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Yoruba Spectacle

The eyes that have seen Gẹlẹdẹ
have seen the ultimate spectacle.
Ojú to ba rí Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ ti de òpin ìrọ̀n.

This saying, well known even in parts of Yorubaland where Gẹlẹdẹ does not exist, suggests something of Gẹlẹdẹ's widespread reputation and its impact on spectators. But what do Yoruba mean by spectacle *(ìrọ̀n)?* In its broadest sense, spectacle is a fleeting, transitory phenomenon. It may be a display or performance for the gods, ancestors, or the mothers; but it may also refer to mental images. Thus, the Yoruba word for spectacle is the same word used to speak of a mystical vision (*ojúùrọ̀n* or *ojúù ìrọ̀n*) or the power of visions (*irîírọ̀n,* literally "act of seeing visions") (Abraham 1958:317). Similarly, *irọ̀n* is used in referring to a remembrance (*inîírọ̀n,* "a mental recollection"). It is perhaps partially in this sense that certain kinds of narratives *(àlọ́)* are considered spectacles, for storytelling creates "the illusion of actualized events" (LaPin 1980:2). A story is a spectacle in the sense that it is visible through the storyteller's dramatization, and the spectator visualizes it further in his mind's eye. Thus Dierdre LaPin's informants referred to certain types of narrative as pictures (*àwòrọ́ń* or *à wò ìrọ̀n*), images to be looked at.

As a vision, as a remembrance, as a narrative, or as a festival or a display for the gods, ancestors, or the mothers—these various usages of the term *irọ̀n* have something in common: they imply, as LaPin says (1980:7–8), "a mysterious, permanent dimension of reality which, until revealed, is shut off from human view." They are otherworldly phenomena whose worldly manifestations are temporary and periodically reintroduced or regenerated.

Perhaps for this reason the term *irọn* also is used to designate "a generation." A generation consists of the members of a lineage *(ìdílé)* who are born into the world at approximately the same time, whose children would make up the next generation. Implicit in a generation is the collectivity of people required to formulate it. A spectacle, by definition, likewise implies a collectivity of participant/spectators and a multiplicity of images and ideas converging in the same time frame. The cumulation of all generations constitutes a lineage, that is, both the living and the departed who trace their origins to a common progenitor. Continuity or regeneration is implicit in the concept of lineage; a generation represents one of its diachronic units. Thus the notion of continuity within a lineage is expressed *l'ìrọn d'ìrọn,* "from generation to generation." A generation is the worldly manifestation of a lineage, just as spectacle is the worldly manifestation of a permanent otherworldly reality. Like spectacle, a generation is temporary, transitory, and cyclical.

The transitory nature of existence in the world is expressed in the Yoruba proverb "The world is a market, the otherworld is home" *(Aiyé l'ọjà, ọ̀run n'ilé).* The market as a metaphor for the world evokes an image of a place one merely visits, whereas home or the afterworld is a permanent residence. The notion that spectacles are temporary, worldly manifestations of permanent, metaphysical realities can be demonstrated in a number of specific contexts. The most explicit example is possession trance, when during ceremonies the gods become manifest in the world in the bodies of their devotees. Other examples of temporary manifestations of the supernatural occur in the masquerade performances of ancestral spirits, Egúngún, and in Gẹlẹdẹ.

Evidence of the otherworldliness of Yoruba spectacle, whether it is a masquerade display, a festival for the gods, or a narrative performance, is to be found in its clearly demarcated openings and closings, which bring it into the world and return it or "carry it away" again, i.e., back to the otherworld *(ọ̀run).* Hence, Egungun society members explained that their own masquerade spectacle opens at night when all nonmembers lock themselves in their houses. At that time, in the center of the town, a spirit known as Agan, who must not be seen by anyone, brings the festival into the world. The chants that accompany Agan's coming hint at the spirit's elusive, otherworldly entry into the world by making an analogy to the way rain falls on the earth:

I come *weréweré* [small, quick, light, i.e., drizzling] like the early night rain
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
I come *kutukutu* [forceful and quick, i.e., pouring] like the early morning rain

Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
I come *pápàpá* [large, heavy sporadic drops] like the rain at sunrise
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
The eyes of the blacksmith cannot see underneath the ground of his shed
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
The eyes of the potter cannot see the inside of clay
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
Mẹ̀mẹ̀mẹ̀ cries the female goat
Bọ̀bọ̀ cries the female sheep
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
I get up early in the morning
I bring dew from the otherworld to earth
I descend *rùrùrùrùrù* [the sound of walking through wet grasses]
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
I come with cudgels, a sheath, a sword
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
Grasp it! Nothing's there!
Grasp it! Nothing!
Grasp it! Nothing!
Amamamamamamama!
Be looking! We are looking!
Be looking! We are looking!
Be looking! We are looking!

Mo dé weréweré bi ejí orì alẹ́
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
Mo dé kùtùkùtù bi ejí àwúrọ̀
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
Mo dé pápàpá bi ejí ìyalẹ̀ta
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
Ojú alâgbẹ̀dẹ ko to'lẹ arọ
Ojú amọ̀kòkò ko to'lẹ amọ̀
Mẹ̀mẹ̀mẹ̀ nigbe ewúrẹ́
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
Bọ̀bọ̀ nigbe àgùtàn
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
Mojí lóròru kùtùkùtù
Mogbé enini ọ̀run w'aiyé
Mo wọ̀ rùrùrùrùrù
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
Mo dé t'ogbó t'ọ̀gọ t'àkọ̀ t'idà
Màrìwòoo! Àgànóoo!
Gbámù! Òfó!
Gbámù! Òfó!
Gbámù! Òfó!
Ámamamamamamama!

Ẹmá wá! Anwá!
Ẹmá wá! Anwá!
Ẹmá wá! Anwá!

[Collected in Ilaro, 1977]

This invocation makes use of idiophonic language to simulate actual dynamic qualities, qualities likened to the way rain falls. But, according to Yoruba thought, its role is not merely poetic or symbolic; rather it invokes or brings the spirit into existence at the threshold of the phenomenal world. Agan enters at the center of the town, but in Yoruba thought the center is the place where the material and the spiritual realms intersect (cf. M. T. Drewal 1975 and Abiọdun 1980b); it is the crossroads, *oríta (orí ìta)*, literally "the head or the point of intersection." Its entry is elusive and enigmatic, like sudden rain. This elusiveness is highlighted by the fact that no one must see Agan; it comes only after the townspeople, for fear of death, lock themselves inside. Its presence is made known through sounds rather than sights. Finally, at the close of the festival, another spirit, called Aráńta or Olọdúngbọ́dún (literally "The-Owner-of-the-Festival-Takes-the-Festival") carries the spectacle back to the otherworld.

The spiritual transcendence of Yoruba spectacle is also implied in the generic name given to the first rhythms played by the *bàtá* drum ensemble during Egungun displays or festivals for Ṣàngó, Ọya, and other deities. These introductory rhythms are called *alùwási,* a contraction of the phrase *a lù wá si aiyé* (literally "drums come into the world"). A sacrifice is performed before the festival begins to put the drums into a ritually transcendent state, and at the close a "cooling" rite *(ètùtù)* is performed to restore them to normalcy.

LaPin (1980:12–14) has recorded opening and closing formulas of a similar nature in storytelling.[1] She notes that

> The metaphorical assertion that *àlọ́* is like a jinn (spirit, dead person) is given further weight in the formulaic verses that open and close many performances. . . . Introductory formulas to the *àlọ́* develop the notion that the mode is a separate ontological entity that undergoes transformation and rebirth in the body of the performer. [An introductory formula] acts in an incantatory sense as a catalyst which dislodges the *àlọ́* from its home in an upper region, somewhere between heaven and earth. Thus shaken out of its slumbering state, the *àlọ́* suddenly lurches into action.

Such opening and closing conventions confirm that spectacle is perceived to be a transitory, worldly manifestation of an otherworldly reality, just as a generation is the worldly manifestation of the Yoruba lineage, which is eternal.

As an otherworldly phenomenon, spectacle partakes of a dynamic force that makes it not merely affecting but also efficacious, not merely symbolic or metaphorical but instrumental (cf. Ray 1973). It possesses the performative power of *àṣẹ,* the power to bring things into actual existence.[2] This concept is fundamental to Yoruba thought. Variously defined as "power, authority, command" (Abraham 1958:71), "a coming to pass . . . effect; imprecation" (Crowther 1852:47), *aṣẹ* has important metaphysical dimensions but no moral connotations. It is neither positive nor negative, neither good nor bad, but rather is an activating force or energy. *Aṣẹ* encompasses both the expression *áàṣẹ,* which follows prayers and invocations and affirms "so be it, may it come to pass," as well as *aṣẹ̀,* "shrine," the site of concentrated substances containing vital force—herbs, foods, blood of animals—which attract and stimulate a god's power. *Aṣẹ* is absolute power and potential present in all things—rocks, hills, streams, mountains, leaves, animals, sculpture, ancestors, and gods—and in utterances—prayers, songs, curses, and even everyday speech.

Utterances, as expressions of the spiritual inner self of an individual, possess *aṣẹ,* the power to bring things into actual existence. This belief is apparently ancient, for a number of Ifẹ terra cotta heads depict sacrificial victims who are gagged to prevent them from uttering a fatal curse upon their executioners (Willett 1967:49; Awolalu 1973:88).[3] As Ulli Beier (1970:49) explains,

> Yoruba believe strongly in the power of the word, or rather in a mysterious force called ashe . . . that quality in a man's personality which makes his words—once uttered—come true.

Raymond Prince (1960:66) confirms,

> It would appear that their background conception is that to utter the name of something may draw that something into actual existence . . . not only within the mind and body of he who utters and he who hears the word, but also in the physical world as well.

And according to J. A. A. Ayoade (1979:51),

> The second and more difficult level [in evoking spirit forces] is that in which the spirit forces still remain dormant until they are called forth through the utterance of words of power. The knowledge of the secret names of these spirits and of incantations is of special importance in concretizing the inner essence of an object.[4]

In this way, the spirit Agan is invoked to bring the Egungun festival into the world. Similarly, in Yoruba incantations *(ọfọ̀)* chanted during the

preparation or application of medicines *(oògùn)* to invoke the dynamic essences of all their ingredients, a monosyllabic action verb drawn from each ingredient's name is pronounced following that name to set the ingredient into action (Verger 1976).

Words possess a dynamic unleashed in the act of pronouncing, thus activating latent forces through effective patterns of stresses—the combination of tone, duration of syllables, and vocal force. This power is especially evident in the voicing of idiophonic words, or what S. A. Babalọla (1966:67–68) calls "word-pictures," words that by their very sound and intensity evoke mental pictures, such as those cited above to invoke the Egungun spirit Agan. Thus, words and phrases not only carry meaning through their definitions and relationships to each other, but may carry extraordinary power in their performance, that is, in the dynamics of the act of pronouncing. By this means, latent forces, or rather forces residing in the otherworld, may be brought into existence, into the phenomenal world. This power is most obvious in incantations and invocations, but it is also explicit in a variety of other verbal arts performances, including those of Ẹfẹ night.

The spoken word carries the power to bring things into being, especially when uttered by the *alááṣẹ*, "one who has and uses *aṣẹ*," during invocations and sacrifices. Blood also contains *aṣẹ*. The shedding of blood in ritual sacrifices, which precedes ceremonies for the gods, ancestors, or the mothers, releases a vital force that is transferred to the god or spirit to renew his or her *aṣẹ* for the purpose of benefiting the devotees. Blood or *aṣẹ* is also poured on ritual objects associated with a deity to infuse them with power. The act of sacrifice is a reciprocal affair between man and the gods in which the devotee nurtures the spirit of the divinity in exchange for increased protection and blessing (cf. Awolalu 1979:134–142).

All sacrifice, however, need not be bloody. When prescribed by a diviner, performance is sacrifice, for it requires great expense on the part of the supplicants. Thus, a diviner may instruct a client to sacrifice by giving a cloth to Egungun in order to conceive a child. In effect, the individual must create a masquerade and perform with the Egungun society during its festivities. Likewise, the community may be told to sacrifice in order to appeal to the spiritually powerful women, and this obligation will be met by performing Gẹlẹdẹ. Art is sacrifice, and artistic displays carry the sacred power to bring things into existence.

The fundamental concept of life force—that it exists in many forms and manifestations and in varying amounts—is at the foundation of Yoruba philosophy and social organization (cf. Drewal and Drewal 1980). The system acknowledges innate individual power and potential. Similarly, the concept of *aṣẹ* is basic to the structure of the arts, whether verbal

or visual, a structure in which the units of the whole are discrete and share equal value and importance with the other units and in which the autonomous segments evoke, and often invoke and activate, diverse forces. So far, this concept has been demonstrated in the opening and closing segments, which bring spectacle "into the world" from its otherworldly realm and carry it away again. This type of organization or compositional style is seriate.[5]

Seriality is a fundamental organizing principle in Yoruba spectacle as well as in praise poetry, invocations, incantations, textile designs, body tattoos, and sculpture (cf. H. J. Drewal 1977b:6–8; Drewal and Drewal 1980). Attention to the discrete units of the whole in any medium produces an overall form that tends to be multifocal, often characterized by a shifting perspective. Its outer features—whether its units are arranged spatially or temporally—include clearly demarcated openings and closings, segmentation, discontinuity, free rhythm, repetition, and density of meaning.[6] Other concepts of performance will become evident as we examine Gẹlẹdẹ as the "ultimate" in spectacle.

The Spectacle of Gẹlẹdẹ

Gẹlẹdẹ, found principally among western Yoruba peoples (including those of Ketu, Ọhọri, Anago, Ifọnyin, Awori, Ẹgbado, Ibarapa, and Ṣabe), varies greatly as a result of historical factors and inherited and acquired worship patterns within lineages. In each town, it is generally associated with a deified founding foremother, either an earth or a water deity, and a deified forefather. Other gods, such as Ògún and Èṣù/Ẹlẹ́gbá, may also be honored, and individual Gẹlẹdẹ families additionally sacrifice to their own lineage gods. Despite local variations, the fundamental purpose of Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle is to pay tribute to and therefore to derive benefit from female mystical power. An elderly participant (Ogundipẹ 1971) points out:

> The gods of Gẹlẹdẹ are so called "the great ancestral mothers". . . . The power of The Great Mother is manifold. The ancestors, when they had a problem, would assemble to determine the cause and the remedy . . . and, if it is found that Gẹlẹdẹ should be done to bring about rain or the birth of children, it should be done and it will be so. The Great Mother has power in many things. . . . [She] is the owner of everything in the world. She owns you. We must not say how the whole thing works.

The Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle honors and serves spiritually powerful

women—elders, ancestors, and deities. Thus, "the Gẹlẹdẹ which we dance is for our great grandmothers whom we call *òrìṣa ẹgbẹ́* [gods of society] to have a collective name" (Babalọla 1971). The term *ẹgbẹ* refers to both Yoruba society as a whole and the secret society of powerful old women who can transform themselves into birds at night and hold meetings in the forest.[7] These women are commonly known as "our mothers" *(awọn ìyá wa),* an endearment that recognizes that "we all came out of a woman's body" (Ayodele 1971). As one Gẹlẹdẹ elder points out (Ogundipẹ 1971), they can be destructive, "but we must not call them that. We call them mother. If they did not exist, we could not come into the world." These statements imply something much more fundamental than female fertility and fecundity. They claim that women possess the secret of life itself, the knowledge and special power to bring human beings into the world and to remove them. This knowledge applies not only to gestation and childbirth but also to longevity. It is a sign of women's power that they live to be very old, often outliving men. Their knowledge of life and death demands that Yoruba herbalists in preparing medicines seek their support. A priestess (Ẹdun 1975) comments,

> If the mothers are annoyed, they can turn the world upside down. When an herbalist goes to collect a root at the foot of a tree, the mothers put it up. And when he climbs up for a leaf, the mothers put it down.

The power of the mothers is equal or superior to that of the gods, for, as a number of informants suggest, the mothers own and control the gods. As the king of a small Ẹgbado town (Adeleyẹ 1971) comments in English:

> Our mothers will not come out openly and say, I want so and so from you. They may be worrying someone until that person goes to a diviner, when it will come out that it is a witch that is worrying the person. Then the oracle will prescribe so many things. . . . They [diviners] have certain means to do sacrifice. If they [the mothers] are worrying somebody, they can hide under an idol. So when someone goes to the oracle—it may be [to] Ṣango or Ọya—it means that the woman is fighting the patient through Ṣango or Ọya. Then if something is offered through that idol, the woman will be satisfied.

Another elder explains further (Babalọla 1971):

> If there is an epidemic, we sacrifice to all the gods of the town. We try to conciliate them. All the mothers are the owners of all these gods. After making sacrifices to the gods, the mothers would know that we have begged them. After giving them something to eat there will be no more trouble.

And as a female Gẹlẹdẹ cult leader told Beier (1958:7):

> No orisha [god] can do good, without the mothers. The mothers could spoil any good action if they wanted to. Therefore Sango himself cannot help his worshippers without permission of the mothers. The prophesies of the Babalawo [diviner] will come to naught, if he has not appeased the mothers. Oro and Egun cannot kill without the mothers.

A priestess confirms (Ẹdun 1975):

> Ifa is senior to them [the mothers] *(alágbára wọn)*, but aside from Ifá, nothing is elder to them. . . . They are more powerful than any deity.

These comments by western Yoruba peoples are not Gẹlẹdẹ-centric, for Verger (1965) collected a number of detailed divination verses, primarily from the Ọsogbo area, that attest to female suzerainity at the very creation of the world. In one of these myths from *ọsa méjì* (1965:204), Òlódùmarè gave woman (Odù) control over the gods on the condition that she use her enormous power with care, calm, and discretion *(máa rọra lọ rèélò agbára)*. When she abused this power Olodumare gave it to Òrișánlá, her male companion, decreeing that he would exercise it but that the woman would retain control over it (Verger 1965:142). In southeastern Yorubaland, an Ijẹbu diviner (Ọșitọla 1982) explains that it was Odu, a wife of the first diviner, who loved her husband Ọrúnmìlà so much that she revealed to him the knowledge of divination so that man could communicate with the spirit realm. And Rowland Abiọdun (1976:1), relying primarily on central and eastern Yoruba sources, writes

> It is believed that from the beginning, the creator-God put women in charge of all the good things on earth. Without their sanction, no healing can take place, rain cannot fall, plants cannot bear fruits and children cannot come into the world.

Because of the mystical power of women, devotees of the gods and ancestors seek them out and encourage them to attend rituals. Their very presence is efficacious. *Àjẹ́*—a generally perjorative term—is used rarely and with caution. No one would address a woman suspected of possessing such power as *ajẹ*, not just out of fear but because such women also work positive wonders. Therefore they are called "our mothers" *(awọn iya wa)* and are addressed personally with "my mother" *(ìyámì)* or "old and wise one" *(ìyá àgbà)* in recognition of their positive dimension as protective progenitors, healers (MacLean 1969:37), and guardians of morality, social order, and the just apportionment of power, wealth, and prestige (Verger 1965:159). It is in this last capacity, as guardians of society, that the mothers are central to Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle.

The otherworldliness of the Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle is evident in its place and time settings. Gẹlẹdẹ performance takes place in the main marketplace—a setting that is significant for several reasons. The marketplace is a metaphor for the world. Existence on earth is like coming to the market to do business before returning to the realm of the ancestors (Lindfors and Owomoyela 1973:23). The marketplace itself symbolizes Gẹlẹdẹ's transitory, worldly manifestation, while at the same time it represents its otherwordly dimension, for the market is a liminal place, where spirits intermingle with human beings. It is often situated at the center of the town, at a crossroads where one finds the shrine for the deity in charge of the crossroads, Ẹṣu/Ẹlẹgba.

Numerous stories involve the marketplace: Hunters' tales describe the way animals in the bush remove their skins, transform themselves into human beings, and go shopping on market days. Other stories tell of spirits in human form who frequent the marketplace, marry mortals, and bear their children, only to disappear one day, taking the children with them. The intermingling of mortals and spirits in the marketplace during Gẹlẹdẹ is suggested by an Ẹgbado king (Bakare 1971), who contended that when Gẹlẹdẹ is a success, spirits known euphemistically as "strangers" visit the performance. They appear as mortals and are identifiable by the fact that they are unknown to the community. When many strangers are in attendance, it is felt that the community has been successful through performance in communicating with the supernatural realm. As Bakare explained, "We realize our prayers have been answered when strangers visit in the night. Young children, grownups, and old people come and then disappear at daybreak."[8]

It is not inconsequential that the market is a major setting of social and economic activity involving primarily women. Trading is probably the most common profession among women in Yoruba society. Indeed the market is controlled by women; its administrative head, the Ìyálôde, holds a position on the king's council of chiefs. Women are economically independent, and through trading they can acquire greater wealth and higher status than their husbands (Lloyd 1963:39; 1974:38). By bringing the spectacle into the market, the Gẹlẹdẹ society introduces it directly into women's realm, the place where their collective social power is most consciously felt. The marketplace is thus a most appropriate setting for a ritual that seeks to gather all segments of the society in order to pay homage to the special power of women and to partake of their influence.

The market is a transient place, at once the domain of women and the worldly domain of spirits, the place where they enter "the world" to mingle freely with mortals. "The mothers," by definition, also have this ability; they are mortals who have access to the otherworld. It is in their supernatural capacity, reflected in the power of transformation, that

women are considered the "owners of two bodies" *(abâra méjì)* and the "owners of the world" *(oní l'oní aiyé)*. They control the world; they control the market. Indeed the market is a microcosm of the world, for the Yoruba concept of *aiye* implies the phenomenal world that any number of spirits, by assuming human or animal form, can penetrate.

Another important and very popular element of Yoruba spectacle is the nighttime ceremony. Thus spectacles such as Gẹlẹdẹ, Egungun, and festivals for the gods often open around midnight and end at sunrise. Informants offer several explanations for nocturnal performances, or *àìsùn* ("without sleep"). One is that it is cooler at night and therefore more enjoyable. Indeed, even when performances occur during the day they are generally scheduled for the late afternoon. While this explanation and others[9] may account in part for the prevalence of night ceremonies, they are not entirely adequate.

Normally nights are devoted to rest after long, hot hours of physical and mental activity. Thus to set aside such time for participation in some ritual activity lasting eight hours or more is to demonstrate a certain and unusual devotional commitment. The tradition of the "wake-keeping," or "vigil," however, is an integral part of Yoruba religious life. The funeral rites of almost all individuals include a sleepless night during which the family and friends of the departed remain vigilant to ensure the safe and proper transfer of the deceased's spiritual essence to the afterworld, *ọrun*. The same principle seems to operate in the openings and closings of rituals to the ancestors and gods, when the supernatural forces inhabiting *ọrun* are coaxed into *aiye*, the phenomenal world, by humans. These difficult and critical occasions involving the interpenetration of realms are most appropriate at night, when spirits are thought to be most attentive (Ọṣitọla 1982). Darkness is the natural abode of the mothers and the creatures most often associated with them, such as birds, bats, rats, and reptiles. The obscurity of the night adds to their awesome, unknowable qualities. If the market is the place inside the community where spirits are most likely to mingle with humans, then the most likely time for intermingling is at night in the market.

Another distinctive feature of Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle that perhaps alludes to its otherworldliness is the theme of doubling. The spectacle itself is in two parts—the nighttime Ẹfẹ performance and the daytime Gẹlẹdẹ dance—and informants stress that one cannot take place without the other. Within the Ẹfẹ rites, the singing male masquerader, Ọrọ̀ Ẹfẹ̀, must be preceded by a partner, either male or female, who is viewed as a companion, wife, or twin. And in Gẹlẹdẹ, masqueraders traditionally perform in identical pairs.

Inherent in the pairing of masks, costumes, and movement, like the ultimate creation of the mothers—twins—is the concept of elaboration.

Automatically the pageantry and energy are doubled as each masquerader dances toward the drum ensemble, individually interpreting the intricate verbal/rhythmic percussive messages. The observer is surrounded by a wealth of artistic display as each performer emerges, dazzles, and quickly disappears only to be followed by another spectacle.

The Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle is a lavish two-part multimedia production created by singers, dancers, carvers, drummers, and spectators. It appeals to the senses through a brilliant array of sounds, sights, and energy. The impact is immediate and striking yet enduring, as evidenced by the easy recall of songs and spectacles that occurred in the distant past. Gẹlẹdẹ has been called "the ultimate spectacle" for its ability to shape society and to create a lasting impression by means of an absorbing multimedia experience.

The first part of the spectacle, Ẹfẹ, is a night of songs. Many of the performers are dramatically attired and are constantly in motion. The senses are activated not only by sound but also by sight and energy made visible. Each performer is an entity unto himself. With each successive entrant, the crowd becomes increasingly excited, and the emotion reaches its peak with Ọrọ Ẹfẹ's gradual emergence. The undulating melody of his songs are made visible in the sweeping, curving, and spiraling movement of his arms and in the complex circular/spiraling forms of his mask. He begins to move through the performance area, orally and physically carrying his words to the crowd. Stateliness and grandeur characterize his moving image, for Ọrọ Ẹfẹ's appearance and manner communicate overt masculine power and authority, the authority that comes from the mothers' support. Ọrọ Ẹfẹ, the "voice of Ẹfẹ," who can utter his thoughts on any topic, is a monarch of the night, immune to all attacks, responsible for the well-being of his "subjects." As he moves through the darkness, appearing and disappearing, his words are now clear and loud, now muffled and distant. The total illusion is both mystical and immediate, just as the songs themselves deal with both spiritual powers and human society. Ọrọ Ẹfẹ is transcendental voice, powerful man, and servant of the mothers.

The dramatic flow of Ẹfẹ night mirrors the serial structure of the spectacle. The tension builds with each performer; a lull follows until the next one appears. Excitement peaks at the most dramatic moment—Ọrọ Ẹfẹ's entrance—and remains sustained yet diminishing during the remainder of the night while songs are sung. Like the masqueraders themselves, songs follow one another in serial fashion, yet their concerns are different and often unrelated.

Power made visible is essential to the second part of the spectacle, the afternoon Gẹlẹdẹ performance. Yet this spectacle is not created by movement alone, but by the integration of masks, costumes, music, and dance.

Here, as in Ẹfẹ night, the artistic modes create images that embellish reality. The Gẹlẹdẹ masquerades present elaborate statements of maleness and femaleness through a profusion of visual elements. Rich cloth heightens the grandeur of the figures while it reinforces and responds to the movements of the dancer. At the same time, it speaks of the support by the females in the community who have lent their head ties, which are incorporated into the costumes. In the dance, these visual, sculptural forms become kinetic. The cloth whirls; articulated superstructures move; the breasts and buttocks bob up and down, thrusting sharply into space to add force to their forms. The masks further define roles and power in society—knives, guns, and caps for the male; bowls, head wraps, and trays for the females. The elaborate form and motion of the costume and dance are echoed in often elaborate superstructures above the composed mask face. Embellished by means of attachments, forms extend beyond the physical limitations of the original wood cylinder. Elaboration and elegance are conscious goals in the masks as well as in the dance, for the curving interwoven forms recall the swinging arms and weaving trace-patterns of the dancers. And in some, stationary and moveable attachments reach down to the torso and affect the posture, position, and movement of the dancer, thus structurally unifying the image.

The relationships among the art forms are multiple and reciprocal. Upon seeing the sculptured forms representing a Muslim priest, for example, the drummers may launch spontaneously into a verbal/rhythmic text associated with this visual motif. And since the identity of the dancer is generally known, his name may be sounded and incorporated into the rhythm. And yet at the same time, the media that make up the whole may have distinct referents and meanings, giving each autonomy. Multiple images and ideas converge in time to produce a multifocal, multifaceted event. Thus, at times, the media as well as the performers vie with each other. For example, during the performance of the night mother masquerade, when the singers ask, "Mother, child who brings peace to the world. Repair the world for us," the drummers are sounding, "Mother, the one who killed her husband in order to take a title." The masquerades themselves have no thematic relationship to each other. Therefore, in Ilaro, for example, where numerous Gẹlẹdẹ rush into the performance space all at once, images compete for attention.

With its performative power, Gẹlẹdẹ thus treats numerous matters and manages them simultaneously. In the process, Gẹlẹdẹ serves a didactic function as it reinforces social values and traditions. Values are enforced with reference to particular individuals or groups, or sometimes they are asserted in general terms. These value-laden expressions can be honorific or derisive. In the very structure of the performance,

Gẹlẹdẹ asserts an egalitarian ideal, insuring that the opportunity to perform is distributed among all members (cf. Drewal and Drewal 1980). It further defines and distinguishes male and female roles and intrinsic power and also reinforces role expectations. Gẹlẹdẹ dancers externalize the inner natures of men and women, shaping as well as dramatizing their distinct inner potentials.

Performance implies a separation between actor and audience, both in distance and in distinction, maintained by means of a masquerade format. Yet in the course of Gẹlẹdẹ the lines between performer and audience blur as enthralled spectators become active participants. This process of inclusion and participation is precisely the ultimate goal and meaning of the ritual, for its fundamental purpose is to honor the mothers from whom we all come. Ọrọ Ẹfẹ speaks out, expressing the conscience of the community, voicing its hopes, fears, desires, and opinions, and stressing unity and adherence to traditions as a way to honor the mothers. The Gẹlẹdẹ dancers, representing generalized roles or groups both inside and outside the traditional society, are the "children" of the mothers. Thus Gẹlẹdẹ is all-inclusive in character, including the membership of its society, its audiences, and the themes and motifs in the songs, masks, costumes, and dances.

As a "plaything," Gẹlẹdẹ is intended to be entertaining. As one member of the Gẹlẹdẹ society explains (Legbe 1971), "We call the women together, the old women, in order that they will laugh, in order that they will have something to enjoy. If we have no food in this world, it will not be sweet." The analogy between food and Gẹlẹdẹ performance suggests that Gẹlẹdẹ is a sacrifice to these elderly women. The notion that Gẹlẹdẹ performances are sacrifices to the spiritually powerful women is alluded to by another elder, who asserts (Babalọla 1971),

> I can tell you that this Gẹlẹdẹ dance is mainly danced for them more than anybody. We dance it mostly for them. That is why we say Gẹlẹdẹ belongs to the women. . . . Our forefathers told us that these were destructive women *(ajẹ)*, that we must not look down upon them. If we despise them it means death. We must pamper *(tù)* them and live.

Tu (to pamper, literally to cool) is the root word for a type of sacrifice known as *ètùtù,* a cooling or propitiatory rite.[10] It is precisely its capacity for entertainment that enables Gẹlẹdẹ to function as an *etutu* to assuage this collectivity of powerful women, the gods of society. All the participants—dancers, singers, costumers—are performing a sacrifice when they strive to achieve perfection in performance.[11] Indeed, Gẹlẹdẹ is an expensive sacrifice that requires the combined resources of the community. Thus, a Gẹlẹdẹ elder comments (Legbe 1971):

> There is no difference from the old days to the present, except that the festival is more enjoyable now than in the past when there was no money. Now there is financial power for everyone. When we prepare for the festival, we will buy clothes for all the children which we have collectively given birth to. They put on fine clothing to express that it is festival time. Many of us have money to spend; we have drinks and much food that we eat for the nine days of the festival. We eat to our full satisfaction. We rest for one year until our financial power is good so that the next festival will be better than the one before.

It is not that one must be wealthy to participate in Gẹlẹdẹ activities; rather one must be willing to commit whatever resources one has at any given time for the festival. That is the meaning of sacrifice.

As a sacrifice designed to placate the mothers, Gẹlẹdẹ advises patience and indulgence rather than confrontation and aggression. According to one devotee, "the one to sacrifice to the Great Mother must have patience." The value of patience is implicit in the masquerade images themselves. The heads of the Ẹfẹ and Gẹlẹdẹ performers are the essence of calmness and composure, while the rest of their bodies engage in powerful dance sequences. Likewise, the faces of the masks represent the idealized inner head, which must remain calm in order not to spoil the countenance, for, if the outside head displays anger, individuals risk direct confrontations, and possibly death, at the hands of others. As a Yoruba prayer states, "May my inner head not spoil the outer one." During Ẹfẹ night, Ọrọ Ẹfẹ appears only after a prescribed host of costumed performers have brought the festival into the world, preparing the ground, opening the way, and giving approval. Then and only then, with protective medicine and the approval of the female cult head, Iyalẹṣẹ, does Ọrọ Ẹfẹ emerge slowly and cautiously. He prudently honors the forces in the Yoruba universe with his chants before he comments on society and individuals. Gẹlẹdẹ is thus an appeal to balance and reason.

Patience and indulgence are the requisite attitudes with which to channel the vital life force of the mothers and their "children" in the world. Patience is perceived to be inherent in femaleness. The Great Mother herself is the epitome of patience; that is, her inner head is composed. She is in control. She does not become visibly angered, but she exacts revenge covertly. These ideas about women are expressed in the channeled and controlled steps of the female Gẹlẹdẹ dances, which are powerful but restrained. The mothers, who are united with all women by the "flow of blood," embody the concept of balance, a female quality that men must understand—indeed emulate—in order to survive.

Gẹlẹdẹ thus mediates between the owners of society—those who generate, manage, control, and also punish it—and the community.

Through praise and criticism, prayers and curses, Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle carries out the perceived will of the mothers. The community is responsive, in turn lending its support. The art forms that make up spectacle thus become instruments for regulating society. Most important of all, perhaps, is that Gẹlẹdẹ affirms patience and indulgence, qualities thought to be possessed innately by women, as ideal means of correcting imbalances and maintaining peace. The arts of Gẹlẹdẹ touch upon different concerns in different ways. They constantly reinforce and revitalize each other to reach all segments within the community.