁴ According to Webster, all five of these masquerade spirits are of Abakwariga origin, but it is only the ashama which concerns us here.⁵⁵

Used only by the Abakwariga sector of the Wukari population, this masquerade has no close counterpart among the Wapa (Wukari Jukun) masks,⁵⁶ despite the fact that nearly all of the Jukun masks are associated with ancestral spirits in one form or another.⁵⁷ The ashama described by Rubin is a blue and white striped cotton tube about fourteen feet long, surmounted by a small conical bundle from which long cotton streamers hang at the apex. It functions to incarnate Abakwariga ancestors, and also is seen in association with the aljanu possession cult.⁵⁸ Like its Idoma counterpart, it effects the voice and movements of the elder dead, speaking through a voice disguiser and moving very little.

C. K. Meek was able to collect an ashama masquerade ensemble which is now a part of the Pitt Rivers Collection in Oxford. On close examination, we learn that it is sewn from the same narrow strip-weave used by Benue peoples for burial cloths and on one side incorporates the resist-dyed patterns known as akya which were made by the Abakwariga and exported to neighboring areas such as the Grassfields, where they are known as "Doma" or "Wukari" cloth. The long cloth filaments, identical in form to those of the alekwuafia, are tightly-woven kyadze cloth with an indigo weft-inlay design, which when sewn together create the burial shroud worn by Jukun.⁵⁹ The bundle forming the topmost projection of the mask ensemble contains the nail parings of the ancestor being resurrected. What is missing is the hidden superstructure which forms the alekwuafia projection.

In Idomaland, the alekwuafia's form varies over time and from place to place. The ancestral masks seen by Armstrong at Agila, by Bassing at Okwoga, and by myself near Otukpo are not identical, though they clearly belong to a single genre (see illustrations).⁶⁰ Of the three, the masks seen at Upu, a village just outside the main Idoma market town of Otukpo, most strikingly resemble the Abakwariga ashama collected by Meek. These alekwuafia wore the same long indigo tube and conical superstructure with streamers seen on the ashama ensemble. The major difference lay in the substitution of two vertical panels of red and yellow appliqued triangles for the resist-dyed patterns of the ashama, the use of red, yellow, and green applique-cloth strips in place of the homespun cotton, and the embellishment of the cone superstructure with rings of cowries near the apex.

The close resemblance of the Otukpo mask to those of the Abakwariga correlates precisely with the fact that Otukpo, along with Ugboju and Adoka, are "core Idoma" kingdoms with few stranger lineages and a strong tradition of earlier residence in Apa/Kwararafa. It also makes obvious sense that the masquerade referred to in the Otukpo chant would bear this resemblance, since the chant has told us already that "the Abakpando [Hausa] ... made the costume of the Alekwu" (line 159).⁶¹ Because there has been no direct contact between the Idoma of Otukpo and the Abakwariga (Abakpa) of Wukari since the Tiv expanded into the Benue Valley and formed a wedge between them, we can safely disregard feedback as a possible explanation for this close correspondence between the visual and the oral evidence.

Rival Claims: Yoruba, Igala, and Igbira Origins

Despite the convincing arguments that connect the Idoma alekwuafia institution directly with the pagan Hausa of the Benue Valley, there are rival claims to the origin of this masquerade. Since each of these peoples has a variant of the alekwuafia at the present time, the claims must be given serious consideration and ultimately weighed against the one advanced above. Let us begin with the Yoruba, since the egungun cult is better known than any of the related ancestral impersonation cults in Nigeria.

The case for a Yoruba-Igala origin of the alekwuafia masquerade rests upon the assumption that the Idoma acquired it during an earlier period of Igala contact. The Igala egwu afia, in turn, is argued by Borgatti to have derived from the Yoruba egungun during a presumed pre-dynastic period of Igala-Yoruba interaction.⁶² The evidence offered for this is of two types - linguistic and historical. The first argument is that of cognates: not egwu afia and egungun, but egwugwu, an Onitsha Igbo term for the same masquerade, and egungun. The Onitsha culture is known to have imbibed a number of Igala influences by virtue of its proximity, including the ancestral masquerade cult, reported by Henderson as egwugwu or mmuo ogonogo ("tall ghost").⁶³ Borgatti suggested that egwugwu may therefore be a linguistic survival of a term no longer used in Igala itself, since it is not an Igbo word. Her other argument rests on the general similarities observable between Igala and Yoruba culture which, along with one legend of origin, have caused some Igala scholars to assume a former period of contact.⁶⁴ In addition, there is a general morphological resemblance between the egwu afia and one type of egungun called alago.⁶⁵

The main weakness of this thesis is its double inferential nature. References to Yoruba origins are lacking in consensus, and since they belong to the distant proto-dynastic period, cannot be either confirmed or falsified by oral evidence alone. Moreover, there seems to be no evidence in Igala tradition itself for the borrowing of egungun from the Yoruba. Instead, the connection must be made logically through the Onitsha Igbo - who may have derived the term egwugwu from the Yoruba in modern times. The Onitsha Igbo name for this masquerade reported in earlier descriptions is maw afia, or mmo afia.⁶⁶ Talbot claimed that most Igbo ancestral masks are called mmaw, "soul," though he noted that among some of the Ika, it is called by the Yoruba name egungun.⁶⁷

The other objection concerns the elusive time frame for this hypothesis. If the Igala derived their ancestral mask cult from the Yoruba, it would have been during a presumed period of Yoruba influence prior to the coming of the Benin and Kwararafan dynasties at Idah - that is, before 1516. Furthermore, it is clear from Boston's description of egwu afia that the masquerade belongs to the nine non-royal clans headed by the Igala Mela - in other words, the descendants of the indigenous Akpoto.⁶⁸ It has nothing to do with the immigrant Igala aristocracy. One is really speaking, therefore, of Akpoto-Yoruba contact. While this would seem entirely possible, the presence of egungun in Yoruba culture prior to 1500 is a matter of some disagreement.

The Reverend Samuel Johnson dated the origin of the egungun cult in Oyo Ile to the reign of Ofinran (probably between 1500 and 1550).⁶⁹ By this time, Igala had entered a period of Benin domination, and direct contacts with the Yoruba presumably decreased. It has been suggested by some Yoruba informants, however, that the introduction of egungun took place during the much earlier reign of Sango, the putative fourth Alafin of Oyo.⁷⁰ If the earlier date were accepted, then egungun would have predated the westward movement of the Idoma by a considerable time, and Borgatti's argument for Yoruba-Igala diffusion might seem at first possible. But the historicity of Sango is itself an unsettled question at best and therefore not a reliable peg upon which to hang a historical argument.⁷¹

An Oyo tradition states that the alago type of egungun is adopted from the Nupe ndako gboya masquerade, which the Yoruba refer to as egunuko.⁷² Oyo Ile (Old Oyo), located near the Niger, was invaded by the Nupe early in the sixteenth century, giving plausibility to this explanation.⁷³ If true, it occurred too late for the Yoruba to disseminate the egungun cult to Igala, which was by then already under Benin domination.

Whether the Yoruba were the "donors" or "recipients" of the masquerade, the present-day linguistic, formal, and functional similarities between the Igala egwu afia, the Idoma ekwu afia, and the Onitsha Igbo mmuo afia bespeak a very strong connection. The terms egwu, ekwu, and mmuo mean "ghost" or "spirit" in Igala, Idoma, and Igbo respectively. It is not clear from which of the three languages afia derives, though it is worth noting that the form used in the alekwu chant transcribed by Amali is alekwu ogboogba and never alekwuafia.⁷⁴ In all three versions, the masquerade is a "tall ghost," culminating in a conical projection with streamers and covered with cloth. In Onitsha and Idoma versions, the conical projecting member is built of a cloth-covered wooden or basketry frame manipulated by the masquerader. This unwieldy extension has been aptly characterized as agwo-ola, "hooded cobra," in Onitsha, since it may strike out capriciously at bystanders when the

figure bends over, with blows that are said to be deadly. Between attacks, they rest their snouts on their escorts' shoulders, since the projections are heavy, and the incarnate dead are very old.⁷⁵

By contrast, the Idoma have adopted the metaphor of a horse, onya, to describe the elongated projection. The whole ensemble then becomes a horse and rider, with the elaborate covering corresponding to the trappings of the horse. This metaphor, as we have seen, is a Northern one, derivable from Hausa culture. Another difference between the Igbo and the Idoma mask appears to be in the placement of the projection: in the Igbo case described by Henderson, it appears to crown the head of the masquerader. A similar example may be seen in the ancestral enkpe mask from the northern Igbo village of Ogbod'aba which visits Agila in southern Idoma.⁷⁶ The Idoma mask is different in that the "horse" projects not from the head but from one arm of the masquerader. Despite this difference, both masquerades feature a heavy protuberance which bends and moves about, or is supported by a retainer either with a forked stick or on his shoulder. These, it will be seen, are the most elaborate of all the variants. North of the Benue and west of the Niger, the mask form is progressively attenuated toward its simplest variant in the Yoruba alago type of egungun. Even the Igala mask is a somewhat simpler construction in which the cone of cloth, sewn closed at the top, is held aloft by a stick concealed beneath it and carried in the right hand.⁷⁷ In this form, which has also diffused to certain Edo groups and which characterizes the Nupe ndako gboya, the shaft may be moved up and down with quick oscillating gestures to create the shimmering movements of the "tall ghost."⁷⁸ An even simpler construction is used by the Igbira (Anebira) of Okene in their ancestral masquerade ekuoba: here the tube-shaped burial cloth is simply pinched together at the top by the hand of the masquerader.⁷⁹ In the alago type of Yoruba egungun, there appears to be no elongating mechanism at all. Its only resemblance to the "tall ghost," "hooded cobra," or "horse and rider" is its construction of one or more long burial shrouds which trail along the ground behind it.⁸⁰ This train, called aflete in Idoma, imparts dignity and affluence, since it shows that the alekwuafia "has more than enough to wear."⁸¹

Linguistically, the Igala egwu afia is an exact cognate. Functionally, it belongs to the non-royal stratum of Igala masquerades which operates at the clan level as representations of individual, named ancestors. While the occasions for its appearance (such as the annual Okula festival) may differ from those in Idoma, its identity is parallel.

Henderson made it clear that, prior to the suppression of many of their activities by the early colonial administration, the "collective incarnate dead" of Onitsha (those who embody, invoke, or escort ancestral spirits - thus including the "tall ghosts") were the supreme authority of the land.⁸² Even the king could be overruled, and was bound to abide by their judgments. An equally powerful role was assigned to them in Idoma, where they had primary responsibility for keeping the land free from pollution caused by wrongdoings. An appeal to the alekwu was the highest appeal an individual could bring, and their decisions could not be overturned. In serious offenses, the threat of swearing an oath upon alekwu was the one sure way of obtaining a confession from the guilty party. For it was (and still is) believed that lying while under the alekwu oath will bring a swift death from the ancestors.

In Igala, where a centralized political system created two levels of authority, one in the capital and the other at the clan level, the egwu

afia functioned within the latter. Its authority was expressed indirectly, through the Igala Mela, and was probably subject to limitations which did not exist in Idoma. The possible divergence in function of the Igala and Idoma ancestral masks needs substantiation, though both appear to be used in dispute settlement.⁸³ If they are indeed functionally different, despite their names, this may be explained by the contrasting political structures in which they occur. But given the similarity in the masquerade's construction, its linguistic affinity, and the fact that there are many Igala lines in the alekwu chant, a powerful argument can be made for its dissemination through the shared substratum of proto-Idoma and proto-Igala populations.⁸⁴

But what of a possible Igbo origin? From ethnographic evidence alone, one would conclude that the most direct connection lies between the Idoma and Onitsha Igbo versions. However, the Onitsha-Igala link is well established historically from the second formative stage of the Onitsha community around 1600 up to about 1780, and was particularly strong during the eighteenth century under the dominance of Anambra-drainage Igala when kingship rituals and regalia were introduced.⁸⁵ By contrast, the Idoma have had no direct intercourse with Onitsha. Furthermore, it is not only the "tall ghost" ancestral masquerade, but also a number of other ritual institutions which Onitsha adopted from the Igala. The possible discrepancy between the historical evidence and the formal structures of the Idoma and Igala masquerades may be explained nonetheless. It is entirely feasible that variants of the form exist within the nine clans of the Igala Mela. Yet it is also true that, while there is no direct contact with Onitsha, the southern Idoma (most particularly in Agila) have certain Igbo-derived lineages who are visited by Igbo ancestral masquerades. The Igbo enkpe and Idoma ekwila, as stated earlier, are both of this type and visit different lineages in Agila town. Ekwila also appears in Igwumale and Ijigbam.⁸⁶ While its underlying structure appears the same, the abo (in Agila, aba) itself consists of an opulent applique cloth pattern of triangles, chequerboards, enclosed rectangles, and stylized palm fronds.⁸⁷ The extension consists of a long cylinder instead of the narrow cone seen in the Okwoga mask. Similar surface patterns and superstructure are found in the Igbo enkpe mask from nearby Ogbod'aba, which suggests that the unusual elaboration in the ekwila costume may have been inspired by the neighboring Igbo example.

The Igbo-speaking enkpe mask, while not indigenous to Agila town, enjoys an important ritual status there, and has assumed the functions of the ancestral mask for certain non-royal lineages. This seeming anomaly becomes clearer when Agila oral traditions are examined. In one song recounting the migrations of the Agila people to their present home, they are said to have come from:

Apa to Idah
 Idah to Ankpa [eastern Igala]
 Ankpa to Ogbod'aba
 Ogbod'aba to Okwoga
 Okwoga to Adiga [southern Okwoga]
 Adiga to Olugbechi
 Olugbechi to Agila.⁸⁸

In the early- to mid-seventeenth century, the first settlers are said to have arrived in what is now Agila and found a few Igbo-speaking peoples

already living there. These scattered groups were assimilated.⁸⁹ According to Erim, some of the settlers came not from central Igala, but from the area south of Idah and north of Nsukka, and may have been either of Bini extraction or northern Igbo.⁹⁰ Around 1800 there was another influx of Igbo immigrants into Agila from Nsukka and Abakaliki.⁹¹ Therefore, among certain of the non-royal Agila groups, there are kinship ties with neighboring Igbo communities. That with Ogbod'aba may have been one of the earliest. It is regarded today as a place with very strong supernatural associations. No one from Agila journeys there because it is thought to be "the home of one's spiritual double" - a land of the dead, like Ajitata in the alekwu chant of Otukpo.⁹²

Without more specific data, it is impossible to say whether enkpe and ekwila spread from the non-royal Igbo descent groups to the Igala-related Idoma ruling group or vice versa. From all accounts, the eastern Igala region appears to have been a migration corridor for centuries, and genealogical research has confirmed the diverse ethnic origins of the present population.⁹³ But if we are to place any credence whatever in the alekwu chants, the Igbo adoption and propagation of the masquerade would have had to occur at a later stage in its history.

There is one other rival hypothesis to be considered. Erim has advanced the case for an Igbira origin of the Idoma ancestral masquerade cult, which is simpler to describe, but no easier to prove. Both Erim and Armstrong, as well as various colonial administrators, collected Idoma and Tiv accounts of earlier Idoma residence in what is today Tivland.⁹⁴ One such settlement reportedly was located near the town of Abinsi, which is about seventy miles northwest of Wukari, on the south bank of the Benue.⁹⁵

In the version collected by Erim, there was an Igbira enclave nearby the Idoma settlement, which served as an important point of diffusion for the ekwuafia (alekwuafia) masquerade cult. In this account, the Igbira were in control of trade along the Benue from the Confluence to Abinsi during the seventeenth century. One of the important items of Igbira manufacture was opa (Idoma: enopa) cloth. This cloth was worn during installations and upon the burial of chiefs, and was closely associated with the ancestral masquerade cult, which the chief of the Igbira used to strengthen his political power and gradually developed into an ideology. The Ugboju royal kindreds (called Owuna Bird by Erim after their principal totem) were among the first Idoma migrants to settle there, and they became involved themselves in the opa cloth trade. They took over the leadership of the Idoma settlement from about 1625 onward, having adopted the ekwuafia ritual from the Igbira and used it to achieve political ends. Thereafter, new Idoma groups arriving at the settlement also adopted it.

This account raises both substantive issues and the question of chronology. The founding of the Igbira kingdoms of Panda and Igu are presumed to have taken place sometime in the eighteenth century, by descendants of the then-ruling Kwararafan dynasty at Idah.⁹⁶ This was probably between 1750 and 1800, since it is known that Aigu, the ninth king of Panda, was slain about 1850 in the Fulani capture of that city. Like the Igala kingdom, the Igbira kingdoms represented the imposition of an alien aristocracy on a group of indigenous commoners, who were the speakers of the Igbira language.

Since neither of the Igbira kingdoms had yet been founded in the seventeenth century, either the events in Erim's account happened considerably later - that is, in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth

century - or they involved the indigenous Igbira, prior to the founding of the kingdoms. This is unlikely for two reasons. It is known that the control of large parts of the Benue went hand in hand with the Panda kingdom's territory at the height of its powers, which means sometime in the period between 1800 and 1850.⁹⁸ Controlling trade prior to the founding of the kingdoms would have been much less likely. Even more important, there is substantial evidence that the original point of diffusion for the ekwuafia masquerade was Apa. But the Igbira commoners were not peoples of Apa. Geographically and linguistically, they are closest to the Nupe.⁹⁹ The present-day Igbira version of the ancestral masquerade cult at Okene either was brought via Panda with the royal founder lineages from Idah (who in turn claimed descent from Apa/Kwararafa), or was adopted directly from Igala settlers on the West Bank.

Furthermore, Meek's description of Abinsi itself suggests the later date for its Igbira inhabitants:

Across the Benue on the southern bank there is the Jukun-speaking town of Abinsi.... They claim an Igbira origin, having been subjects of the old kingdom of Panda, which was destroyed about the middle of the last century.... When they settled at Abinsi, they came directly under the authority of the Jukun king of Wukari, to whom they sent annual tribute in the form of cloth. Most of their official titles are Jukun, and so also are their religious cults. I am inclined to think that, as the neighborhood of Abinsi was once an Apa centre, the present inhabitants are a fusion of Igbira immigrants with an aboriginal Jukun stock.¹⁰⁰

From the weight of this evidence, it is likely that either the Igbira settlement near Abinsi and the events associated with it were much later than Erim has suggested, or, more likely, that the settlement was indeed an early one, but the opa cloth trade, and possibly the diffusion of the ancestral masquerade, date from a later period and represent a telescoping in the oral traditions of the Ugboju settlers.¹⁰¹

The political motive ascribed for the taking up of the masquerade is entirely credible, and is analogous to that suggested by Babayemi for the adoption of egungun at Oyo.¹⁰² But not only is the dating problematical, there is no reported evidence of the "tall ghost" ancestral masquerade among the Igbira of Panda.¹⁰³ Wilson-Haffenden made no mention of such a masquerade in his lengthy ethnographic description of the "Kwottos" (Igbira) of Panda, referring only to the dodo masquerades in their tight-fitting, knitted costumes.¹⁰⁴ These would appear at funerals as the ghosts of departed ancestors. But there seems to have been no mask dressed in the burial shroud which is the sine qua non of the alekwuafia.

The shroud type of masquerade known as ekuoba has been documented in the Igbira enclave at Okene, but the latter was not founded until the nineteenth century by refugees from Igu and Panda who were fleeing the Fulani invaders, and by settlers from Igala villages west of the Niger.¹⁰⁵ The Igbira settlement at Abinsi appears to have been also founded at this time. Ironically, the Fulani jihad may have been a major factor in the spread of this pagan cult throughout the Lower Benue and Confluence.

Even if Erim's version were historically feasible, one would be left with the considerable discrepancy in form between the Idoma alekwuafia and the simple cloth tube of the Igbira mask. We would have to assume either that the Idoma form has undergone considerable elaboration over time, or that the Igbira form has become greatly simplified. At present, their main resemblance is in the use of a burial cloth for the basic covering. In the Idoma version from Okwoga, the opa is all but hidden by the red ododo cloth which covers it, and has come to be preferred in many cases, both for aesthetic reasons and for its prestigious associations with royal regalia.¹⁰⁶ In the ekwila and unaaloko ancestral masks from Agila, the form and materials are even more elaborate, combining ododo with a yellow cloth in the applique technique. The alekwuafia seen at Upu also wore applique panels against an indigo background. The notion of dignity and sumptuousness is clearly important in the alekwuafia masquerades.

Alekwuafia: A Hypothetical Reconstruction

Taking into account both the formal characteristics of the masquerade variants and the narrative elements of the alekwu chant just analyzed, and placing these against the oral accounts collected by Erim, Sargent, and Webster, it is possible to hypothesize the following sequence: first, the ashama masquerade was propagated in the Apa/Kwararafa region east of Wukari among the Abakwariga, where it spread to the proto-Idoma (Idoma/Alago) population. During the population movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which marked the founding of the Kwararafan dynasty at Idah, Idoma-speaking lineages carried the masquerade to one or more Idoma settlements on the Benue near Abinsi, while others carried it downriver to northeast Igala.¹⁰⁷ It is conceivable, though unlikely, that it was passed on to an Igbira enclave at Abinsi in the seventeenth century. Alternatively, the Igbira adopted it from the Abakwariga at Abinsi in the nineteenth century. In eastern Igala the masquerade cult passed into (and was probably altered by) the indigenous Akpoto culture which was still dominant outside the Igala capital. It reached modern Idomaland with Idoma and Akpoto settlers from Apa, as well as eastern Igala (Ankpa). Since these migrants settled in several parts of Idomaland, the cult had more than one point of secondary diffusion: Ajitata, Ankpa, and possibly the important Abakpa village settlement in the Igala border region, and Ochobo, Ugboju, and Okwoga in Idoma proper.

The subsequent elaboration in the details of the Idoma masquerade, such as the addition of applique patterns, ododo cloth, and cowries probably took place over several generations following its establishment in the new settlements. One possible stimulus to this change may have been contact with both the Igala and the Igbo. Erim noted that the ancestors of the modern ai-Alekwu clan in Okwoga claim to have come from the Eha Amufu area in northern Igboland, though they also claim Igala origins.¹⁰⁸ Several groups in Agila, Ijigbam, and Ulayi are of southern ancestry (Bini, Igbo, and Ogoja) and use variant forms of ancestral masquerades such as enkpe, ekwila (ekwula), and unaaloko. It is likely that a systematic study of alekwuafia type-distributions would reveal that those of greatest complexity are concentrated in southern districts. These correlate closely with other intricate cloth designs limited to southern Idoma, such as chiefly regalia and the hats of titled elders.

This reconstruction raises several unanswered questions. To begin with, Igalaland appears to have been an important center of dispersion as well, though whether this is a case of secondary or primary dispersion is far from clear. If one accepts the hypothesis that the masquerade-type originated in the middle Benue sometime prior to 1700 and then spread to the Confluence area with the Idoma expansion, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Kwararafa incursions into Igala, and finally the nineteenth-century population movements resulting from the Fulani jihad, then it can be assumed that it spread from the Confluence to peoples under Igala influence such as the Igbira and Niger Igbo. The Onitsha Igbo case fits this hypothesis, since they claim to have adopted certain Igala institutions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its spread into other Igbo groups could have emanated from Onitsha, southern Igala, and southern Idoma.

The Nupe and Yoruba cases are more difficult to fit into this argument. If, as Johnson suggested, the Yoruba egungun "mystery" began to be celebrated in Oyo Ile as early as 1500-1550, it could not have been adopted from the Igala Mela in the above sequence.

The most open question of all concerns the role of the Alago.¹⁰⁹ These Idoma-speakers were prominent members of the Apa/Kwararafa confederation of states, with close ties to the Abakwariga and Jukun. They possess a simpler version of the ashama masquerade called iwagu.¹¹⁰ Recent research supports the statement of an Argungu manuscript that the (Alago) states of Doma and Keana were founded from Kwararafa, but there is also a persistent tradition of earlier residence at Idah.¹¹¹ While the Kwararafa connection is geographically obvious, the Idah one is not, and therefore raises suspicion of a politically motivated claim.

Yet Armstrong reported that the Alago dialect of Idoma is closer to Yoruba and Igala than the other Idoma dialects, despite the lack of geographical contiguity.¹¹² This supports the notion of an Igala genealogical connection prior to the founding of Keana and Doma, the two Alago states north of the Benue. An ancillary problem concerns the term alago used for the shroud-type Yoruba egungun masquerade. Further research may reveal the Alago to be a missing link in the propagation of this mask from the pagan Hausa population to a wide array of peoples in central and southern Nigeria.

We have seen how a ritually and politically significant artifact, the Idoma alekwuafia masquerade, can be used to corroborate or cast doubt upon oral traditions. Like linguistic data, it possesses a concreteness which those traditions lack, though by itself it is inadequate as evidence. In the case of alekwuafia, there is a strong convergence of the visual and linguistic data with the oral evidence of the alekwu chants. Without the masquerade itself, the oral text would remain conjectural. But because the mask's distribution can be checked against the journey of the alekwu found in the chant, it is possible not only to assess the metaphoric versus historical value of the text, but also to isolate later additions and alterations.

The central question of Idoma history concerns its relationship to Apa/Kwararafa. Encapsulated within this is the question of how the Idoma who now occupy a part of Benue State became separated from their kin of Lafia Emirate, the Alago, or Idoma Nokwu. Their very separate development since the decline of Kwararafa, the Fulani jihad, and Tiv expansion into the Benue has all but obscured the fact that they were at some point in time one people. While this never may have been a political unity, it was

likely to have been a cultural one. And for one or both, the relationship to the Abakwariga was crucial. The alekwuafia masquerade offers both an important clue and a point of entry into that problem.

FOOTNOTES

¹The value-neutral term "artifact" is preferable to "art," since masquerades are "art" from the viewpoint of outsiders, but emphatically not from the perspective of those who own and use them.

²Jan Vansina, "The Use of Ethnographic Data as Sources in History," in T. O. Ranger, ed., Emerging Themes of African History (Nairobi, 1968), 103-104, 107-120.

³J. B. Webster, "Spirits of the Kingdom," Benue Valley Project Paper No. 7 (Dalhousie University, 1975); R. Sargent, "Igala Masks: Dynastic History and the Face of the Nation," in Sidney L. Kasfir, ed., Tricksters, Transvestites and Warriors: African Masks and Cultural Systems (forthcoming); E. O. Erim, "A Pre-Colonial History of the Idoma of Central Nigeria" (Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1977), 136-137. Published in Nigeria as The Idoma Nationality, 1600-1900: Problems of Studying the Origin and Development of Ethnicity (Enugu, 1981).

⁴Jan Vansina, Art History in Africa: An Introduction to Method (London, 1984), 314.

⁵Fieldwork for this study was carried out intermittently between September 1976 and July 1978 while the author was a member of the research staff of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

⁶Despite this, only the Yoruba egungun cult has been studied extensively. The remaining data exist mainly in fragmentary form in colonial archival reports, and as brief references in more comprehensive histories or ethnographies. In the case of the Idoma (and perhaps others), there is also an excellent descriptive account by an amateur historian, A. P. Anyebe, "Alekwu in Idoma Religion" (cyclostyled, 1980).

⁷Jean M. Borgatti, "Art and History in West Africa: Two Case Studies," in Justine Cordwell, ed., The Visual Arts (The Hague, 1980).

⁸Erim, "History of the Idoma," 136-137.

⁹Robert G. Armstrong, "The Religions of the Idoma" (University of Ibadan, n.d.), 2.

¹⁰Anyebe, "Alekwu," 2-3.

¹¹The phrase is taken from Richard N. Henderson, The King in Every Man: Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Ibo Society and Culture (New Haven, 1972).

¹²Anyebe, "Alekwu," 3.

¹³Ibid., 3.

¹⁴Robert G. Armstrong, "The Idoma-Speaking Peoples" in Peoples of the Niger-Benue Confluence (London, 1955), 100.

¹⁵Anyebe, 7. But not all dead fathers are eligible to be resurrected in this fashion. The rules vary slightly from one part of Idoma to another, but all require that the father must have reached the status of an elder prior to his death and must be survived by an adult male child. Dead mothers may not become alekwuafia, nor may daughters raise up their dead fathers.

¹⁶Ibid., 14.

¹⁷Ibid., 13.

¹⁸Armstrong, "Religions," 10.

¹⁹Erim, "History of the Idoma," 60.

²⁰Oteikwu O. Amali, "What Caused the Trouble Between Alekwu and the Abakpa" (University of Ibadan, n.d.).

²¹Otukpo, according to Anyebe (personal communication, May 1978). But Erim speaks of Otiya as a settlement on the north bank of the Benue in Greater Doma. Erim, "History of the Idoma," 60.

²²Contemporary historians use the Hausa term "Kwararafa," but the Idoma always refer to this group of states and their satellites as "Apa," a Jukun term. In older texts the Igala ruling classes are sometimes called Apa because they are held to have come from Kwararafa and conquered Idah. See O. Temple, Notes on the Tribes, Provinces, Emirates, and States of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria (Lagos, 1919), 147.

²³A village on the Idoma-Igala border in northern Idoma (Ochekwu district).

²⁴Refers to an Igbira settlement, though perhaps not literally the town of this name.

²⁵Erim, "History of the Idoma," 59.

²⁶Ibid., 57-58.

²⁷Picton has remarked that in Okene, these chant-singers are the myth-makers of the society. They invent as well as record history, in the manner of praise-singers. John Picton, personal communication, 4 May 1979.

²⁸Amali, "Alekwu," 7-23.

²⁹A town in eastern Igala, formerly an Akpoto stronghold. Nearly all the lines describing this episode are spoken in Igala.

³⁰An Igala name for alekwu is egwu ibegwu. Amali, "Alekwu," 24.

³¹Ogba, a "line"; ogboogba, "in a single line"; translated as "litany" with reference to the chant pattern. Hence Alekwoogboogba is "alekwu-of-the-litany." Ibid., 24.

³²Ochobo land is in central Idoma (Oglewu district).

³³The Abakpa are the Hausa and Akono presumably a Hausa settlement (Kano?).

³⁴This 56-line passage is probably intrusive, and is mainly in Igala. The reference to the "striped polecat" (anwu) is analogous to the civet cat referred to by Boston as ewolo, an animal tabooed by the Igala Mela clans and whose pelt is worn as part of the egwu afia masquerade. J. S. Boston, The Igala Kingdom (Ibadan, 1968), 41. The same totemic animal (anwu) is recorded by Erim for many of the central and northern Idoma groups who migrated through Igalaland.

³⁵The Abakpa market, formerly a large slave market like Igwumale, was an important source of ododo, an imported red blanketing manufactured in England and used for the construction of the abo. This market apparently was used by the Yoruba as well, as a source for ododo for sango and egungun rituals. H. Drewal, personal communication, 1979.

³⁶Onyanji is the daughter of the alekwu. In the chant, she accompanies the alekwu on its journey.

³⁷Erim, "History of the Idoma," 182-189; R. Sargent, "The Methodology of Chronology: The Igala Core Dating Progression," History in Africa, 11 (1984).

³⁸Byng-Hall in Temple, Notes on the Northern Provinces, 148.

³⁹Akpoto ("Okpoto" in Byng-Hall and Sargent) is used here to mean the earlier inhabitants of what are present-day Igala and Idoma lands. They form the commoner lineages over whom the immigrant Igala aristocracy has ruled since the late seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries.

⁴⁰Anyebe, personal communication, May 1978.

⁴¹Anyebe, "Alekwi," 12, 36.

⁴²H. R. Palmer, Sudanese Memoirs (Lagos, 1928; London, 1967), III, 107.

⁴³Mahdi Adamu, The Hausa Factor in West African History (Zaria, 1978), 40.

⁴⁴Joseph Greenberg, The Influence of Islam on a Sudanese Religion (New York, 1946), 49; M. Onwuejeogwu, "The Cult of the Bori Spirits Among the Hausa" in M. Douglas and P. Kaberry, eds., Man in Africa (London, 1969), 285.

⁴⁵A. Bassing, "Masques ancestraux chez les Idoma," Arts d'Afrique Noire, V (1973), 8, photographs by E. I. George.

⁴⁶Anyebe, "Alekwi," 14.

⁴⁷Amali, "Alekwi," 17.

⁴⁸Igbira evidence tends to corroborate this. Whereas the usual Igbira term for "Hausa" is "An'igambari" (as in Igala and Yoruba), the name of the tailor who sews the ancestral ekuoba costume is Ovopa, which may derive from the Idoma term Abakpa (John Picton, personal communication, 4 May 1979). Or instead, it may come from opa, the Idoma name for the burial cloth from which the masquerade costume is made. Both interpretations suggest that the Igbira mask was adopted in some way from the Idoma.

⁴⁹Greenberg, Influence of Islam, 58.

⁵⁰Adamu reports that the Abakwariga of Takum district are still predominantly pagan, while those of Wukari are Muslim. The Hausa Factor, 39.

⁵¹C. K. Meek, A Sudanese Kingdom (London, 1931), 22-23, 29-30, 44, 50-51, 67, 149, 151, 172, 185, 276, 279, 285, 432, 496.

⁵²Adamu, The Hausa Factor, 38-43; A. C. Unomah, "The Gwandara Settlements of Lafia to 1900" in Elizabeth Isichei, ed., Studies in the History of Plateau State (London, 1982), 123-127; A. Rubin, "Arts of the Jukun-Speaking Peoples of Northern Nigeria" (Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University, 1969), 71; Webster, Spirits, 2-3.

⁵³Adamu, 41-43.

⁵⁴Meek, Sudanese Kingdom, 139.

⁵⁵Webster, Spirits, 3.

⁵⁶While used by the Wukari Jukun to mean "person" (apa) or "people" (wapa) as a self-definition, apa is used by the Idoma as a place designation, which Meek identifies with the area around Abinsi, and Armstrong with Wukari. Meek, 16; Armstrong, Peoples, 96. A site called apa lies a few kilometers from Gindindorowa near Wukari. Anyebe, 21.

⁵⁷Rubin, Arts, 71, plates 90, 91.

⁵⁸Ibid. Adamu identifies this cult explicitly with bori, the most widespread of the Hausa possession cults. Adamu, 43. The connection between ashama, a masquerade to incarnate Abakwariga ancestors, and aljanu, a spirit-possession cult, is not explained by Rubin, but the powerful horse-and-rider metaphor documented for bori is reflected in the Idoma alekwuafia and may therefore be used for the ashama masquerade as well. For additional connections between the Abakwariga aljanu cult and Idoma anjenu, see S. L. Kasfir, "Anjenu: Sculpture for Idoma Water Spirits," African Arts, XV, 4 (1982), 47-51. Anjenu, and therefore probably aljanu, are of fairly recent origin compared with ashama and alekwuafia. On the Idoma side of this set of parallels, it would be inconceivable for an alekwuafia to appear in the context of something so "profane" (because female-dominated) as an anjenu ritual.

⁵⁹Venice Lamb and Judy Holmes, Nigerian Weaving (Roxford, England, 1980), 147-160 and plate 229. The authors were told that the Aku himself is buried in an akya cloth. The ashama masquerade ensemble therefore combines the woven burial cloth of the Jukun (kyadze) with the akya of Abakwariga origin - symbolism which may be politically significant as well as ritually efficacious.

⁶⁰Photographs of alekwuafia are very rare, as their appearances are hedged about with numerous taboos. Those by Armstrong and by E. I. George for the article by Bassing, both dating from the 1950s, are therefore extremely valuable as documents.

⁶¹Amali, "Alekwu," 17.

⁶²Borgatti's discussion is limited to the Yoruba and Igala, and thus does not include comparisons with the Idoma or Abakwariga.

⁶³Henderson, King in Every Man, 88, 349.

⁶⁴Armstrong assumes a (very ancient) common origin for the Yoruba and Igala based on glottochronology. Armstrong, Peoples, 80. Crowther recorded two origin legends, one of which claimed a Yoruba conquest, the other an Edo ("Ado") one. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Journal of an Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers ... in 1854 (London, 1855, 1970), 65, 206. Boston also assumes ancient Yoruba-Igala connections, but is careful to divorce this from verifiable dynastic history. John Boston, "Oral Traditions and the History of Igala," Journal of African History, X, 1 (1969), 29-43. Yet Robert Sargent, the first oral historian to gather extensive data on Igala dynastic history, includes no Yoruba component in his reconstruction of the Igala kingship. Sargent, "The Methodology of Chronology: The Igala Core Dating Progression," History in Africa, Vol. II.

⁶⁵William Bascom, The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria (New York, 1969), 89.

⁶⁶G. T. Basden, Among the Ibos of Nigeria (Philadelphia, 1921), 120, 124; Basden, Niger Ibos (London, 1938, 1966), 294-295; Daryll Forde and G. I. Jones, The Ibo and Ibibio-Speaking Peoples of South-Eastern Nigeria (London, 1950), 37.

⁶⁷P. Amaury Talbot, Peoples of Southern Nigeria (London, 1926), III, 767 ff., figure 166. The author states that Illah, a northern Ika village group whose ancestral masquerade closely resembles that seen in southern Idoma, was founded by Igala.

⁶⁸Boston, Igala Kingdom, 41.

⁶⁹Samuel Johnson, The History of the Yorubas (London, 1921), 156-160.

⁷⁰Possible evidence for this is suggested by the ritual paraphernalia of the two cults: for example, only the sango and egungun cults employ red ododo cloth and the bata drums (H. Drewal, personal communication, 7 August 1979). There is an elaborate Yoruba mythology surrounding the sacred power of red cloth and associating this with the Nupe. Robert F. Thompson, African Art in Motion: Icon and Act (Berkeley, 1974), 221.

⁷¹Robin Law, The Oyo Empire (Oxford, 1977), 34.

⁷²Ndako gboya is employed in boys' initiations and in an anti-witchcraft cult. This mask, a long tube of white cotton cloth, is suspended from a wheel-shaped bamboo frame fixed to the top of a tall pole which is raised and lowered. The ndako gboya is not reported to be an ancestor, but a secret, mystical force. S. F. Nadel, Nupe Religion (London, 1954), 188 ff. To avoid confusion, I have refrained from discussing the contemporary Nupe gugu ancestral cult, which is derived from egungun and practised by Yoruba settlers in Nupe. Ibid., 274. The Nupe elo masquerade also derives some of its form, but not its meaning, from egungun prototypes. Gugu appears to be a reintroduction - a case of feedback in an altered form - if one accepts the hypothesis that egungun originally derived from Nupe. Drewal, personal communication, 7 August 1979.

⁷³Law, Oyo, 43. The association of egungun with Sango, while possibly evidence of a Nupe origin (since Sango's mother was said to be Nupe) is much too early to fit this chronology, assuming for the sake of the argument that Sango was an historical figure.

⁷⁴Afia forms part of several ritual designations besides mmuo afia in Igbo, such as Ife-afia and Afia-ji-oku, both names of a harvest festival. Here it means "industry" or "striving (brings wealth)." Basden, Niger Ibos, 67. This seems quite unrelated to the fact that in Idoma, the afia are the long filaments which hang down from the apex of the mask projection and are regarded as its most sacred and powerful essence, being used for the swearing of oaths. The afia must never touch the ground or be touched by a human being. Anyebe, "Alekwu," 26-27.

⁷⁵Henderson, King in Every Man, 349.

⁷⁶For a full description of this masquerade, see my essay in Herbert Cole, Chike Aniakor, et al., Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos (Los Angeles, 1984).

⁷⁷John Boston, personal communication, 12 February 1981. Like the Abakwariga, Idoma, and Igbira masks, the top projection contains nail parings and hair of the deceased. It may also contain an ajibo, made from a small strip of burial cloth (okpe) tied and knotted to resemble the dead man.

⁷⁸Jean Borgatti reports that "tall ghost" masquerades are found among northern Edo groups such as Weppa-Wano, Northern Ibie, Ekperi, and Okpella. Personal communication, 14 March 1979. Carol Ann Lorenz has seen them in Ishan as well. Personal communication, 9 December 1983. Probably sources for these attenuated versions are Igala and Igbira settlements on the west bank of the Niger.

⁷⁹John Picton, personal communication, 4 May 1979.

⁸⁰Bascom, Yoruba, illustration opposite page 88.

⁸¹Anyebe, "Alekwu," 12.

⁸²Henderson, King in Every Man, 362.

⁸³Boston, 12 February 1981.

⁸⁴This argument can be supported even from the most extreme anti-migration mythical-charterite position that the Igala and Idoma have "always" lived where they are now, but its extraordinary similarity to the Abakwariga ashama can only be accounted for through the presumption of historical contact.

⁸⁵Henderson, King in Every Man, 94 et passim.

⁸⁶Armstrong, Peoples, 123-124 (spelled ekwula).

⁸⁷The same type of blanketing is used in Okwoga and is probably ododo.

⁸⁸Emeje Ogbu, Agila, 9 February 1978.

⁸⁹Erim, "History of the Idoma," 249. The low population density was due to the fact that Nsukka and Abakaliki people left it empty as a buffer zone. Emeje Ogbu, 9 February 1978.

⁹⁰Erim O. Erim, "Leopards, Civet Cats, Birds and History: The Idoma Case" (Dalhousie University, n.d.), 23-26.

⁹¹Erim, "History of the Idoma," 248.

⁹²Talbot reported what is probably the same belief among several Igbo groups of Abakaliki Division including the Ngbo, very close neighbors of the Agila people. The dead were said to live in a special town called Obodo Ma, the "Town of the Dead." The Agila term Ogbodo Aba (Ogbod'aba) substitutes aba (masquerade) for ma, but is otherwise identical. Talbot, Peoples of Southern Nigeria, II, 322.

⁹³Erim, "History of the Idoma," 67.

⁹⁴Armstrong, Peoples, 97.

⁹⁵Erim, "History of the Idoma," 136-137.

⁹⁶Paula Brown, "The Igbira" in Peoples of the Niger-Benue Confluence (London, 1955), 57.

⁹⁷Capt. J. R. Wilson-Haffenden, "Ethnological Notes on the Kwottos of Toto (Panda) District," Journal of the African Society, XXVI (1927), 370.

⁹⁸Ibid., 370.

⁹⁹The Nupe kingdom, according to its own traditions, was founded from Idah early in the fifteenth century by Tsoede, born of a Nupe mother and Igala father. Daryll Forde, "The Nupe" in Peoples of the Niger-Benue Confluence (London, 1955), 22.

100Meek, Sudanese Kingdom, 43.

101Finally, it should be mentioned that the Igbira themselves do not manufacture opa cloth (Idoma, enopa; Igala, okpe), which is a handspun narrow strip-weave, made on the men's horizontal loom. Their funeral cloth is much wider, striped, and woven on the women's vertical loom. John Picton, personal communication, 23 May 1981. This cloth type is illustrated in Lamb and Holmes, Nigerian Weaving, 232.

102Solomon Babayemi, "Egungun Among the Oyo Yoruba" (Ibadan, 1981).

103Theodore Celenko, personal communication, 29 October 1979.

104Capt. J. R. Wilson-Haffenden, The Red Men of Nigeria (London, 1930), 303-307.

105Picton, personal communication, 4 May 1979.

106Bassing, "Masques Ancestraux," 8. Picton reports that the ekuoba may also wear a red cloth, woven by the Bunu and used by them in funerary contexts. John Picton, personal communication, 23 May 1981. This heavy, blanket-like cloth, called abata, is illustrated in Lamb and Holmes, 81-82, and appears to be the equivalent of ododo for the Idoma alekwuafia.

107Designated by Erim as "Apa II," "History of the Idoma," 168 and map.

108Ibid., 89.

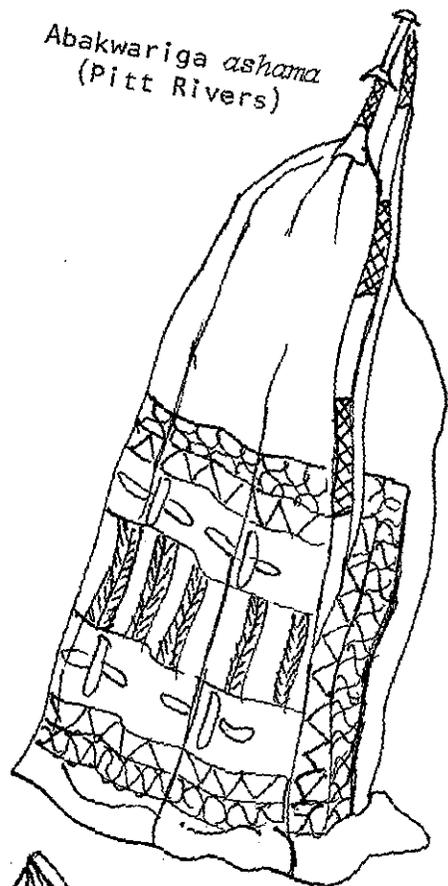
109The Hausa name for the Idoma inhabitants of Doma and Keana north of the Benue, who call themselves Doma Nokwu.

110Arnold Rubin, "Prologue to Art History in Plateau State" in Elizabeth Isichei, ed., Studies, 61 and illustration 1, opp. page 144.

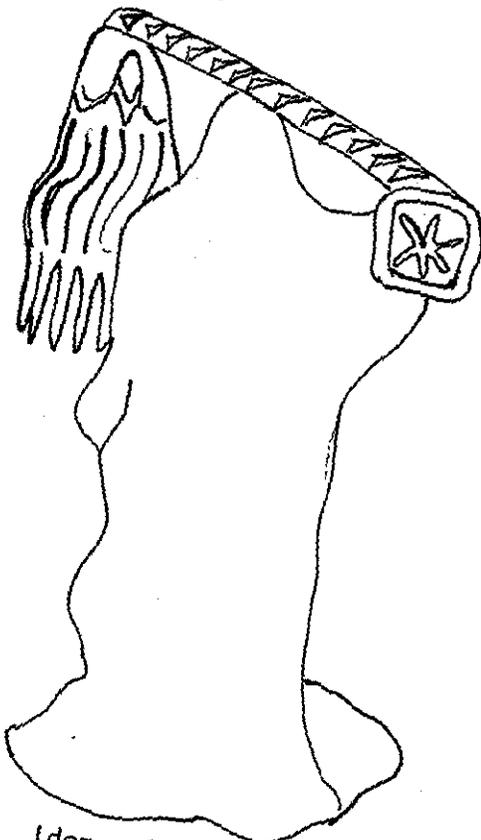
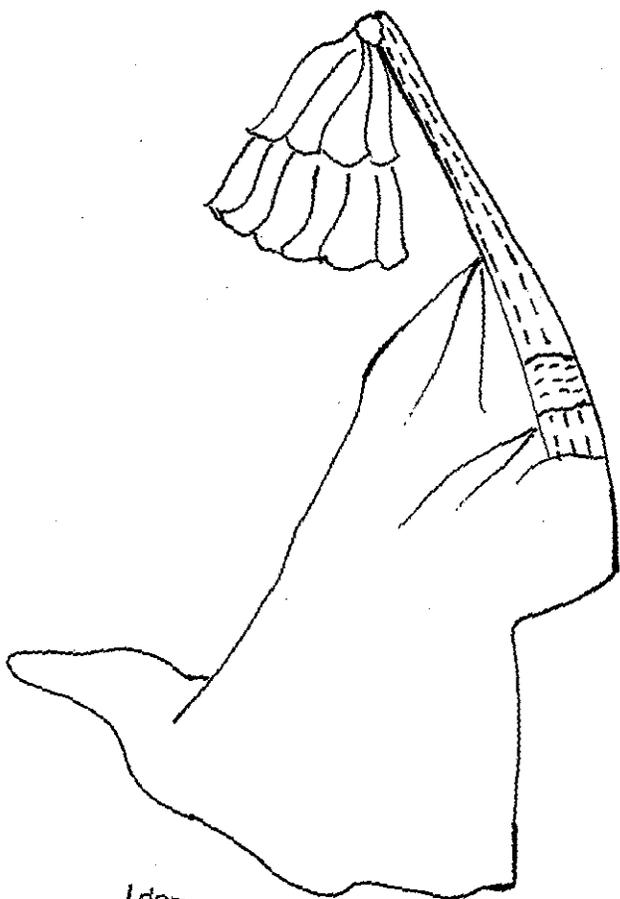
111Ade Adefuye, "The Alago Kingdoms: A Political History," in Elizabeth Isichei, ed., Studies, 108.

112Armstrong, Peoples, 125. For example, pronouns are even closer to the Yoruba form than Igala pronouns. The Alago say that they supported Igala in the war against Benin (1515-1516). Adefuye, "Alago Kingdoms," 108.

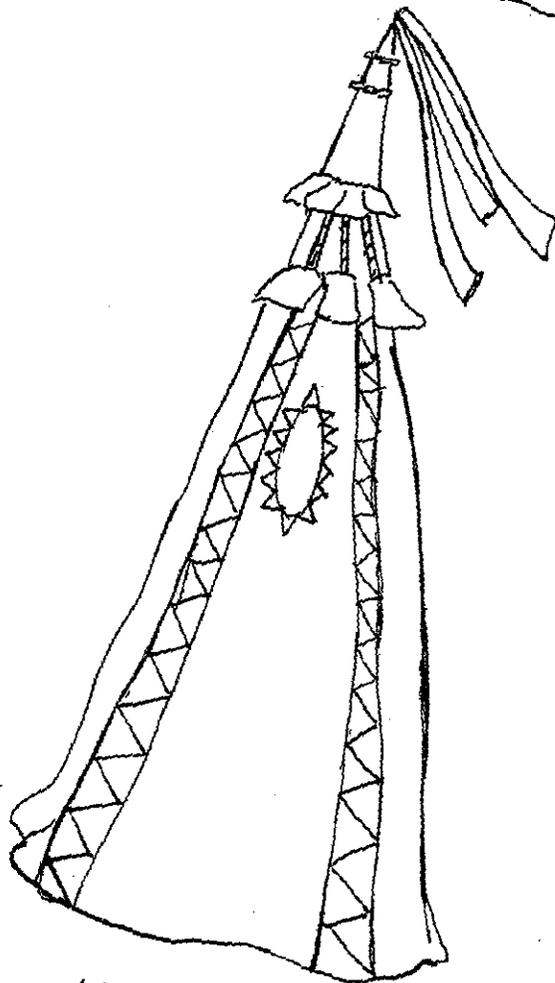
Abakwariga ashama
(Pitt Rivers)



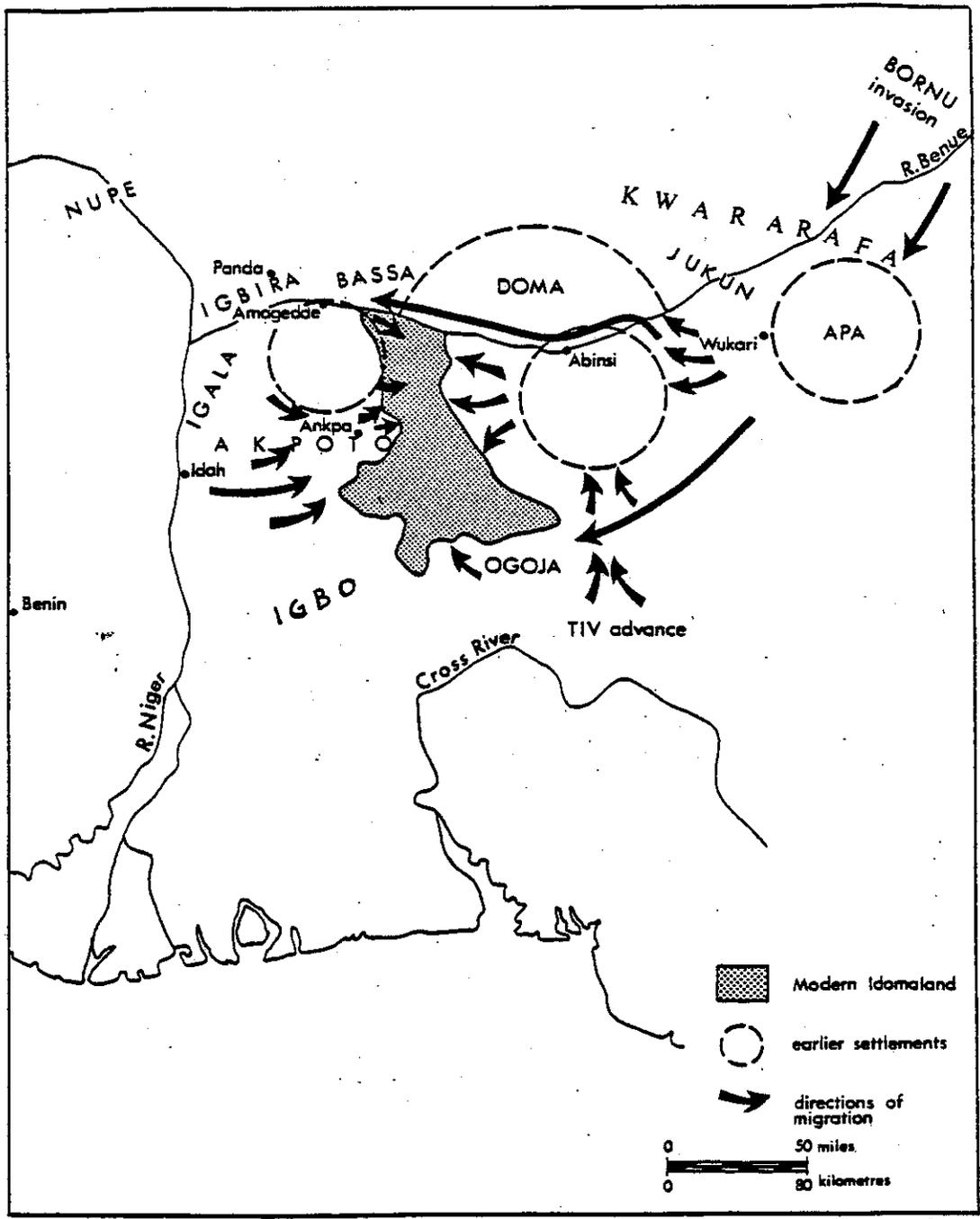
Idoma alekwafia
(Okwoga)



Idoma ekwila
(Aaila)

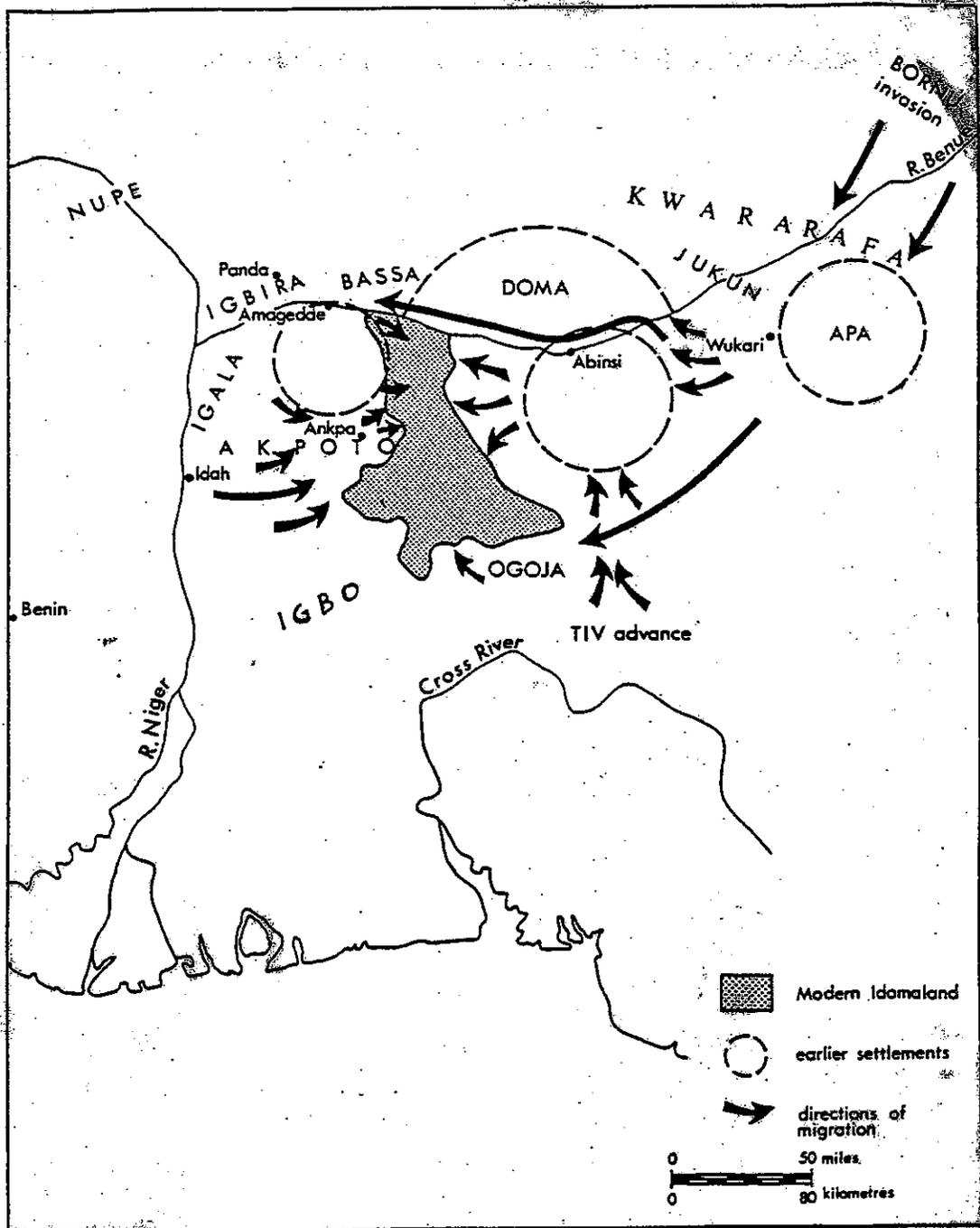


Idoma alekwafia
(Otu)



Migrations into Idomaland from Apa and Igala

adapted from Erin O. Erin
A precolonial history of the Idoma
1977



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