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A YORUBA EPA MASK BY FASIKU ALAYE

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Source: *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, May 1998, No. 10, MEG Conference 1997:  
Inter-Active: World Cultures and Museum Education (May 1998), pp. 121-124

Published by: Museum Ethnographers Group

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40793609>

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## A YORUBA EPA MASK BY FASIKU ALAYE

Anthony Shelton

As part of the South Hall and Emslie Horniman Gallery redisplay, the Horniman Museum has begun to acquire new material to be displayed alongside the older collections. The new acquisitions are intended to complement existing holdings by providing fuller coverage of particular cultural themes, or to enlarge the appeal of the new displays by including material not well represented elsewhere in UK collections. Many of the new acquisitions will be of high visual quality; they will help centre the new displays and, when funds allow, increase the number of 'masterpieces' in public trusteeship.

A sculpture which fills all the above criteria and is also a masterpiece of the carver's art is the recently purchased Epa mask from the Yoruba peoples of south-west Nigeria. The Horniman already has a good Yoruba collection which includes twelve Gelede masks, three of which were bought last year, an Egungun mask, Ibeji and maternity figures, superb examples of divination boards and a rich collection of textiles, many of which were obtained in Nigeria by Lisa Stanfield and Keith Nicklin. With the acquisition of the Epa mask, the collection now includes examples of three major Yoruba masquerades.

The National Museum in Lagos lays claim to over 150 Epa masks (Heyden 1977: 18). In this country examples are exhibited at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter and the Liverpool Museum, while the British Museum displayed two extremely fine examples at the Royal Academy in its 1995 exhibition *Africa: the Art of a Continent*. The Pitt Rivers Museum also has two examples. Prior to 1965, the Horniman mask formed part of the Rosen collection in Brussels. It then moved to Berlin where, in 1987, it was acquired by Guntha Hepe from whom the Museum purchased it. It has been identified by John Picton, a leading expert on the Yoruba, as the work of Fasiku Alaye, an early twentieth century master carver who lived in the village of Ikerin in the region of Opin. The scholarly importance of the mask is considerably enhanced by our knowledge of the identity of its maker, a fact that Sir David Attenborough gave particular attention to when he described the piece (Attenborough 1997).

Epa masks originated from the seventeen<sup>1</sup> kingdoms which make up the Ekiti region in the north-east of Yoruba territory. Unlike other parts of Yorubaland, Ekiti has been subject to extensive foreign influences. According to Forde (1951) the area received successive waves of immigration from Ife in the sixteenth century and from the Bini in the seventeenth, as



**Plate 1** Yoruba Epa mask by Fasiku Alaye. Photograph © Horniman Museum.

well as being the target of military raids from Ilorin and Ibadan in the middle or late nineteenth century. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century the area was considered by Akintoye (1969) to have formed part of the Benin empire. Consequently, its population has a complex mixed ethnic origin which has given rise to some unique traditions not previously found elsewhere in Yorubaland but which have since spread to the Iyagba, Igbomina, Oshun, Owo and Ijesha regions. It is also not surprising to find that the warrior figures often surmounting Epa masks represent heroes who proved their mettle during this long period of instability.

Epa masks consist of a Janus faced helmet and an often elaborate figurative superstructure usually carved with a female or equestrian figure at its centre. Our mask depicts a woman carrying a baby on her back. In her right hand she holds a bowl of kola nuts and in her left a cockerel, carried as religious offerings. The smaller figures surrounding the mother and child represent traders, musicians, hunters and other personages central to Yoruba community life. Many Epa masks bear names like 'Mother with Children', 'Owner of Many Children', 'Children Cover Me' (like a protecting cloth), 'Children are Honourable to Have', 'Bringer of Children', 'Mother of Twins', 'Nursing Mother' and many other similar appellations (Ojo 1978: 458), which occur in the songs that accompany the dancers. Like these, the Horniman sculpture honours the child-bearing ability of women while acknowledging fertility deities like Oshun (associated with a river of the same name

whose cult is centred on Oshogbo) or the female ancestors of particular communities who also help with procreation. Early writers including Fagg & Eliosofson (1958) have interpreted Epa ceremonies as entirely focused on fertility. However, others (Carroll 1967; Ojo 1978; Heyden 1977) have found the ceremonies to be equally concerned with warriors<sup>2</sup> and the medicine God Osanyin, relating them to both physical and spiritual security. Ojo (1978: 464), following Carroll, has proposed that at one level the ceremonies incorporate the re-enactment of historical events. In a ceremony recorded by Heyden in Iloro, Ekiti, masks surmounted by female figures were identified as the wives of the warrior Okotorojo, represented by an animal mask resembling a goat or antelope. Okotorojo, the principal figure in the festival, was chained to another man described as either having the duty to restrain the wild powers of the warrior or, paradoxically, as the representative of the power (*ashe*) of Eleda (or Oludumare, God), who always remains behind the warrior to render him invincible in battle (Heyden 1977: 19-20).

In north-west Yorubaland the Epa masks are kept by the head of a lineage or a town chief on behalf of the lineage or community. When in use they are choreographed as emerging from the bush, where they return once the festival is completed. Offerings may be made to a mask before it is used or during the ceremony. According to Robert Thompson (1974: 191), 'the Epa cult stresses the transformation of young men into stalwart specimens able to bear pain and shoulder heavy weight'. King Arowolo of Iloro distinguished between the type of energy belonging to the cult of Elefon, concerned with ancestral spirits, and the cult of Epa, connected with the dignified, slow and patient masquerades of ancient men and culture heroes (Heyden 1977: 17). While the Ekiti Yoruba share their principal deities with Yoruba from elsewhere, they also have many deities and masquerades peculiar to themselves (Ojo 1978: 455), leading other fieldworkers to note that the distinction is less clear than Thompson suggested. In north-eastern Yorubaland, Epa and other masks are used in annual ceremonies, held in February or March in some places or as late as September in others (*ibid.*: 457) to promote the fertility and well-being of the community. They also appear in Elefon festivals performed to celebrate the return of the warriors, to honour Ogun, the god of war and iron and to mark the growth of new crops. Elsewhere such masks were used in post-burial rites relating to titled men. In one fairly consistent episode in the festival the masquerader, supporting a mask which can often weigh 50 lbs or more, attempts to jump off a mound to augur the quality of the new year. A fall or loss of balance is read as a bad omen which may herald coming misfortune.

The helmet is always simply carved, often with two faces, and is reminiscent of a mortar or pot. Such similarities are made explicit in the term used to describe the helmet, *ikiko* (pot), alluding to it as a container of spiritual power

## Research Notes

and otherworldly force, *ashe*. The eyes of one face are usually carved open, looking out to the world of the living, while those on the other are sealed, contemplating the realm of the divine and the ancestors.<sup>3</sup> Much Yoruba ceremonial is concerned with the control and focusing of this divine force for the benefit of the community. Ojo (*ibid.*: 467) recounts that in Ido the ritual power of the masquerader is kept in a briefcase and the masquerades are referred to as the carriers of medicine. The control and focusing of *ashe* is a central theme throughout the different episodes that make up the Epa festival as well as apparently constituting a theme in other ceremonies in which Epa masks are used. The equestrian figures from episodes from the region's turbulent history incorporate representations of the channelling of *ashe* to safeguard the conquering hero. Maternity figures invoke *ashe* for increasing procreative abilities and fertility, while references to medicine also express the dependence of personal well-being on the judicial channelling of *ashe*. Perhaps, then, the iconographic clue to the meaning of Epa masks is not to be found in their elaborate superstructures, but in the crude pot helmet itself as a manifestation of the efficacy of *ashe* for communal and personal well-being.

## Notes

1. There were sixteen kingdoms according to tradition.
2. Not only do the central equestrian figures usually represent warriors, but the depiction of leopards (on the mask belonging to the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris for example) is also meant to be a metaphorical invocation of warfare.
3. Emmanuel Arinze: personal communication.

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