2

Gẹlẹdẹ Performance

Prudence was the ancient wisdom of the Ẹgba
Prudence was the ancient wisdom of the Ijẹṣa
It was divined for Ọrunmila, who was going to the town of the owners of birds [i.e., spiritually powerful women]
That he must put on an image [mask], head ties, and leg rattles
He obeyed, he put them on, he arrived in the town of the owners of birds and he survived
He rejoiced in dancing and singing—
"I have covenanted with Death, I will never die
Death, worrisome Death
I have covenanted with sickness, I will never die
Death, worrisome Death"

Pẹlẹ ni nṣ'awo won lode Ẹgba
Pẹlẹ ni nṣ'awo won lode Ijẹṣa
A da f'Ọrunmila, o nṣ'awo re Ilu Ẹlẹiye
Won ni ko ru Aworan, Ọja ati Iku
O gbo, o ru, o de Ilu Ẹlẹiye, o yè bọ́
O wa nsunyẹrẹ wipe—
"Mo ba'ku mule nwo ku mọ
Iku, Iku gbọingbọin
Mo b'arun mule, nwo ku mọ
Iku, Iku gbọingbọin"

[Beyioku 1946]

This Ifa divination text from *ọsa meji,* drummed at the beginning of Gẹlẹdẹ spectacles in Lagos as the masqueraders enter the arena to perform, recounts the mythic origin of Gẹlẹdẹ masquerading. Ifa instructed Ọrunmila, the deity governing divination, to exercise great caution *(pẹlẹ, pẹlẹ)* in entering the domain of spiritually powerful women known as *ẹlẹiye* (literally "owners-of-birds") by donning a mask *(aworan),* head tie

(ọja), and leg rattles *(iku),* three essential elements found in all Ẹfẹ and Gẹlẹdẹ costumes (color plate 1). Ọrunmila did not confront these powerful women aggressively, rather he sought to assuage them. As one elder comments, "we must pamper *(tu)* them [the mothers] and live" (Babalọla 1971). And, "it is the Great Mother who gave instruction saying anyone who worships her must have patience *(sùúrù)*" (Ogundipẹ 1971). For the mothers "from the left and from the right, from the front and from the back" are asked to descend and join the gathering; their reply comes from the trees in the form of birds' cries (Beier 1958:10). Another elder, this time a priestess, asserts (Akinwọlẹ 1971): "these masks are like the vital power *(aṣẹ)* that the ancients wielded in the past which they called *ẹ̀sọ̀* [a thing done with carefulness]. . . . They must not perform it nakedly."[1] With the requisite attire and demeanor, Ọrunmila journeys safely into the midst of the owners-of-birds, where he sings and dances. Gẹlẹdẹ performances recreate this mythic journey.[2]

The Sounds and Sights of Ẹfẹ Night

As darkness approaches, the community completes its preparations for the Ẹfẹ ceremony.[3] Between 9 and 10 P.M. a large crowd gathers in the central market—men, women, children—all bringing with them lamps, mats, chairs, and food. They arrange themselves in a large circle, often sitting together in age group societies *(ẹgbẹ́).* The performers' entry way into the circle, known as the "mouth of authority" *(ẹnuàṣẹ),* orients the crowd. Families with titled elders, especially women, and other important personages are given preferred positions along the edge of the performance space (fig. 1). This mass of people, sometimes numbering 1,000–1,500, includes Gẹlẹdẹ society members (actually a small percentage of the total audience), local inhabitants of various religious faiths (Muslim, Christian, and traditional, including devotees of diverse deities), relatives of local people who live in other towns (sometimes from as far away as 150 miles), and "strangers" (a category that includes spirits as well as *ọmọ ar'aiyé,* "children of the world," a euphemism for evil-intentioned persons). From all parts of the town and from neighboring villages, from the otherworld, and from all age groups and all walks of life, the people assemble to see the Ẹfẹ spectacle.

The drummers arrive first and set up their ensemble within the arena just opposite the masqueraders' entrance. The ensemble of four to six drums contains two large lead drums approximately three to four feet high; the larger is called "mother drum" *(ìyálú),* the other "female *ómélé,*" or *ómélé abo.* The *iyalu* and *omele abo* together beat verbal messages by reproducing the rhythmic and tonal structure of spoken Yoruba. The smaller supporting drums, the *omele akọ* (or "male *omele*"), which are fixed

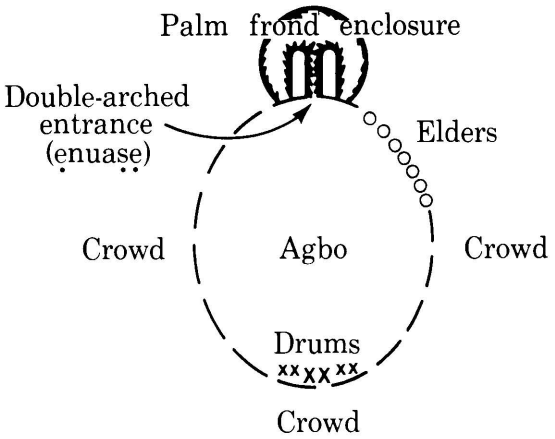

Fig. 1. Performance space, Ketu region.

at different pitches, maintain a rapid, complex polyrhythm. Over this background rhythm, the mother drum and the female *omele* weave well-known proverbs and praise the gods, ancestors, and elders while awaiting the arrival of the chorus of singers.

The singers, known collectively as "the carriers of the news" *(abanirò),* consist of male and female members of the society, called respectively *akijẹlẹ* and *akọdan.*[4] Upon leaving the Gẹlẹdẹ shrine, they proceed to the gathering singing a song such as the following, which announces that all are in place and ready:

It is now time to start, it is time.
Bush fowl lives in the forest, it is time.
Teak is found in the grasslands, it is time.
The lavish display is prepared, it is evening, it is time to start.

Nṣe kókò àkókò, nṣe kókò àkókò.
Àparò n'igbó, àkókó.
Ìrokò lọ l'ọ̀dàn, àkókò.
Ìdàgbà là fújà, àkókò, nṣe kókò lálẹ́ yì, àkókò.

[Collected in Ketu, 1971]

The stage is now set for a series of masqueraders to appear. All the masquerades are performed by men, but the costuming and movement may represent either males or females. First, a delightful puppet act may appear, featuring a figure on a platform called "machine magic" *(ẹ̀rọ).* From underneath the platform the performer manipulates the puppet's

arms by pulling on a string, while children cheer, pushing and shoving to get a closer look at the animated figure.

After this lighthearted spectacle, Ẹfẹ night opens with a series of introductory masquerades known generically as "spirits of the earth" *(ọ̀rọ̀ ilẹ̀)*. The first is Ogbagba, who represents the divine mediator, Ẹ̀ṣù/Ẹlẹ́gbara. As mediator between men and the gods, Ẹ̀ṣù/Ẹlẹ́gbara is honored first and encouraged to "open the way" *(ago l'ọ̀na)* for a successful ceremony. Crossroads, entrances, exits, and liminal or transitional sites are the abodes of the one who straddles two realms. He appears twice, first as a "young boy in a white cap and raffia skirt," as people sing, "Eshu comes with light leaves"; then as a grownup wearing banana leaves and iron anklets, as cult members sing lines such as these (Beier 1958:9):

> Ogbagba carries leaves
> On all the rubbish dumps he has picked up the *eko* leaves
> He comes carrying leaves

Ogbagba, or Ẹ̀ṣù/Ẹlẹ́gbara, is followed by Arabi Ajigbálẹ̀. As the name suggests, Arabi is "The-One-Who-Sweeps-Every-Morning"; literally, he "sweeps" and thus clears and cleanses the marketplace (pl. 1). His costume of shredded palm leaves *(mariwò)* and his clearing actions allude to Ogun, the god of iron (cf. Barnes 1980:38–40), for both he and Ẹ̀ṣù/Ẹlẹ́gbara serve to "open the way" for all men's communications with supernatural forces (Beyioku 1946; Osubi 1973). At his appearance people may sing (Moulero 1970:44):

> Arabi, The-One-Who-Sweeps-Every-Morning
> The cloth of another is good for sweeping
>
> *Arabi Ajigbalẹ*
> *Aṣọ alaṣọ dun igbalẹ*

Fire is the focus of the next masquerade pair. The first—Agbénà, or Fire Carrier—appears with either a mass of blazing grasses or a pot of fire balanced on his head and a costume of white cloth. The performer moves quickly through the space as sparks fly, forcing the crowd backward as it sings (Moulero 1970:46):

> The fire in the bush starts without warning
> Farmers with fields near the bush, beware
>
> *Ko pa ina njako*
> *Oloko l'adugbo*

PLATE 1. Wearing the cloths of the iron deity, Ogun, Arabi Ajigbalẹ sweeps the market to clear the way for the masqueraders that follow. Lagos, 1978.

These series of masquerades ritually reenact the steps taken in establishing a shrine, a house, or a settlement, actions of entry, clearing, and finally burning off the remains, actions presided over by Ẹṣu and Ogun. As the god of iron and the one who clears the way, Ogun in particular is regarded as the tutelary deity of this process. Agbena, disappearing as quickly as he appeared, may be immediately followed by Apana, the "Fire Extinguisher" (Beier 1958:9–10):

Owner of fire, kill your fire!
The hoopoe [a bird with decurved bill] is coming
Put down your load,
Because one does not light fires
To regard the bird of the night

The performance enters a new phase now that the marketplace has been ritually prepared. All lights are extinguished as the impending "bird of the night," the most sacred of Ẹfẹ and Gẹlẹdẹ forms, the Great Mother, Ìyánlá, appears either as a bearded woman (pl. 2) or as a bird called Ẹyẹ Òrọ̀, Spirit Bird, or Ẹyẹ Òru, Bird of the Night (pl. 3). In the darkness the Great Mother comes trailing a white cloth. While she performs, all lights must be extinguished. As she moves in a gentle, slow dance *(ijó jẹ́jẹ́)*, matching her steps with the drum rhythms, the elders of the Gẹlẹdẹ cult flock around her limiting the audience's view of the headdress.[5] The headdress, worn almost horizontally, is fastened to a long white cloth that often trails on the ground. Emphasizing the horizontality of the mask, the performer plunges his torso forward and maintains a crouched position throughout the performance; his elbows and knees are bent and spread laterally to evoke hoary age. Ankle rattles echo the Gẹlẹdẹ drum rhythms as the mother masquerade slowly advances and then retreats using small-amplitude jumps that barely leave the ground. The Great Mother does not speak. A series of songs and drum rhythms accompany her, creating layers of messages. If the masquerade represents Spirit Bird, the chorus and crowd sing:

Spirit Bird is coming
Spirit Bird is coming
Ososobi o, Spirit Bird is coming
The one who brings the festival today
Tomorrow is the day when devotees of the gods will worship
You are the one who brought us to this place
It is your influence that we are using
Ososobi o, Spirit Bird is coming

Ẹyẹ Òrọ̀ mbọ̀
Ẹyẹ Òrọ̀ mbọ̀

PLATE 2. The bearded Great Mother, Iyanla, bent with age, trails white cloth on the ground. Photograph by Edna Bay in Cove, Benin, 1972.

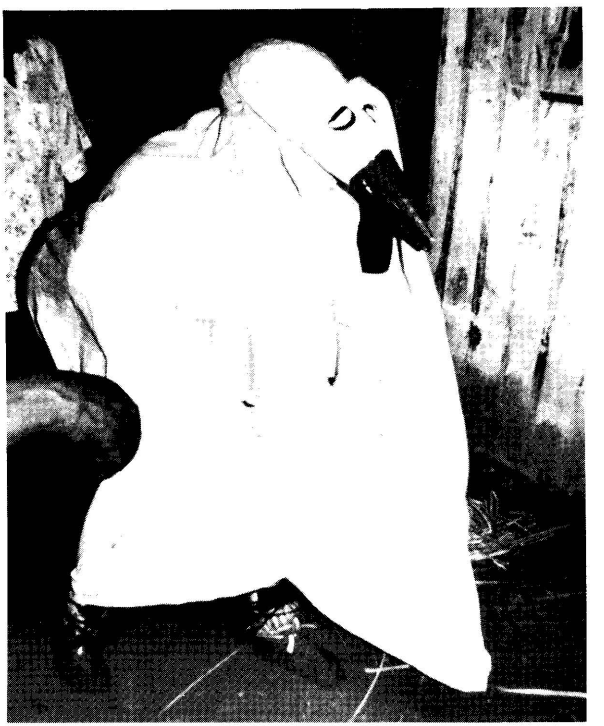

PLATE 3. Spirit Bird with blood-red beak hastens through the marketplace and disappears into the darkness. Ilaro, 1978.

Òsòsòbí o, Ẹyẹ Ọ̀rọ̀ mbọ̀
Eni l'olòdùngbòdùn
Ola lolò'sà mbọ̀ òrìṣà
Iwo lokowa délẹ̀ yi
Ola rẹ̀ lawa nje
Òsòsòbí o, Ẹyẹ Ọ̀rọ̀ mbọ̀

[Recorded in Ilaro, 1978]

If, on the other hand, the masquerader appears as bearded mother, the community offers the following:

Iyanla come into the world, our mother
Kind one will not die like the evil one
Ososomu come into the world
Our mother the kind one will not die like the evil one

Ìyánlá ẹ̀ sò w'aiyé o, Ìyá wa
Olóòré ka kú sipo [ikà]
Òsòsòmú ẹ̀ sò w'aiyé o
Ìyá wa olóòré ka kú sipo

And:

Ososomu e e e
Honored ancestor *apake e e e*
Mother, Mother, child who brings peace to the world
Repair the world for us
Iyanla, child who brings peace to the world o e

Òsòsòmú e e e
Olájogún àpàké e e e
Ìyá, Ìyá, ọmọ atún aiyé ṣe
Ba wa tún aiyé ṣe
Ìyanlá, ọmọ atún aiyé o e

[Collected in Ibaiyun, 1975]

As the songs praise the Mother, the drums approximate the tonal patterns of Yoruba speech and simultaneously offer another message:

Mother, Mother, the one who killed her husband in order to take a title
Come and dance, the one who killed her husband in order to take a title, come and dance
Stand up, stand, come and dance
One who killed her husband in order to take a title, come and dance. . . .
Honored ancestor *apake,* come and dance
Come home immediately
One who killed her husband in order to take a title, come home immediately

One who has given birth to many children, come home immediately, come home now
I made a sacrifice, I received glory, the day is proper
I sacrificed, I sacrificed, I sacrificed, I sacrificed
A woman will not describe what happened during travel
A woman will not tell what we have done
A woman cannot have Ajanọn [title] in Oro
In this world, in this world, in this world
Yé yé, Apọkọdoṣù
Wá ka jó, Apọkọdoṣù, wá ka jó
Nde, nde, wá ka jó
Apọkọdoṣù, wá ka jó. . . .
Ọlájogún apake, wá ka jó
Wanle wara, wara, wara
Apọkọdoṣù, wanle wara, wara, wara, wanle wara
Abiamọ didé, wanle wara, wara, wara, wanle wara
Moṣẹbọ, mogbaiyin, ọjọ́pé
Moṣẹbọ, moṣẹbọ, moṣẹbọ, moṣẹbọ
Obìnrin kì royìn ajo
Obìnrin kì sọ ohun wà ṣè
Obìnrin kì jẹ́ Ajanọ̀n Òrò
L'aiyé, l'aiyé, l'aiyé

[Collected in Ibaiyun, 1975]

In darkness and completely surrounded, Iyanla circles the performance area and quickly returns to the shrine, where the mask, wrapped or draped with white cloth, serves as the focus of worship for society elders.

With the departure of Iyanla, the first singing mask arrives. It is known in some places as Tetede (The-One-Who-Comes-in-Good-Time), in others as Aiyé Tùtù (Cool World) (pl. 4). The role of this masquerader is to prepare the way for Ọrọ Ẹfẹ with chants *(ijúbà)* that honor the mothers, the gods, and the assembled elders and then to call Ọrọ Ẹfẹ, ensuring that he may safely begin his night-long solo performance (Moulero 1970:51):

Amulohun, if I call you the first time and you don't answer
You will become an anthill
If I call you a second time and you don't answer
You will become a piece of wood
If I call you the third time and you don't answer
You will become a savage beast

Amulohun, õ bi mo ba pe ô l'ẹkini o jẹ
Ẹ di igbodi pẹtẹ
Bi mo ba pe ọ l'ẹkeji õ jẹ
O di kukubọlẹ
Bi mo ba pe ọ l'ẹkẹta õ jẹ
Ẹ di ẹran oko igbe

PLATE 4. Tetede, "The-One-Who-Comes-in-Good-Time," appears with a tray of ritual containers to sing the praises of the supernatural forces and to call Ọrọ Ẹfẹ to begin his performance. Ṣawonjo, 1978.

With the call of this introductory singing masquerader, two attendants of Ọrọ Ẹfẹ come into the area and kneel before the entry way, or "the mouth of authority." They carry special medicines to protect Ọrọ Ẹfẹ throughout his performance. From the area in front of the entrance, the female cult head and her assistant, both dressed all in white in honor of the cool, or "white," deities *(òrìṣà funfun)* and Òduà, the Great Mother, strike sacred four-sphered bells. They ritually call Ọrọ Ẹfẹ to the world, announce his coming, and insure that he is protected. Next a flute player appears. His short bursts of music praise Ọrọ Ẹfẹ, call him by name, and silence the crowd. The slow, insistent beat of Ọrọ Ẹfẹ's leg rattles announces his coming, as he appears in the "mouth of authority." He sways slowly, majestically swinging horsetail whisks in each hand (frontispiece). With his first high, piercing note, the flute ceases and the crowd becomes quiet. With everything readied and ripples of expectation and excitement running through the crowd, the drums fall silent, and Ọrọ Ẹfẹ, accompanied by the flute *(fèrè)*, replies to the first singing masquerader (Moulero 1970:53):

When you called me the first time,
I had been doing a task for the *apa* tree.
When you called me the second time,
I was providing service for the *iroko* tree.[6]
But when you called me the third time, I answered in a clear, resounding voice.
Now that you have finished calling me, go home.

Nigba t'o pe mi l'ẹkini
Apa l'o ran mi l'iṣẹ
Nigba l'o pe mi l'ẹkeji
Iroko l'o be mi l'ọwẹ
Nigba l'o pe mi l'ẹkẹta
Mo je fun rerere apela l'ai p'agba
Bi o ba pe mi tan mã lọ

All attention now focuses on Ọrọ Ẹfẹ's words, as the performer carefully begins to honor deities, ancestors, the mothers, and elders. His sharply inclined torso and slow, methodic stamping express reverence to these spiritual powers. All the while, men in the hunters' society shout and fire their guns, the loud reports echoing in the night, punctuating the honorific incantations of Ọrọ Ẹfẹ. When he has completed this important devotion, he emerges fully from the entry way, rises to full stature, and moves toward the center of the performance space, where he delivers a song of self-assertion (pl. 5). His majestic costuming reinforces the extraordinary quality of his tense, piercing voice, which must project well, for high volume and vocal clarity are essential qualities by which Ọrọ Ẹfẹ's performance is judged. He paces up and down the arena while singing, flashing the whisks as a way of greeting and blessing the assembled community.

The performance continues throughout the night with only brief interludes, during which the drum ensemble offers a variety of praise poems, proverbs, jokes, and riddles. As dawn approaches, a stilted masquerader in the form of a hyena *(kòrikò)* (pl. 6) enters the marketplace to divert the attention of the crowd. His appearance allows Ọrọ Ẹfẹ to reenter the "mouth of authority," signaling the conclusion of Ẹfẹ night. People collect their belongings and slowly disperse to their homes to rest. They will return in late afternoon for the next spectacle—Gẹlẹdẹ.

The Daylight Dances of Gẹlẹdẹ

After the night's Ẹfẹ performance, the town is unusually quiet for most of the day, but as the shadows lengthen and the heat diminishes, the afternoon Gẹlẹdẹ dances build like a gathering thunderstorm. The drummers arrive and position themselves opposite the masqueraders' entry way. The audience gathers slowly. First come the children, curious

PLATE 5. In a headdress adorned with woodpeckers, snakes, and a leopard and in a costume covered with geometric and representational images, Ọrọ Efẹ moves through the performance area guided by his attendants. Igbogila, 1978.

PLATE 6. The gaping jaws of a Hyena headdress divert the attention of the crowd, allowing Ọrọ Ẹfẹ to disappear, thus ending the night ceremony. Kẹsan Orile, 1971.

to watch the musicians' preparations. Then the teenagers and adults begin to appear. The elders, especially the elderly women, fill their places on the perimeter of the performance space. The ever-increasing crowd listens to the stirring rhythms of the drummers while awaiting the appearance of the first masqueraders, who are preparing themselves in their compounds or at the Gẹlẹdẹ shrine. Crowd controllers—male Gẹlẹdẹ cult members aided by hunters—move back and forth across the marketplace; with large sticks or palm branches, they attempt to keep back the accumulating mass of people in order to maintain a large performance area between the entrance and the drummers.

PLATE 7. A partially costumed Gẹlẹdẹ-to-be holding an old broken mask on his head marks the drum beats with persistent, if unsteady, stamps. Ilaro, 1978.

PLATE 8. An older child with a more complete costume dances under the critical eye of his instructor. Ilaro, 1978.

The format of the Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle, no matter what the occasion, is serial, and the masqueraders usually make their appearances in order of age—the youngest appearing first. As the drums launch into their dance rhythms, a small, partially costumed "Gẹlẹdẹ-to-be" wearing an old mask marks the beats with persistent if unsteady stamps (pl. 7). Lacking the finesse of his seniors, he must hold the mask with his hands to balance it on his head. Older children follow, more daring in their kinetic offerings (pl. 8). The crowd greets these youngsters with great enthusiasm and amusement. Some shout encouragement, while others rush forward to reward their efforts with small coins. These first awkward attempts are

PLATE 9. Stronger, self-assured teenagers provide a relatively accomplished performance as their dance master watches. Ilaro, 1978.

PLATE 10. An identical pair of master dancers match each other's intricate dance patterns, as the crowd strains to see the action. Ketu, 1971.

followed by stronger, more self-assured teenagers (pl. 9). Often a teenager is accompanied by his mentor, who stands over him and watches every detail of his performance, sometimes tapping out the rhythms visually or verbally in order to assist the teenager and to keep him on the right track, sometimes to shout out instructions or to correct him if he makes a mistake (pls. 8, 9).

These preliminary performances heighten the crowd's anticipation, for they herald the imminent appearance of the master dancers, elegantly attired in elaborately carved headdresses and a profusion of cloth. The tone becomes more serious and the critical evaluations of the performance more exacting. The crowd strains to see a pair of dancers in front of the drums as they match each other's steps (pl. 10). The crowd controllers make a conscientious but futile effort to keep the crowd from pressing forward. Moving back and forth along the perimeter of the performance space, they lash the ground with their switches just at the toes of the spectators, forcing them to retreat. Masqueraders perform in quick succession, each striving to outdo the others in his mastery of

PLATE 11. As enthusiasm mounts, spectators spur the masquerader on to greater choreographic heights. Ilaro, 1978.

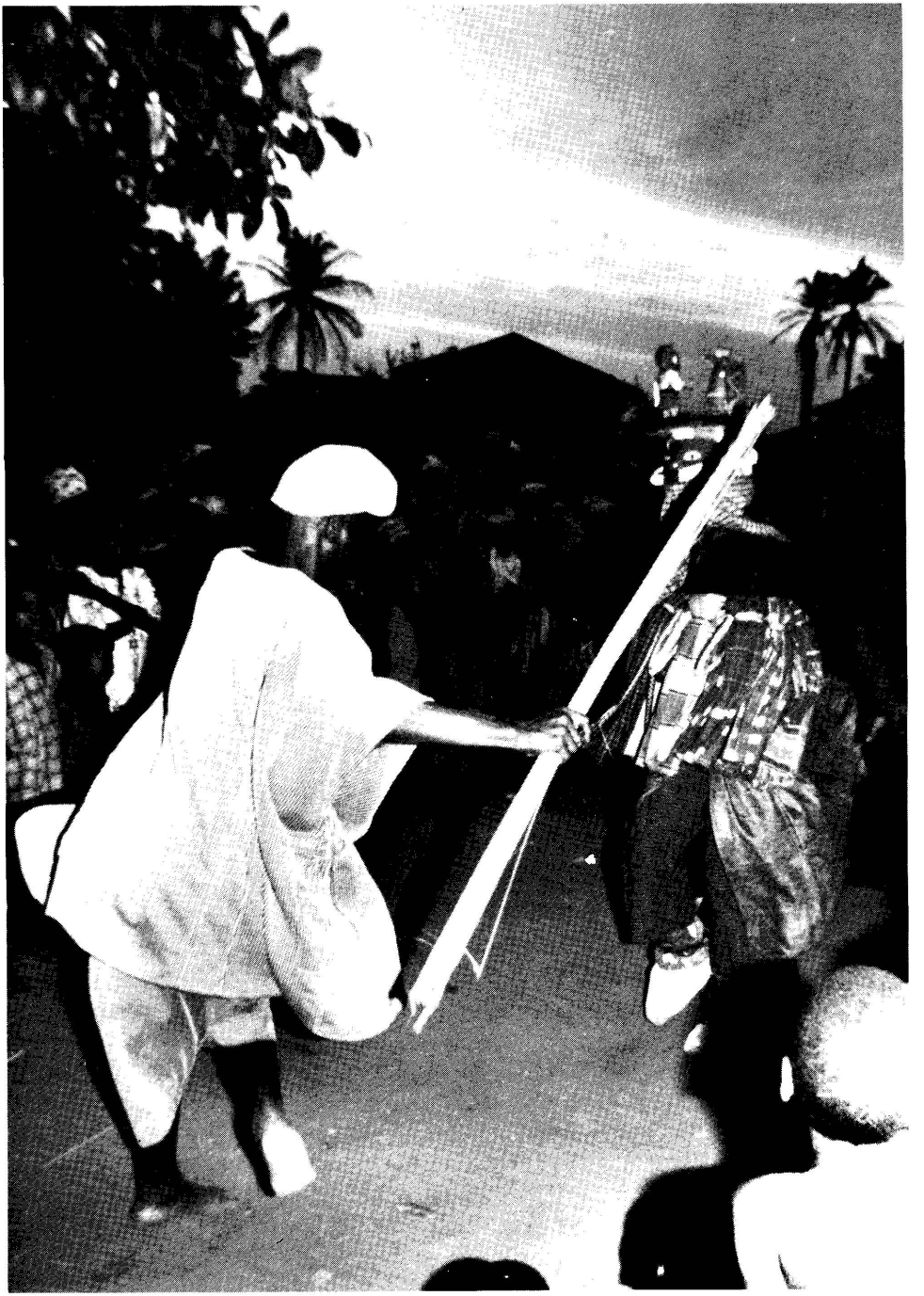

PLATE 12. A crowd controller rushes into the arena to perform with a masquerader. Ṣawonjo, 1978.

PLATE 13. At the close of the afternoon dance, the deified ancestral priestess, dressed in white, comes to bless the community. Imaṣai, 1971.

increasingly complex rhythmic patterns. As enthusiasm mounts, crowd controllers and cult elders—men and women—rush into the performance area to accompany their family's masqueraders and spur them on to greater choreographic heights (pl. 11). In the dimming light of dusk the last Gẹlẹdẹ perform (pl. 12), and the spectacle usually closes with a special masquerader representing the deified ancestress of the community (pl. 13). Her appearance reassures the crowd of the mother's blessings and signals the conclusion of a successful festival as all reluctantly disperse to their compounds.

By examining the content of the various art forms that constitute Gẹlẹdẹ performance, it is possible to understand its social concerns and the way these concerns are expressed both verbally and nonverbally. It is also possible to perceive how Yoruba spectacle operates, communicating discrete bits of information simultaneously through the use of multimedia.