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The Art of Fasting: Benin's Ague Ceremony

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The Art of Fasting: Benin’s Ague Ceremony

KATHY CURNOW

Against all advice, Acting British Consul-General James R. Phillips insisted on visiting Benin City in early January 1897. The Oba had asked him to delay because of Ague, a ritual requiring his complete isolation from visitors. Although the subsequent British colonization was probably inevitable, Ague’s timing and Phillips’s obstinacy catalyzed the chain of reactions which led to the conquest of the kingdom.

Formerly a ceremony of critical importance, Ague has received little scholarly attention, perhaps because its full celebration ceased during the reign of Oba Eweka II (r. 1914–33). In its development it confirmed the Edo adage “Every new Oba creates new rules,”1 for Ague changed substantially under various monarchs, until ultimately it came to knit together such disparate elements as Lenten denial and regional New Yam beliefs. These successive royal innovations suggest that other Benin festival “traditions” may have similarly dynamic, complex histories.

Yams, Benin’s staple food and crop, were ostensibly at Ague’s core, but its ultimate concerns were the ownership, pollution, and sanctification of the land. Before the British invasion, yams played a ritual role in four related ceremonies. In the first, which opened the agricultural cycle, yams were planted in a symbolic pattern at the Oba’s Ugbebu village farm. Diviners examined this yield to forecast the general harvest, sometimes ordaining human sacrifices to avert disasters (Thomas 1918:138–39). The second ceremony took place after the general harvest with the commencement of Ague-Osa, a period of fasting that required participants to abstain from eating newly harvested yams.2 At its conclusion, Benin’s New Yam festival was celebrated,3 and bidden yams were offered to paternal and maternal ancestors, deities, the unburied dead, and hostile spirits (Melzian 1959:99) (Fig. 1). The fourth ceremony, a second Ague period known as Ague-Oghene, followed, ending the agricultural year. By the 1930s Ague-Oghene’s activities were already obscure (Melzian 1959), and the two Agues are often confused and conflated today.

Ague was a sober time. No burials or marriages took place, no guns were fired, and no drums or calabash rattles were played. While all Edo avoided eating new yams, only the Oba and certain chiefs, priests, and courtiers were full Ague participants. Their abstinence extended to other types of fresh produce4 and to sexual celibacy for up to four “Benin months.”5 Ague-Osa’s preparatory period concluded with seven days of isolation in Oguan, a special palace chamber sited in or near Oba Esigie’s quarters (Nevins 1928:9; Bradbury notes 1959:BS218).6 Human sacrifice took place on the chamber’s threshold when the Oba was about to enter, and again just before his exit (Egharevba n.d., “Benin Museum Catalogue” ms. in Bradbury notes:R67).

Other injunctions besides fasting were in effect. One chief told me, “On certain days you don’t talk to human beings; you don’t touch water at all, even to gargle or bathe.” Perils were intense, even life-threatening. Contact, direct or indirect, with the new yam or its leaf was contaminating. As Chief Osuan said, “If partici-

Left: 1. Yam knife with handle terminating in a Janus memorial head. Bronze, 19cm (7.5”). The Field Museum, Chicago, neg. A99487, cat. 210309.

This type of knife was used to peel sacrificial yams for the palace’s New Yam festival.


The attendants are chiefs Osa and Osuan, who kneel only when praying with the Oba at Ague.
pants] touch a new yam plate or shake a new yam hand or have any contact with something associated with new yam, they won’t come back safe from Ague.” A deadly cholera-like disorder was said to strike those who did not comply with Ague’s regulations.7

Participants suspended metal badges (umanague or aba) from a length of twine around their necks. Some were wedge-shaped, like miniature “thunderbolts” (ugh-awam), while others were cruciform.8 The expression “Because he was unable, he did not wear the aba” describes someone who cannot finish what he starts. A lapse in participant stricken with the cholera-like illness prompted the phrase “Umanague has caught him.”9

Ague’s self-denial and isolation kept participants free from pollution, strengthening their spiritual powers and making them especially pleasing to the ancestors. Chief Obasogie stated that without Ague’s sanctification, those attempting certain invocations risked death; successful fasting was believed to ensure that all requests would be granted. Recognition of the supernatural potency Ague conferred often led to court and military promotions.

Ague’s Origins

The new yam harvest is celebrated because it signifies ancestral endorsement, a certification that the world is as it should be. Privation, disease, and other disasters are evidence of problems with Oto, the deified earth. Ague’s origins seem tied to such afflictions. Epidemics and famine are said to have occurred during the early years of Benin’s present, Ife-founded dynasty, confirmation that the land was polluted. Tradition states that the royal settlers sent to Ife for the deities Uwen and Ora, also known as the Ebo n’Edo (“Edo gods”),10 to arrest these calamities. These gods’ appeasement before eating new yams acted as a sort of proto-Ague.

Land concerns continued under Oba Ewedo (r. ca. 1330–60). When he finally established control over Benin City itself, he was forced to “buy” occupancy rights ceded by Chief Ogamien, descendant of a previous indigenous regent. This transaction must be duplicated at each installation. When the Oba purchases Ogamien’s sand during his coronation (Nevadomsky 1984:56), he acknowledges his own external origin and affirms land ownership as the birthright of the indigenous inhabitants. The spiritual authority to rule requires their ancestors’ endorsement.

Despite this ostensible settlement, the struggle between settlers and indigenes is considered perpetual. Ominigbon, Benin’s divination system, describes their relationship metaphorically: “The human world fought for the palm fronds and the spirit world fought for sugar-cane.”11 The interpretation of this epi-

gram deals with either a dispute that continually resurfaces or with disease and epidemics. Through this association of eternal struggle with disease, the epi-

gram reinforces ties between concepts of land ownership and land pollution.

Approximately a century later, Oba Ewuare (r. ca. 1450–80) blamed the deaths of his two sons on “spoil” land. Hoping to purify the land and forestall additional problems, he passed laws prohibiting bathing, sex, dance, and celebration, thereby introducing mourning as part of the appeasement of Uwen and Ora. Ewuare is credited with coalescing the ceremony known as Ague-Oghene.

The name Ague-Oghene, “the Ooni of I’fe’s Ague,” refers to the origin of the dynasty and its gods Uwen and Ora. Ewuare appointed priest-chiefs to care for these deities: Chief Osa is in charge of Ora, who seems to be associated with weapons and aggression, while Chief Osuan cares for Uwen, whose province is healing, obstetrics, and fertility of the soil. Each chief has a shrine to his respective deity, but the joint Ebo n’Edo altar is in the palace, where worship of these gods is restricted to a small circle.

The popular saying “Only Osa and Osuan know the secret of the young palm fronds”12 intimates that these chiefs are privy to some of the palace’s most secret matters. Sometimes called the “twins” (i’era, or “two coconuts”), they always appear together (Fig. 3), and the saying “The ceremony the Oba opens finds Osa and Osuan there” attests to their critical presence.13 These chieftaincies were formerly associated with human sacrifice, the bathing in or drinking of human blood, and even cannibalism, a concept that was anathema to the Edo. The current Chief Osa noted

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his predecessors’ appellation: “Osa has killed and eaten a victim; the son of one who eats flesh greedily.” The Ebo n’Edo were similarly praised: “The deities who don’t eat sick victims.”

**Oba Esigie and Ague-Osa**

Oba Esigie (r. 1517–66) drastically changed Ague’s focus, although chiefs Osa and Osuan remained critical participants. His alterations reflect the growing presence of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century. Their wealth and arms stimulated interest in their religion, along with the hope of increased trade, military alliances and supplies, and perhaps additions to the supernatural arsenal. European records suggest that Esigie was baptized as a youth in 1516 and came to the throne the following year (Ryder 1969:50–51, 69–73). His accession involved an intense struggle with his elder brother, Arhuan, and he seems to have recruited Portuguese allies even before the death of his father, Oba Ozolua (r. ca. 1490–1517). One well-known Edo account hints at a surreptitious relationship. When his father queried him about his foreign associates, he dissembled, “I don’t understand them. When they tell me *miniminimini* (nonsense syllables referring to Portuguese’s unintelligibility), I answer *miniminimini*.15 Individual Portuguese did assist him in his early struggles for the throne (commemorated in the Iron ceremony) and helped him defeat the Igalu during the Idah war.

Christianity initially prospered under Esigie. The Edo state that three shrines to the Supreme God Osanobua were originally Catholic churches, erected during his reign. Esigie rededicated Ague, christening it Ague-Osa (“the Supreme God’s Ague”), and changed the ceremony’s direction. Many contemporary chiefs say that Ague was “just like Lent,” and Jacob Egharevba asserted that Esigie “copied it from the Catholic Church” (in “Benin Museum Catalogue” in Bradbury notes: R67).

Although at first Lent seems unrelated to Ague—their scheduling and prohibitions differ—both ceremonies do focus on purposeful self-denial and sacrifice. Esigie’s Ague innovations included the new emphasis on Osanobua and the transformation of the Ugbague grove into a preparatory arena for prayer, penitence, and meditation.16 He also originated the final seven days of seclusion in Oguan, whose chamber was sited by his quarters, and introduced the umanague badge, granting it only “to those of highest character.” He mandated that its wearers never be killed (Bradbury notes 1951:A35).

Some bronzes which probably portray Esigie demonstrate Ague connections, and date from either his reign or that of his son, Oba Orhogbua. Foremost among them are a series of six plaques17 showing essentially the same scene: the Oba seated on a cylindrical throne, holding an iron hammer (*asulaka* or *awunaka*) in his right hand, and flanked by two kneeling chiefs (Fig. 2). All three wear beaded attire and headgear topped by projections known as *oro*. On four of the works, the chiefs support the Oba’s hands, as is usual when the Oba is moving at ceremonies. On the other two, a matched pair that seems slightly earlier (one in the National Museum, Lagos, and the other in the British Museum), they do not touch him. Five of the works include small profiled Portuguese half-figures or heads near their upper edges. These fragmentary figures18 occur on many plaques; they are decorative motifs, not meant to be read as part of the scene. Although generally the Portuguese symbolize wealth (two figures hold manillas, curved metal bars which served as currency), they may also indicate events from Esigie’s reign.

The symmetrical compositions are near duplicates of one another. The Oba remains rigidly frontal, while the others turn. This implication of movement has foreign origins, deriving from the Portuguese and their illustrated books. Incompletely absorbed, this pose creates some awkwardness. From the hips down, the kneeling figures are nearly in profile, but their upper bodies rotate to indicate three-quarter views. In the Lagos and British Museum pieces, this clumsily forces the inner arm into visibility. Hierarchical scale is less prominent than in most Benin works. The chiefs, if standing, would approach the Oba in height, differing only in the breadth of their faces and bodies. This factor, as well as their nearly identical dress, suggests very high rank.

The figures are represented wearing beaded shirts, the high *odigha* collar, anklets, armlets, and similarly shaped crowns, although the Oba’s includes additional cylindrical ornaments. All three *oro* projections, woven from a special palm fiber, are clearly phallic in form; the monarch’s version is portrayed as coral-covered. *Oro* seems to have sacral rather than political associations. Today the Oba, chiefs Osa and Osuan, the Uzama chiefs, and certain high priests (such as the Ohen Nukoni) wear *oro*; sixteenth-century plaques show that its use was once more widespread.
Knee-length garments hung with pendants at the waist complete the figures’ dress. Two examples show the Oba with human-face pendants, while the others depict leopard faces. His attendants wear crocodile-head ornaments except for one example, which substitutes frog pendants. The men’s skirt-like garments, tied with fringed sashes, are unlike the wrappers seen on most plaques. Each has an interface border—a mark of high status—as well as a variety of other patterns. Wrappers on the matching Lagos and British Museum plaques additionally include highly abstract frontal and profiled Portuguese faces.

The posture of the flanking figures identifies both the chiefs shown and the occasion itself. According to the present Chief Osuan, the only time he and Chief Osa kneel is when they pray with the Oba at Ague. “During Ague we dress like the Oba, but his crown is made of beads; ours is woven. We flank him then. It is a time of sober reflection...it’s [we] three who can enter in the interior of Ague [Ogun] for the final seven days. [We] pray for the nation. It’s like a retreat.”

That the Oba himself is not shown kneeling is unsurprising. Considered submissive, kneeling is suitable for women but not men; at times of sacrificial anointing, blood is touched to men’s knees with the prayer “May you not have to kneel and beg.” The degradation of kneeling is one of the components of Ague that make chiefs regard it as an ordeal. There is a possibility that the royal mudfish-legged figure that is so common in Benin art might be an encoded representation of a kneeling Oba; a plaque in the Reiss-Museum, Mannheim, includes an unusual kneeling figure of a member of the Ewe guild, his peculiarly bent legs curving up like mudfish-leg representations (Fig. 4).

Kneeling is, of course, also the Catholic position of supplication and petition.

Two additional plaques which show the same triad standing (The Field Museum, Chicago, CNFM 8258; also British Museum 98.1–14.27) are closely related to these six works. They also show Osa and Osuan supporting the Oba’s arms, an activity which takes place not only at Ague but also at the Oba’s coronation, his visits to Aruosa (one of Osanobua’s shrines), and the Ododu masquerade (Egharevba 1934:93). Although both sets of plaques depict these chiefs identically, their traditional placement distinguishes them: Osuan is always at the Oba’s left, Osa at his right. These plaques again depict similarly sized figures in nearly interchangeable attire; the source of this parity may be one of Osa and Osuan’s praise names: er’Oba (ere Oba), or “Oba’s equals/friends.”

The plaques of the standing triad also show the Oba holding an avalaka. This iron implement, whose name means “thunder imitator,” is prominent in Ague imagery. Often kept on shrines to Ogun, the deity who embodies metal and war, it is both tool and weapon: it can clear paths, destroy, or act as ise iberigho, an object which ensures that what the Oba swears on it will come to pass. The plaques may represent avalaka in any of these functions: ridding the Ague arena of danger and obstacles, killing the sacrificial victims, or reinforcing the Oba’s will (particularly likely, since one of Ague’s purposes is to strengthen his blessing and cursing abilities). They may alternatively specify Oba Esigie, since two of his defeated enemies, his brother Arhuaran and the Attah of Idah, were associated with avalaka.

According to brasscaster James Ihama, “Among Ogun’s children, avalaka is the first son. When Ododu wanted to become very powerful, he had to invite him. Without Ogun you cannot war...in those days [when they did] sacrifice, it is this avalaka which [would] be used to kill them.” It once may have had a ceremonial purpose; Chief Osa states that his founding ancestor came from Ile “with three avalaka—one for himself, one for the Oba and one for the Iie of Igun...avalaka was used for ada and eben [ceremonial swords] in those days.”

The avalaka also links the plaques’ Oba to the Ebo n’Edo shrine. Despite Catholic influences, Ague’s associations with the deities Uwen and Ora must have continued under Esigie, since their priests appear prominently with the Oba on the Ague plaques. Esigie expanded the number of groups admitted to the Ebo n’Edo altar, which is in the palace’s Ogun chamber (Iwogun) (Ben-Amos in Blackmun 1984:355). His newly created Ewa (the guild which, under Chief Ohuoba of Ogbelaka, traditionally woke the Oba and performed rituals before his morning zematon ceremony) joined Osa, Osuan, and the Otton (who open and close ceremonies, using whips to keep onlookers away from secret activities) and Emu iru guilds (who carry brass vessels filled with protective medicine related to Uwen and Ora, according to Oba Akenzua II in Bradbury notes 1958:B996). The frequent appearance of members of these guilds in artworks dat-
ing from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries attests to their importance.

Ewa members are particularly common in Benin art, seen in over fifteen freestanding sculptures (Fig. 5) as well as on plaques, altarpieces, and ivory tusks. They are usually shown with 
uolaka in their left hands and a staff in their right, wearing helmets and a cross at the neck. Although they bear citizens’ tattoos on their chests, many also have puzzling, non-Edo “cat-whisker” cheek scarifications. Visual evidence supports Oba Akenzua II’s identification of these figures as Ewa (Bradbury notes 1959: BS207/2), although they have been variously labeled “messengers from life” and Osanobua’s Ohensa priests.3 Multi-figured compositions prove their low rank, for their relative size is often very small (Fig. 4). Crosses do not distinguish the weavers either, for Ewa, life “messengers,” and Ohensa all possessed them.24 Context further suggests they are neither Ohensa nor “messengers”; they usually appear on ivory tusks in conjunction with the others who had access to the Ebo n’Edo shrine (see Blackmun 1984), and several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Queen Mother (Iyoba) altarpieces group them with her war chiefs and other attendants. Since the Iyoba, like her son, celebrated zematon daily (Bradbury notes 1961: BS459), it is quite likely that she had her own Ewa guild.

There are some indications that the Idah war links Ewa with Ague. One story states that Ague took place in the war camp, perhaps to fortify the soldiers.25 The defeated Attah and his men were made to “kneel and repent,” and the Portuguese who accompanied Esigie then baptized them—the claxon of Ague-Osa. Certainly, some of the vanquished Igala soldiers were castrated26 and taken to Benin as Eguadase guild members serving either in the Oba’s harem or at the Iyoba’s Uselu palace. These eunuchs were also known as “eru erie n’Oguan,” a name which ties them to the Ague site.

Bradbury recorded an ekasa song verse: “Eguadase and Ogbela both provide ewa; Eguadase have an altar for Esigie” (notes 1951:65). Those Ewa drawn from Eguadase were thus originally Igala, and may be the source of the Ewa figures’ “cat-whisker” marks, for those scarifications were found among the Igala. Both the Oba and the Attah of Idah were identified with leopards,27 and one of the Oba’s main praise names is ekpen n’oova (“leopard of the house”). To avoid potential blasphemy (because of the word ekpen’s royal associations), the leopard has a second Oba name—atalakpa—which designates only the wild animal. A Benin joke refers to the defeat of the Attah, who was taunted by soldiers: “You claim to be ekpen, but you can’t be—our Oba is the ekpen. You, Attah, were tricked into believing Benin would attack you, and you were senseless enough to have believed it. You are a fool (akpa). You are not ekpen, you are Attah n’aka (“Attah the fool,” a play on “atalakpa”).”

The Idah baptism and atalakpa stories may be apochryphal, but they are intriguing nonetheless for their insights into contemporary Edo takes on history. The possibility that baptism was the culminating rite of Esigie’s Ague remains speculative, but it would provide a real tie to Catholicism (making sense of the Lenten marks), since converts traditionally prepare during Lent for their baptism on Easter. Some adaptation of foreign religion, possibly as a key to Portuguese wealth and arms, certainly occurred in Esigie’s reign, although it may not have followed orthodox conventions. One important Ague ritual did involve water. Bradbury stated, without elaboration, that a pair of ram aquamaniles (Fig. 6: also British Museum 1954AF23.294) were used in the ceremony (notes 1959: BS250). According to Chief Araguá, whose title derives from the Portuguese word for water, these objects functioned in Ague’s closing rites and held water stored from the year’s final rain (usually in November or December). The ram’s iconographical significance in this context is unclear. A symbol of stubborness and masculinity, it was only one of several types of animals sacrificed during Ague; unfed rams remained in Oguan during Ague-Osa’s final seven days (Egharevba, “Benin Museum Catalogue” in Bradbury notes R67).

Esigie’s relationship with the foreigner and their religion seems to have soured with time. In 1538 the Portuguese king sent missionaries to Benin, but the ruler (who seems still to have been Esigie) was antagonistic toward them and refused to allow them to baptize anyone. They complained of human sacrifices and “idolatry” (Ryder 1969:69–73; 1961:238–39). One of Bradbury’s informants claimed that Esigie killed some missionaries and took their crosses (Bradbury notes 1959:264). Although no European archival record of this exists, by mid-century some unnamed outrage prompted the Portuguese factor to suspend trade between São Tomé and Benin (Ryder 1969:74).

Revival and Changes under Eresonyen
After Esigie’s reign, Ague practices shifted. His son, Oba Orhobogba (r. ca. 1566–86), probably continued Ague-Osa, since he is said to have been a Catholic, but his successor, the anti-Christian Oba Ehengbuda (r. ca. 1586–1616), scrapped Ague. Oba and maintained Esigie’s Ague-Oghene. In 1725 some version of Ague was still being celebrated; until his seven-day seclusion ended, Oba Akenzua I (r. ca. 1714–34) confined the Dutch factor to Ughoton port (Ryder 1969:172).

When Oba Eresonyen (r. ca. 1737–50) came to the throne, Ague underwent both revival and change. Whether because of divination, war, epidemics, or other factors, Eresonyen introduced Ague-Osa, Oba Esigie’s Ague, meshing it with Ague-Oghene. A proverb resulted: “Eresonyen found a place to put Ague-Osa.”28 One possible impetus may have been Esigie himself; Eresonyen apparently felt a keen affinity with his ancestor (Ben-Amos 1984). Trying to emulate or outdo him, Eresonyen instigated a resurgence of bronze-casting, even commissioning a more elaborate version of Esigie’s erhe stool. As in Esigie’s time, Catholic missionaries entered Benin (after a period when Dutch and other Protestant traders had been on the ascendance), and although Eresonyen did not
convert, the cross became a common motif during his reign, appearing on his ikegobo and other shrine pieces.

Eresonyen’s rivalry with Esigie extended to masquerades. Ovia, a village purification masquerade strongly associated with Esigie (though unrelated to Ague), was performed annually at the palace (illustrated on pp. 2, 44, 45). Eresonyen banned Ovia in Benin, supposedly because the masqueraders insulted him. He is credited with instituting Ododua, a new purification masquerade restricted solely to the palace, and making it part of his version of Ague-Oghene.

Ododua’s aristocratic materials—eagle feathers, bronze, and red ododo cloth (Figs. 8, 9)—supplanted Ovia’s red parrot feathers and humble raffia. Likewise, royal aggrandizement replaced Ovia’s village focus; even its name ties it to the present dynasty’s origins—and thus Ague-Oghene—since Ododua founded Ife’s kingship. The masquerade is attributed to Uzala, a village north of Benin, where

Clockwise, from top left:

6. Ram aquamanile. Bronze, length 44cm (17.3”). National Museum, Lagos. Aquamaniles were used in Ague’s closing rites. Except for a second example in the British Museum, all other known examples are in leopard form.


8. Ododua masqueraders. This purification masquerade was instituted and incorporated into Ague by Oba Eresonyen. Benin City, ca. 1955. Photo: Peter Morton-Williams.
Eresonyen is said to have admired the town’s fourteen Ovbo n’Uzala masqueraders. He decided to return with seven (a medicine-connected number used to summon “hot” gods), 29 giving chiefs Osia and Osuan their dances and songs.

The masquerade’s costumes and dance implements, however, owe nothing to Uzala. Three dancers represent males; their headpieces (which sit atop the head, unlike true masks) are capped with long oro projections. Three others represent females with crested hairstyles (Underwood 1949), while one has a very short oro and represents a male spirit-world child, oobie erimwine (Fig. 7). All have large, staring, iron-inlaid eyes, as well as bared teeth.

The British carried off the eighteenth-century headpieces in 1897, 30 their replacements are still in use, for the masquerade—last danced in 1989—is the only part of Ague still practiced publicly; reproductions and fakes are also extant. The original male headpieces (e.g., Fig. 10) are nearly identical to one another: the triangular “Uzebu” pattern (apparently deriving from Ijebu textiles) covers the oro. Numerous snakes zigzag down its surface, while others ornament the jawline and hair; crocodiles emerge from the nostrils and also descend the forehead. Three raised marks appear over each eye, and two vertical strokes (ikaro) are placed above the nose. In addition, each male is individualized by emblems at the chin and under each ear. One bears eben ceremonial swords, another, crosses, and the third, mudfish.

Opposite page: 10. Odo du headpiece. Bronze, 70.5 cm (27.8”). The Walt Disney-Tishman African Art Collection, 1984.AF.051.076.


The female headpieces display the crested coiffures of eighteenth-century court attendants. All have four marks over each eye, but they lack the ikaro and reptiles. The “child” also lacks these, as well as the Uzebu pattern, although he bears the three eye marks of other males. He is further distinguished by several crescent moons in his hair and by the elephant trunk-hand—a popular eighteenth-century motif—which appears at the corners of his lips.

Most Odo du performers hold either crosses or ufienwine (iron objects that resemble wrapped arrows) in one hand, and either an agbada sword (males) or a fan (females) in the other. 31 The “child,” who seems to be the group’s leader, carries both fan and avula. Chief Osuan states that all these implements enable the masqueraders to “go to the unknown forcefully. Generally things in front are seen as evil; these drive it away and let [them] go ahead without problems.” The avula in particular refers to the deities’ power to kill. 32 As if to reinforce this, the “child’s” dress included an abstract sheet-brass ornament in the form of Ofoe, harbinger of death (Bradbury notes: R58).

Odo du headpieces are unlike any other Edo examples, though their form resembles certain riverine masks originated by the Ijo and imitated by the Isekiiri, riverine Yoruba, and others, including the Edo of Ughoton. Stylistically they are consistent with other Benin work of the same period, except for the mouth with exposed teeth, a feature uncommon in Edo art and, indeed, in Edo culture. (Teeth are not represented in recent examples, however.) As one elderly man stated, “The mouth and genitals are private. It shows cultured upbrinling to cover your mouth.” Aristocrats often shield their mouths with handkerchiefs and do not eat in public. The expression “No one sees the teeth with which the then deities ate something” associates teeth with privacy and power.

Bared teeth do occur, however, on two face pendants in the Benin Museum (Willett 1973:11), as well as on two bells (Willett 1973:13; Fagg & Plass 1964:123) and the Tada bronze figure’s circular medallions (Eyo & Willett 1980:149). These examples also include snakes extruding from the nostrils; in Benin this signifies that a native doctor’s very breath has the power to destroy enemies. Osun, the personification of medicine, is associated with this imagery. The leaves grasped by the elephant trunk-hand motif
on the headpiece of the Ododua “child” is also a shorthand reference to Osun, and the moons in his hair further refer to powers of medicinally strong “night people.”

However, it is crocodiles (agbaka), not snakes, which emerge from the nostrils of the Ododua heads. The water-avoiding Edo consider them frightening, potent aggressors. Merciless people are called “as sharp as crocodiles (agbaka).” An incantation speaks to the creature’s perceived ruthlessness: “When the crocodile catches something, he doesn’t leave it.”

The identity of the masked spirits remains inconclusive. Their supervisor, Chief Osa, says, “They all have names, but they can’t be mentioned. There is rank among the seven.” Ben-Amos (1976) proposed that they depicted Ora, his wife Uwen, and their entourage—“great magicians who came from Ife with Oranmiyan”—but later (1984) alternatively suggested that they portray “members of the ruling line of Ododua, the father of Oranmiyan and progenitor of this Yoruba dynasty.”

The masquerade’s name does suggest a Yoruba dynastic connection, but the male headpieces themselves hardly represent monarchs, whether Yoruba or Edo. Minimal ornamentation, crownless heads, and exposed teeth are not found on Edo portrayals of respected monarchs. The females do not have queenly hairstyles, although they do, curiously enough, wear the beaded udahae headband normally seen only on royal men and chiefs. Although Ben-Amos (1984:75–79) attempted to relate the headpieces’ form and function to Yoruba works with royal connotations, the similarities are not particularly strong.

Internal evidence suggests that her earlier hypothesis has more merit, though it is still problematic. The works’ iconography does strongly suggest Osun, and one of Ague’s prime functions is medicinal strengthening. Identification with Osun specialists would be nearly certain if not for one critical aspect: the presence of females, who are considered medicine-neutralizers (Curnow, in press). Perhaps this emphasis on the couple relates to the deity Uwen’s fertility concerns. Sexual pairing—exceedingly rare in Benin art, though common elsewhere in Africa—implies duality and complementarity. The presence of these alien concepts constitutes the masquerade’s strongest Yoruba links.

The Ododua masquerade may be the only vestige of Ague, but memory, verbal expressions, and artworks attest to the ceremony’s historical importance. If these create a somewhat confusing mixture of information, contradictions, and gaps, they at least help illuminate some aspects of the past. Their very variety speaks to the hazards of regarding Ague—and probably other Benin festivals—as static.

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1. Oba ojú oba ojú dimóni ọnà ajó.
2. The role of cloth in many parts of Southern Benin. Some Benin ceremonial traits were shared with the neighboring Igbo. As Pita Efijkor notes (1985:33-34), many Benin rulers are said to have been given their first tubers of yam at birth. In the context of Benin’s cosmopolitan posture, Jacobstall discussed Benin’s New Yam Festival, its ceremonial and ritual significance. Benin’s New Yam Festival is a celebration of the success of the previous year’s harvest. Benin’s New Yam Festival has been celebrated since the 19th century. During the festival, Benin sends a delegation to give thanks to the gods for a bountiful harvest and to ask for a good harvest in the coming year. The festival is also a time for Benin to display its wealth and power to other states.

3. Rituals also play a significant role in Benin’s New Yam Festival. These rituals include the presentation of gifts to the gods, the sacrifice of animals, and the performance of dances. The performances of these rituals are conducted by the Benin priests and are accompanied by the sounding of trumpets and the drum. These rituals are performed to appease the gods and to ask for a bountiful harvest. Benin’s New Yam Festival is a time for Benin to display its wealth and power to other states. It is also a time for Benin to invite other states to participate in its celebration.

4. Benin’s New Yam Festival is a time for Benin to invite other states to participate in its celebration. It is also a time for Benin to display its wealth and power to other states. The participation of other states is important to Benin because it is a way for Benin to assert its influence and power in the region. The participation of other states in Benin’s New Yam Festival is a way for Benin to invite other states to participate in its celebration. It is also a time for Benin to display its wealth and power to other states.