



POWER OF TUSSLES AND THE TUSSLE OF POWERS: RITUAL DRAMA, POLITICAL COSMOLOGY, AND SPATIAL AUTHORITY IN IJEBU FESTIVALS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the dynamic interplay of ritual performance, political cosmology, and spatial authority in the Ijebu kingdom of southwestern Nigeria, focusing on the annual Agemo and Òjówú festivals. Far beyond mere cultural spectacles, these festivals operate as living constitutions, where sovereignty, legitimacy, and cosmic order are negotiated, dramatized, and renewed. Drawing on archaeology, anthropology, oral history, and spatial theory, the study argues that in Ijebu, power is not a static possession but a circulating force, ritually enacted through dance, satire, drum language, processional movement, and sacred geometry. The Agemo festival stages a tripartite drama of power, from ritual humiliation and re-empowerment of priests by citizens, to symbolic combat among priests, culminating in a co-sovereign encounter between the Onírè and the Awùjalè (king). In contrast, the Òjówú festival encodes gendered dualism and astronomical cycles, aligning political theology with solar and lunar rhythms through choreographed spatial movement. Together, these festivals demonstrate that Ijebu kingship is cosmologically anchored, ritually recursive, and communally accountable. This model challenges conventional distinctions between politics and performance, revealing how ritual functions as the primary architecture of governance in Ijebu. Power here is storied, embodied, and continually re-legitimated through sacred motion, offering enduring lessons for understanding sovereignty as a process of collective becoming.*

KEYWORDS: Ijebu; Ritual, Kingship, Cosmology, Performance.



INTRODUCTION: RITUAL AS POLITICAL ARCHITECTURE

Among the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria, ritual is far more than a sacred performance—it is a system of knowledge production, a method of political expression, and a memory infrastructure embedded in movement, space, and time. In the Ìjẹ̀bú kingdom, this convergence of cosmology, power, and space becomes most visible during annual festivals such as the Àgẹ̀mọ and Òjòwú. These festivals commemorate spiritual deities, mark calendrical shifts and stage the kingdom's constitution in motion. Through bodily performance, spatial transitions, and musical symbolism, the festivals embody what Victor Turner (1969) described as the "social drama," where symbolic conflict and resolution are enacted before the public eye, and the political order is reaffirmed.

This paper focuses on two major festivals of Ìjẹ̀bú—Àgẹ̀mọ and Òjòwú—as sites where ritual performance encodes the political cosmology of the kingdom. An outsider may be quick to perceive them as festivals of entertainment or a mere sustenance of traditional dogmas. An emic perspective shows that they are profound acts of statecraft. As Akinwumi Ogundiran (2020) has argued, Yorùbá ritual forms, including praise poetry, carved architecture, and processional performance, should be understood as generative genres of historical consciousness. They do not only supplement written archives; they *are* the archive. Within this hermeneutic, Àgẹ̀mọ and Òjòwú are better understood as constitutional reenactments where sovereignty, legitimacy, and succession are debated, dramatized, and renewed.

While previous scholarship has addressed the architectural sophistication of Ìjẹ̀bú, especially in relation to Sungbo's Èrédò and the concentric palatial enclosures of Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde (Aremu, 2002; Chouin & Lasisi, 2019; Lasisi, 2025), less attention has been paid to how ritual movement animates these spaces as political texts. The Ìjẹ̀bú cultural landscape, rather than being static, is kinetic, inscribed annually through sacred footsteps, chants, and gestures that follow calendrical and cosmological cues. This paper takes seriously the idea that *ritual is architecture in motion*, and that through these moving forms, power is demonstrated, redistributed, and reconfigured across time and space.

At the heart of this analysis is the figure of the Àlágẹ̀mọ, the ritual priest who also functions as a political ruler in outlying Ìjẹ̀bú towns. His relationship with citizens, fellow Àgẹ̀mọ priests, and the Awùjalẹ—the paramount king—reveals a complex political hierarchy that is neither fixed nor unilateral. Through annual ritual performances, the Àlágẹ̀mọ undergoes a cyclical drama of humiliation, re-empowerment, and symbolic elevation. This dramatic sequence reveals the Yorùbá understanding of power not as possession but as process, not as inheritance but as performance—continuously negotiated, revoked, and restored in ritual time.

Similarly, the Òjòwú festival introduces a cosmic dualism that complements the terrestrial dynamics of Àgẹ̀mọ. Through the pairing of male and female deities—Okunrin Òjòwú and Obinrin Òjòwú—the festival encodes solar and lunar rhythms into the kingdom's political theology. These deities, their priests, and their movement across the palace landscape enact a calendar of spiritual balance. The timing of the festival with the March equinox, the observance of moon cycles for priestly abstinence, and the dramatic reunion of the deities all point to an astronomical consciousness embedded in political ritual. Here, the king becomes not just a political figure but a solar axis, blessed and affirmed by cosmological forces beyond the human.

In framing the Àgẹ̀mọ and Òjòwú festivals as ritual infrastructures of the Ìjẹ̀bú kingdom, this paper draws from an interdisciplinary mix of archaeology, anthropology, oral history, and



spatial theory. It contributes to ongoing conversations about how African societies archive political memory, how power is spatially enacted through ritual, and how oral-performative traditions function as living constitutions. Ultimately, the festivals examined herein offer a compelling case for understanding the African city—not merely as a place—but as a *process*, where memory, power, and sacred motion continually bring the polity into being (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Mbembe, 2001).

Power and Ritual Performance in Yoruba Culture

The conceptualization of power in Yoruba societies transcends material control or hierarchical dominance. Instead, it is enacted, contested, and reconstituted through a dynamic interplay of performance, space, and spiritual invocation. Rituals—particularly those involving dance, music, masking, and processional movement—function beyond static representations of belief, but act as active technologies of governance, memory, and cosmological order (Drewal & Drewal, 1983; Apter, 1992; Ogundiran, 2020). In this sense, performance is both a stage and a battlefield, where symbolic dramas articulate political relationships and reaffirm ancestral legitimacy. The Agemo and Ojowu festivals in Ijebu represent some of the most elaborate ritual dramatizations of such power dynamics, blending embodied movement with spiritual transformation to animate a living constitution of sovereignty.

Power, in this context, must be understood as ritualized performance rather than an abstract notion. Drawing from Victor Turner's (1969) concept of ritual as social drama, and Clifford Geertz's (1973) view of culture as a system of symbols and actions, the Ijebu festivals are recognized as choreographies of political expression. Yet Yoruba traditions go further than Geertzian semiotics. They embody what Karin Barber (1991) calls the *generative poetics of performance*, where meaning is not only interpreted but continually re-created through ritual interaction. Thus, the Agemo and Ojowu rituals are not re-enactments of past mythologies; they are mechanisms of re-anchoring political legitimacy in the present.

The Agemo festival in particular enacts a triadic power structure: between the priest and his local citizens, among priests from the various Agemo towns, and between the collective priesthood and the paramount king, the Awujale. Each of these encounters involves contestation through ritualized dance, verbal performance (in oriki and drum speech), and spatial reorientation (e.g., from palace to grove and back). These performances constitute what I call ritual architecture—the embodied inscription of spatial authority through kinetic acts (Lasisi 2025). As Drewal and Drewal (1983) observe in their work on Gelede festivals, “to perform is to transform.” In Ijebu, to dance is to govern, to process is to claim territory, and to confront is to enact cosmic hierarchy.

The Ojowu festival, by contrast, manifests a gendered dualism that mirrors celestial dynamics: the static male deity is likened to the sun, while the mobile female counterpart echoes the moon's orbit. Through this astral choreography, the Ijebu ritual calendar is organized, and political legitimacy is cosmologically validated. Here, power is not just a social construct but a reflection of divine order—a metaphysical architecture rendered visible through movement, procession, and calendrical precision. As Lucas (1948) noted in his early study of Yoruba religion, the worship of sun and moon deities in Ijebu reveals a sophisticated cosmotheology that links kingship with the heavens, further intensifying the sacred dimensions of political order.



In both festivals, performance serves as a ritual calculus by which status is measured, and authority is earned. The use of acrobatic dance, drum language, and satire in song creates a participatory feedback loop between rulers and subjects, ancestors and living beings, city and hinterland. The Alágẹmọ must undergo ritual humiliation before regaining power; the Onírẹ (a representative of the entire Alágẹmọ ritual priests) must embody the collective spirit before confronting the king, and the king must face the ancestor to receive the people's blessing. These recursive structures form what Ogundiran (2020) calls the "genre of Yorùbá archives"—a mode of memory transmission that prioritizes movement, performance, and symbolic reenactment over textual preservation.

To fully grasp the nature of power in Ìjẹbú, then, one must look not to static institutions or written decrees, but to the ephemeral but enduring acts of ritual drama. They are more than cultural traditions as they are acts of spatial governance, emotional engineering, and political theology. The Agẹmọ and Òjòwú festivals are thus constitutions written in dance, negotiations inscribed in drums, and contracts sealed in the sweat of communal ecstasy. A careful analyses of the ritual dynamics between the priests, citizens and the king points to how the tussles of power manifests as the power of tussles in the Ìjẹbú case.

Citizens vs Alágẹmọ: Ritual Humiliation and Re-empowerment

One of the most compelling elements of the Agẹmọ festival is the deliberate ritual reversal of power between the Alágẹmọ priest and the citizens of his town. This inversion—where rulers are temporarily rendered powerless and mocked by their subjects—functions as a form of political dramaturgy deeply rooted in Yorùbá ritual cosmology. It is a process of ritual "humiliation" that sets the stage for eventual "re-empowerment," rebalancing spiritual legitimacy and affirming the cyclical nature of power in Ìjẹbú society. As Turner (1969) described in his model of ritual process, the "liminal" phase—where social hierarchies are suspended—allows for transformation and reintegration. The Agẹmọ priest enters this liminal phase before ascending to a higher spiritual status.

Twelve hours before the priest's departure to Ìjẹbú-Òde, the citizens gather at the palace of the Alágẹmọ to perform a series of songs, chants, and drum languages that strip him of his immediate authority. In this space, the Alágẹmọ is not a divine intermediary or ritual leader; he is portrayed as a weakened figure, mocked through satire and taunted with performances that challenge his potency. The Yorùbá proverb—"Alágẹmọ ti bí ọmọ rẹ ná, àìmojọ kù sí ọwó ọmọ Alágẹmọ" ("The Alágẹmọ has given birth; if the child cannot dance, the fault is the child's")—is evoked in this moment to emphasize expectations of ritual competence. Failure to meet these expectations attracts ridicule.

Songs such as "*Ole nsa lo, Duro demi n wo sokoto oo*" ("The lazy one is running away; wait for me to wear my trousers") are sung in chorus by citizens, symbolically accusing the priest of fleeing a ritual battle. The Alágẹmọ, in response, exits the palace, symbolically defeated. But this is a performative defeat, part of a larger dramaturgical arc. As he walks toward the sacred grove, his voice begins to return, and with each step his spiritual status is reasserted. He sings: "*Eje kin wo Agbala, E ma mo pe agbara wa*" ("Let me go into the grove; you will know that there is power"), signaling the beginning of his reconstitution as an ancestor spirit. The transition from ridicule to reverence is marked by crossing into sacred space—the grove—where ordinary power relations are suspended in favor of divine hierarchies.



At the grove, the Alágẹmọ becomes transformed. Surrounded by the Aborẹ (supporting ritual priests), he performs sacred rites including circumambulation of the *Ẹrù* (*the physical manifestation of the secrets of the kingdom*), invocation of the four cardinal directions, and the donning of the sacred headdress that marks his full identification with the ancestral Agẹmọ. This moment echoes Barber's (1990) notion of "transmission through transformation," in which identity is remade through performance. The Alágẹmọ, who had been mocked as a failed leader, now emerges as a deified embodiment of ancestral power.

What is remarkable is the way this transformation resets the power dynamic. The same citizens who mocked him now fall silent, reverent, aware that any insult directed at the priest in this form could incur spiritual consequences. He has transitioned from a secular leader to a liminal being, from ridicule to reverence. His speech is no longer his own, but that of the Ìjẹbú ancestor spirit. As such, the power he now wields exceeds the temporal; it is sacred, collective, and cosmically grounded.

This ritual inversion and renewal are foundational to Yorùbá political culture. It ensures that no leader becomes permanently entrenched in authority without undergoing periodic renewal through public performance and community sanction. It echoes the logic of "liminal kingship," where power must be ritually deconstructed in order to be validly reconstructed (Beier, 1954; Apter, 1992). The Alágẹmọ must "lose his voice" in the civic world before gaining divine voice in the ancestral one. Power, in this system, is not merely inherited or possessed; it is earned and renewed through ordeal, submission, and embodied transformation.

In sum, the contest between citizens and the Alágẹmọ is not an anomaly in Yorùbá kingship structures but is in itself a ritual grammar. This staged humiliation and re-empowerment create a feedback loop of accountability and divinization that reinforces both democratic ethos and sacred kingship. The Agẹmọ festival, therefore, reveals the performance of power on one the hand and the power of performance on the other hand, integrating them as moral architecture built upon humility, transformation, and the communal reaffirmation of sacred legitimacy.

Alágẹmọ vs Alágẹmọ: Selection and Symbolic Combat

Following the ritual inversion and transformation of each Alágẹmọ within his town, the Agẹmọ priests converge in Ìjẹbú-Òde, where a new stage of ritual contest unfolds—not between priest and citizens, but among the priests themselves. This encounter represents a higher level of symbolic combat, wherein the balance of sacred authority across the Ìjẹbú kingdom is negotiated through performance, acrobatics, and drum-choreographed dance. Each Alágẹmọ, now the embodiment of ancestral power from his town, must compete with others to determine who among them will emerge as Onírẹ—the ritual leader and representative of the Agẹmọ collective in their final engagement with the Awùjalẹ, the king.

The ritual space of this encounter is Imọsàn Grove, located within the boundaries of Ìjẹbú-Òde but spiritually closer to the capital city fortification, functioning as a threshold between the ancestral and political domains. It is here that all sixteen Alágẹmọ gather to perform ètò—a sacred choreography involving coordinated movement, incantation, and symbolic gestures. Their aim is to outshine one another, not merely in aesthetic performance, but in ritual intensity, spiritual discipline, and symbolic fluency. As in other Yoruba festivals, such as Gelede or Egungun (Drewal & Drewal, 1983; Lawal, 1985), competition is not antagonistic but affirmational, reaffirming the collective potency of the cult and the structured pluralism of Yoruba sacred governance.



While the ritual drama suggests that all Aláḡẹmọ have an equal chance to become Onírẹ, it is commonly understood that Posa of Imọsàn or Tami of Òdógbolú are the two most eligible contenders. This semi-scripted rivalry reflects spiritual lineage, territorial politics, and historical memory. As the custodian of the grove and the embodiment of the Onírẹ spirit throughout the year, Posa of Imọsàn holds symbolic primacy. Yet, Tami of Òdógbolú—whose town has historically provided the Onírẹ—maintains a de facto authority that disrupts the spatial advantage of Imọsàn. This duality echoes the Yorùbá conception of coeval sovereignties, where multiple centers of spiritual gravity can coexist, provided ritual balance is maintained.

The contest between Aláḡẹmọ priests is marked by a series of symbolic duels enacted through dance and song. Citizens of each town act as cheerleaders, singers, and satirical commentators, deploying praise poetry and ridicule to either uplift or destabilize rival priests. Songs such as “*Tó bá fẹ́ jó, jó ní; má ẹ fí àkókò rẹ ẹ̀fò pẹ̀lú ìwòrà ènì wò*” (“If you want to dance, just dance; don’t waste time checking yourself”) function as coded provocations, challenging a dancer’s authenticity and stamina. The Aláḡẹmọ’s response to these songs is often through accelerated dance sequences, mimicking war maneuvers, animal forms, or ancestral gestures that convey strength, possession, and sacred fury.

At the heart of this performance lies the assumption of the Onírẹ identity. Once a priest dons the Onírẹ regalia, he ceases to be a representative of a town and becomes the singular manifestation of the Agẹmọ spirit across the kingdom. This transformation also transforms the dynamic from a sartorial concept to an ontological one. Songs such as “*Omode yi gbe ade ba re, o gbe o tabi o gbe?*” (“This child carried his father’s crown—did he carry it or not?”) speak to this transformation as a test of lineage and legitimacy. The Onírẹ becomes both the son and the father, the apprentice and the ancestor, the fragment and the whole. This aligns with Yoruba metaphysics, where identity is always relational and recursive (Hallen & Sodipo, 1986; Abiodun, 1994).

This ritual of selection also provides a glimpse into the decentralized nature of Yorùbá political theology, where power is never singular but distributed across a network of spiritually charged agents. Though one Aláḡẹmọ may carry the Onírẹ crown, his authority is a condensation of the powers of all others. This is evident in the proverb “*Ojo ti o ba pa Onírẹ, gbogbo Aláḡẹmọ ni o pa*” (“The rain that falls on Onírẹ falls on all the other Aláḡẹmọ”). The selection of a representative thus affirms a collective embodiment, rather than individual supremacy. The Onírẹ does not rule the others; he channels them.

Finally, the symbolic contest between Aláḡẹmọ priests serves to re-territorialize the kingdom. By converging from sixteen outlying towns and ritually engaging one another at the center, they enact a centripetal ritual geometry, collapsing distance and drawing dispersed spiritual energies into a singular focus. This gathering, followed by the onward movement toward the central palace complex, transforms the physical geography of Ìjẹ̀bú into a sacred map—a pulsating diagram of power in motion. The Agẹmọ priests gathering now reinscribe the kingdom through their steps.



Onírè, the incarnate of Ìjèbú Ancestor Spirit

Onírè vs Awùjalè: The Ritual of Dual Kingship

The climactic moment of the Agemo festival unfolds in the ritual encounter between the Onírè, the incarnate of the Ìjèbú ancestral spirit, and the Awùjalè, the living monarch and political head of the kingdom. This confrontation, staged within the architectural and symbolic thresholds of the royal palace complex, represents a profound moment of ritual co-sovereignty, where spiritual and temporal authorities meet not to compete, but to recalibrate the metaphysical balance of kingship. The encounter is charged with tension, choreography, and spiritual significance—an annual collision of cosmic forces enacted through dance and ritual poetics.

The location of the confrontation is Òjofà, a liminal zone connecting the outer palace wall with the ritual core of Ìjèbú-Òde. The very name—Ojú-Ọfà, meaning “the place where the arrow struck”—is saturated with mythological resonance. Oral traditions recount that Òjofà is where the king (Awùjalè) once slew an elephant that had wandered too close to the palace, an allegory for the necessary taming of a raw spiritual force before it can be admitted into civic order. The elephant in this legend corresponds to the dual persona of the Agemo-Onírè: both spiritual beast and sacred emissary. As the Onírè approaches Òjofà, he makes elephantine foot stamps in the earth, signaling the tension of the moment—the need for one aspect of himself (the elephant, the wild) to die, so that the other (the ancestor, the emissary) may proceed into the palace.



This transition is marked by a brief rite at the shrine of Ogun Awùjalẹ, the king's personal patron deity and the guardian of iron and war. There, the Onírẹ performs eto, offering sacrifice and incantation, not to challenge the king but to negotiate a safe passage into the palace domain. Once inside Ìtórò, the central court of the royal complex, the dramatic confrontation begins. It is not a verbal debate nor a physical battle—it is a dance, laden with symbolic power. The Onírẹ and the Awùjalẹ circle each other, mirroring the movements of hunter and hunted, attacker and defender, ancestor and inheritor.

The public dimension of this dance cannot be overstated. Citizens gather in droves, singing "*Sonso meji yio foju kan oju...*" ("Two-pointed personalities will see face to face"), a poetic declaration that two sovereign entities—each carrying a divine mandate—have entered mutual recognition. This phrase captures the impossibility and sacredness of the moment: like two sharpened needles balanced tip-to-tip, the alignment of Onírẹ and Awùjalẹ defies ordinary rules of space and power. Here, Yorùbá notions of àṣẹ (cosmic authority and creative force) are not concentrated but *shared*. It is an act of divine equivalence, performed once a year, to reaffirm the symmetry of spiritual and temporal realms.

The dance culminates in a ritual unveiling: Onírẹ and Awùjalẹ lift their crowns momentarily, exposing their faces to each other and the public. This gesture is ontological. It declares that both wear the marks of kingship but draw their power from different sources: the Onírẹ from the ancestral realm, the Awùjalẹ from the living polity. In that brief moment, Ìjẹbú citizens witness the unity of the past and present, of origin and continuity, of divine spirit and earthly rule. The performance marks not an end to rivalry but a fusion of parallel sovereignties.

Thereafter, the Awùjalẹ hosts the sixteen Alágẹmọ at his residence, offering hospitality not only as king but as one who now bears the renewed spiritual mandate of the kingdom. The gesture is crucial: though the Alágẹmọs are ritually superior during the festival, it is the king who absorbs, consolidates, and redistributes that authority to govern for another year. This echoes Yorùbá political logic, where kingship is not absolute but perpetually renegotiated through ritual circuits (Apter, 1992; Peel, 2000). The Agẹmọ festival thus functions as a sacred contract—renewed annually, choreographed through drama, and sealed in gesture—between the people, the priests, and the throne.

This encounter between Onírẹ and Awùjalẹ therefore reveals a fundamental principle of Yorùbá governance: the dual embodiment of power. Kingship in Ìjẹbú is never unilateral; it is always mediated by ancestral protocols, performative legitimacy, and ritual scrutiny. The king does not rule by fiat; he rules by consent—ritually renewed, cosmologically validated, and communally witnessed. In the Agẹmọ festival, that consent is neither whispered nor written—it is danced in mask and completed in identification of who danced behind the mask.

The Òjòwú Festival and the Cosmology of Gendered Time

While the Agẹmọ festival enacts a choreography of political authority and ancestral embodiment through priestly confrontation, the Òjòwú festival explores another axis of Ìjẹbú cosmology: the dualism of gender, celestial motion, and calendrical time. Where Agẹmọ dramatizes the distribution of power through ritual combat and ancestral possession, Òjòwú affirms the continuity of cosmological cycles through the interplay of sun and moon, male and female, stillness and movement. The festival's emphasis on dual deities—Okunrin Òjòwú (male) and Obinrin Òjòwú (female)—and its precise alignment with astronomical phenomena



such as the March equinox reveals a metaphysical structure in which time, gender, and kingship are tightly woven into the fabric of Ìjẹ̀bú political theology.

The gendered division of the Òjòwú deity into male and female forms goes beyond a reflection of biological complementarity to becoming a manifestation of cosmic polarity. The male Òjòwú, stationed at a fixed shrine, is akin to the sun—perceived as immobile yet central to all planetary motion. His female counterpart, who moves ceremoniously through space during the festival, corresponds to the moon—mobile, cyclic, and marked by phases. This spatial metaphysics mirrors Yorùbá temporal logic, where movement through space—whether by celestial bodies or ritual actors—is a sign of agency, life, and generativity (Blier, 2012). The Obinrin Òjòwú's journey, beginning at Odo-Esa and culminating in her union with the static Okunrin Òjòwú, becomes a cosmogram of lunar return, ritual cleansing, and renewal of order.

Central to the festival is the triangular movement performed within the palace complex. This movement—from a meeting point within the palace wall to two other palace shrines—follows an anticlockwise trajectory, a pattern consistent with other Yorùbá rituals involving spiritual intercession (Ogunba, 1978). The triangular geometry evokes symbolic references to fertility, cosmic balance, and triadic divinity. Its repetition three times echoes the principle of Òrìṣà triality in Yorùbá metaphysics—where every essence is known through three dimensions: its inner being (*inù*), its outward manifestation (*ita*), and its connection to spirit (*èmí*). In this case, the Òjòwú triangle anchors both a cosmological map and a political stage, linking temporal cycles to royal affirmation.

The priests who officiate this dual-gendered rite—Olówá Modisa (male) and Olówá Iberu (female)—enact ritual disciplines that mirror celestial taboos. While biologically male, the Olówá Iberu assumes a feminine spiritual role, weaving his hair, maintaining ritual celibacy, and following lunar cycles to track sacred time. The priest becomes a human representation of the moon's journey—waxing, waning, and returning. This gender fluidity is not aberrant but sacred, affirming the Yorùbá belief in identity as function, not as essence. Power, in this system, is not fixed by gender or title but flows through ritual adherence, cosmic alignment, and cyclical return.

The culminating moment of the festival occurs when Obinrin Òjòwú arrives at the male shrine, having completed her ritual journey through the city. Here, the two deities “see” each other—an event that occurs only once annually. This meeting is not just symbolic of conjugal reunion, but of calendrical reset. Their union corresponds with the solar zenith and the arrival of rain, and the complete equinoctial cycle of the sun, signaling agricultural renewal and a cosmological acknowledgment that time, like the sun and moon, is always in motion, always paired, always returning. As the priest chants “*Aje yoooo, Oso yoooo, irunbirodo*” (Witch beware! Wizard beware! Dark omens are flowing to the river.), he drives out evil forces and welcomes a new ritual year, affirming the cyclical nature of Ìjẹ̀bú temporal life. After this, they will move triangularly in an anticlockwise direction within the palace complex three times. The vertices of these triangular movements are where the male and female priests meet, the boundary of the palace, and Oju Òsì, the central palace shrine. This kind of anticlockwise movement is expected in Ìjẹ̀bú ritual. Oyin Ogunba showed this in Osu festival among Owu/Ìjẹ̀bú. Three chiefs make anticlockwise circular movements just as they are about to reach a palace ground, while songs and drums are played (Ogunba, 1978). While in the case of the Osu festival, the movement is circular, it is triangular for Òjòwú.

The sacred geometry of the palace complex, especially the Geometric Pavement where the priests align in a V-shape and face the rising sun, reveals an embedded astronomical knowledge system. The configuration mimics the solar angles during solstices and equinoxes and serves as a ritual calendar. Just as the Agemọ festival redistributes political power, the Òjòwú festival recalibrates cosmic time, transforming architectural space into an astronomical instrument. In doing so, it revalidates the king's reign not just politically but celestially. The palace becomes not merely a seat of government but the cosmic axis mundi, the meeting point of sun, moon, earth, and spirit.

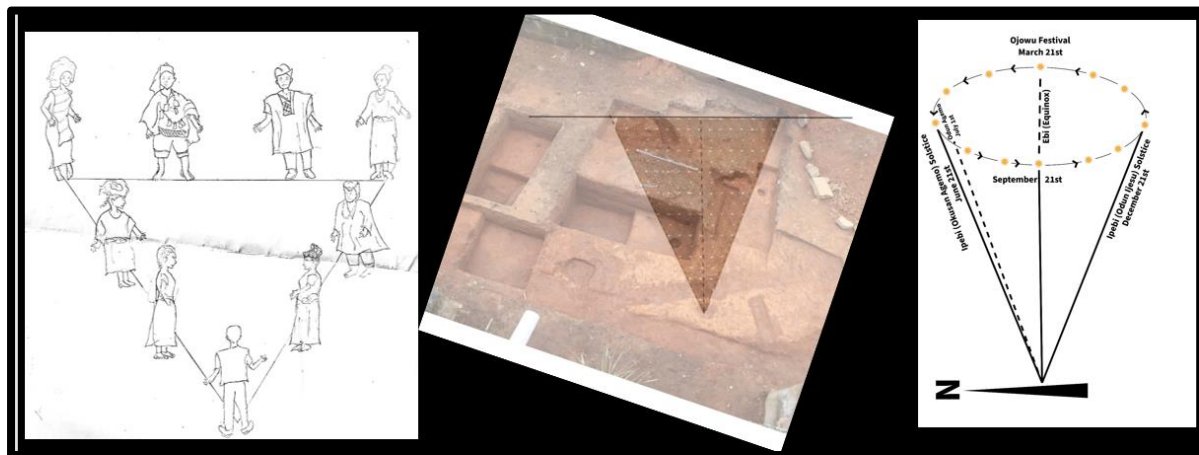


Fig.1. The geometric arrangement of Òjòwú priests at Ìtórò

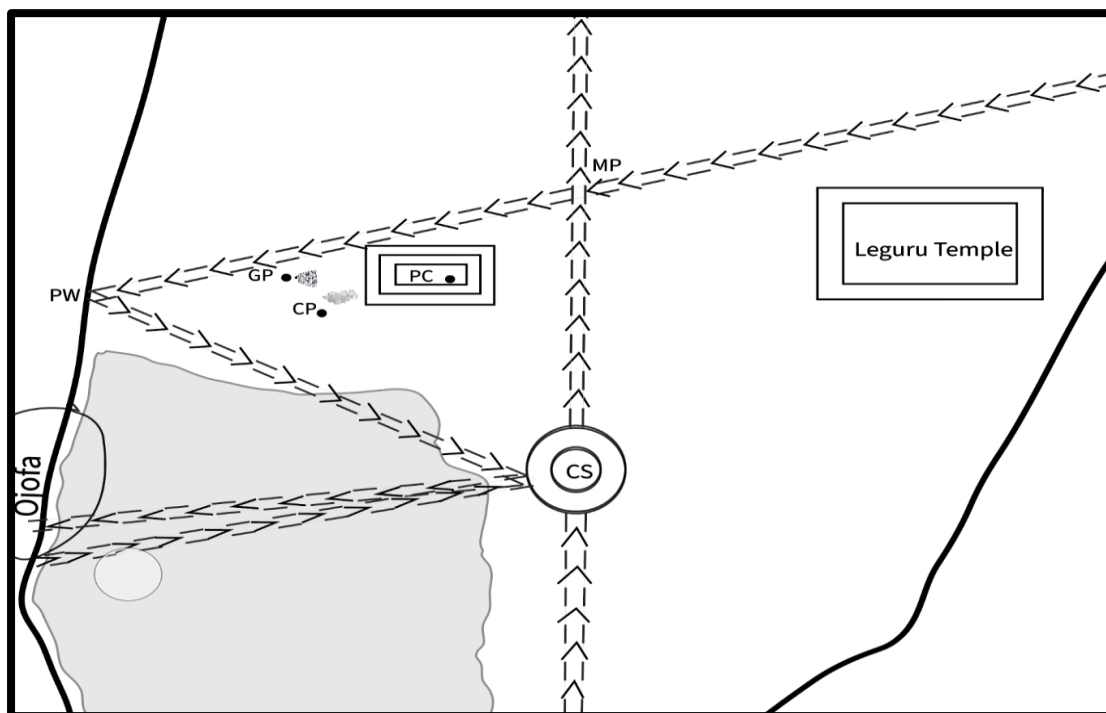


Fig. 2. Male and female Òjòwú movements in the palace complex from MP to PW to CS, and finally rituals at GP, Geometric Pavement and CP, carved pavement.



Ultimately, the Òjòwú festival reveals a dimension of Ìjèbú kingship not fully visible in Agẹmọ: its dependence on heavenly legitimation. The king is not only a recipient of ancestral àṣẹ through priestly dramatization but also a mediator between solar stability and lunar renewal. In this way, the Òjòwú and Agẹmọ festivals complement each other: one affirms kingship through ritual combat and ancestral drama, the other through cosmic renewal and gendered dualism. Together, they constitute the full ceremonial logic of Ìjèbú kingship, reminding us that sovereignty is never singular—it is celestial, ancestral, and perpetually re-enacted in the movements of gods, priests, and stars.

Conclusion: Ritual as Constitution, Power as Performance

This study of the Agẹmọ and Òjòwú festivals in Ìjèbú reveals a layered and dynamic conception of power—one that is ritualized, cosmological, and spatially inscribed. Power in this context is not a static possession vested in individuals or offices, but a circulating force, negotiated and re-legitimated through embodied performance, ancestral choreography, and celestial alignment. Through dance, satire, drum language, costume, processional movement, and sacred geometry, Ìjèbú ritual actors reenact foundational principles of governance, community, and cosmic balance. In this way, ritual operates not as an embellishment to politics but as its primary architecture.

The Agẹmọ festival dramatizes the politics of inversion, renewal, and collective embodiment. It stages a triadic sequence of power negotiations: first between citizens and their local priests; then among the priests themselves in the contest to become Onírè; and finally between the Onírè and the Awùjalẹ in a ritual encounter that symbolically balances ancestral and temporal sovereignty. The performative nature of these events transforms priests into ancestors, citizens into arbiters of legitimacy, and the king into a recipient of sacred mandate. The entire landscape—from the Agẹmọ towns to the groves of Imọsàn to the palace gates of Ìjèbú-Òde—becomes a stage upon which the cosmopolitical order is ritually reassembled.

In contrast, the Òjòwú festival enacts a subtler but equally profound negotiation of cosmic legitimacy. By splitting the deity into static male and mobile female forms, and aligning their movements with solar and lunar cycles, the festival encodes Yorùbá timekeeping, fertility rhythms, and cosmic order into its ritual performance. The triangulated movement within the palace, the intersection of gender roles, and the annual reunion of the deities at the solar zenith all signal a cosmological recalibration of the Ìjèbú polity. The king's sovereignty is affirmed here not only through ancestral blessing, but through cosmic synchronization—he reigns because the sun rises and the moon returns.

Together, the Agẹmọ and Òjòwú festivals illustrate the duality and plurality of Yorùbá power: it is at once performative and astronomical, ancestral and calendrical, gendered and spatial. The king is not merely a ruler, but a mediator between opposing but complementary forces: between spirit and state, between movement and stillness, between memory and possibility. His authority is only as durable as his annual renewal by the Aláṣẹmọ and re-blessing by Òjòwú. As such, sovereignty in Ìjèbú is not linear or bureaucratic—it is ritually recursive, cosmically anchored, and spiritually accountable.

This model challenges Western paradigms that separate politics from performance, or governance from religion. It suggests that in Ìjèbú—and in many African polities—ritual is constitution. Songs are law. Dance is diplomacy. Sacred groves are parliaments. The annual festivals are not cultural remainders of a premodern world; they are operative blueprints of



legitimacy, citizenship, and governance in motion. To understand power in Ìjẹ̀bú, then, is to follow its footsteps—not through archives alone, but through rhythm, procession, and sacred choreography.

In the age of algorithmic governance and digital sovereignty, the Ìjẹ̀bú ritual system offers a profound reminder: power remains human, embodied, and storied. It must be danced, tested, re-given. In the tussles and their resolutions, the Ìjẹ̀bú have not only preserved their past; they have created a system where each generation must move again, speak again, and believe again. And in doing so, they teach us that the future, too, must be ritually enacted through the power of tussles and the tussles of power.

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