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Many Colours of an African Performative Ritual

By Sola Adeyemi

Abstract

Egungun is a unifying force in Imesi-Ile, a Yoruba community in Nigeria. Unlike other masquerade festivals, especially among the Yoruba people, the celebration of this festival in Imesi-Ile is a unique performance that combines all the elements of theatre on various levels of adoption and appreciation, culminating in an aesthetically satisfying presentation that involves all the people, from the town's royalty to visitors. This essay highlights the performative rituals of the festival, with specific focus on the biennial Ladunwo performance. The aim is to highlight the masquerade origin of modern Yoruba theatre and the importance of the audience-performer relationship that underpins traditional performances.

Introduction

The Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria believe in re-incarnation. In fact, the whole concept of transcendental existence is primal to Yoruba life. Human beings live and die repeatedly until they have attained a certain level of spiritual growth; they then graduate to either becoming a god or an ancestor, depending on their achievements while in the world. The ancestors, with the gods, function to aid people at transition points in life and after life, particularly in crossing the gulf which separates the living from the ancestors, the space Wole Soyinka calls the fourth stage (Soyinka 1976). These ancestors are however not worshipped like gods and other deities but revered and venerated. The most popular instance of this veneration is in the Egungun¹ cult.

Egungun: An Introduction

The belief is that those who are dead are still very close to the world of the living, particularly to their relatives whom they protect from evil forces and misfortunes. Special days are reserved for the veneration of these ancestors who are represented by

¹Egungun' will be used throughout to denote both the singular and the plural forms.

masques in the form of egungun masquerades. Egungun are referred to as *Ara Orun* (the inhabitants of heaven) by the Yoruba. ‘Masquerade’ refers both to a performance given by masked characters and to the masked performer, the ‘masker’ (i.e. egungun). ‘Mask’ is the face- or body-covering. The human performer who dons the mask represents the embodied spirit (Harding 1997: 4) and is accorded the same respect as the ancestors.

Egungun could be described as a ritual performance, that is, a performance that is ritualistic in intent and purpose, or a performative ritual. However, for the purpose of this study, egungun is more of a ritual performance because of the structure and organisation of the performance. Ritual, for me, is a set of actions that contribute to the development of a community or people and that are performed to achieve a religious or secular satisfaction within the community.

Ola Rotimi (1981) posits a definition of performance within a cultural setting as an imitation of an action or of a person or persons in action, the ultimate object of which is to edify or to entertain, or to do both (77). Performance then is the act of doing and of re-doing; of self-consciousness about doing and re-doing both by performers and spectators (Carlson 1996:195). Performance can be a re-enactment of the essence of a culture if we adopt the view that re-enactment means the same as recreating and repetition, as well as restoration – and re-storation.

Origin

Clapperton, Oyo, Adedeji, etc

Influence on Alarinjo and modern performance culture

Types of Egungun

There are various types of egungun in Yorubaland, including satirical masks, elegant masks that exhibit the beauty and elegance of costumes and dance, and masks that dramatise masculine strength, but the most significant among Yoruba egungun are the ancestral masks. Much as these egungun are performed for ancestral veneration and ritual purposes, the entertainment function is also highlighted and this is evident in choice of maskers. A performer has to be a good poet or orator and attuned to different styles of music and if, in the course of a performance, a performer “cannot improve his performance, he may be asked to terminate the performance or to let another masker take over” (Enekwe 1987: 84). Amankulor pushes this point further when he asserts that “among the Igbo of Nigeria, for example, the *Okonko* or *Mmonwu* performances, given by initiation associations with those names, are freely described as *egwu* (play)” (1991: 227). And these performances are presented “to entertain and educate the spectators and to help them treasure memorable aspects” (1991: 228) of the performances.

Ancestral masks are recognised by their moral and mystical authority, and attributes which serve as embodiments of the ritual importance of the ancestors. These ancestral egungun perform various functions, from officiating during burial ceremonies where they are assumed to take the soul of the departed to the land of the ancestors, to performing at night as bull-roarers in a bid to maintain societal equilibrium. Some egungun use songs and proverbs to ridicule people whose habits or behaviour are considered undesirable in the community. Yet, others adjudicate difficult cases or perform oracular roles.

In a typical Yoruba town, each household has its own egungun and a household may have more than one egungun or even different kinds of egungun. Usually, the spirit of the most powerful or the most benevolent individual in the household is invoked into the mask of the more important egungun.

There are egungun who represent powerful ancestors who were either great medicine-men or chiefs in their past existence on earth. They are the most powerful ones known for great feats like waging wars, curing diseases, making sacrifices, executing decisions and dispatching convicted criminals. They are regarded as the elder egungun. Most communal rites are performed by the elder egungun. There are also the dancers, the poets, the acrobats, the satirists, the praise-singers and the Layewu, the hunter-masques famous for their imitations of wild animals in mime and dance. As there are different kinds of human beings in different stages of life, there are also different kinds of ancestors represented by different kinds of egungun.

Origin of Egungun

Like most secret (or quasi-secret) societies in Yorubaland, it is difficult to trace the real origin of the egungun cult despite the fact that it is embraced by all. Most elder initiates of the egungun cult are very hesitant in disclosing the truth about the origin of the cult, claiming not wanting to divulge the deep secrets of the cult. The Ifa corpus as it relates to the origin of egungun is also very obscure. But one thing is certain: egungun is the assumed spirit of the dead covered with cloths. And it is generally accepted that the idea behind egungun started with the Yoruba people. It is common knowledge that the egungun is a masque with human beings donning the mask, yet we

must always acknowledge the egungun as *Ara Orun* and that the person behind the mask is unknown, even to his handlers. As Iyalla (1983) suggests, from one point of view, the egungun is intended to mask something real; from another point of view, the egungun is a dramatic masque of some unseen existence, but the fact remains that egungun is nothing more or less than a venerated representation of the ancestors (73-82).

The egungun of Yorubaland are accepted as spiritual beings. The dead are believed to have transformed into another realm of living in the spirit world. But they are not to be confused with the quintessential spirits with whom they cohabit that other world. For whereas the ancestors could reincarnate, or linger around the land of the living as wraiths, the quintessential spirits of folktale do not derive their existence or livingness in the nether world from human deaths or transitions. The ancestors are a distant class of anthropomorphic spirit world inhabitants who derive from dead humans. The egungun is at the same time a ceremony, a civic rite and a political weapon. It is feared, respected, patronised and admired.

The traditional history of egungun starts in oral tradition. Egungun combines two factors – (i) a spiritual or ethereal being with human features and definite control over human affairs on this plane; and (ii) the presumed form of that being worn over an ordinary human body for the performances of the special egungun.

Importance and Role of Egungun and Egungun Festival

The great importance which the Yoruba attach to the egungun is responsible for the festival associated with it remaining one of the most significant festivals in the whole

of Yorubaland despite the influences of Islam and Christianity, or the observance of ceremonies for other divinities. The participants do not see themselves as engaging in a ceremony with a necessary religious colouring, but in a national festival, a traditional custom and rite that is necessary for the continued existence and well-being of the community. Citizenship in Yorubaland is bound up with membership of a lineage, and in cultic affairs, each lineage is represented by its own ancestral spirits.

Egungun perform a variety of inter-related roles, although the combinations differ with communities, and with the individual egungun.

Masquerades can be used as a form of social control, and sometimes a masked figure will publicly reprimand an individual. Antisocial characteristics such as sexual profligacy, meanness, drunkenness or laziness are singled out and the culprit made the butt of jest and mockery (Harding, 1997: 4).

Egungun are regarded as having the power to avert any evil, danger or fear that may befall a Yoruba lineage or community. Since egungun come from the spirit world, they are believed to have the capability of driving away evil spirits from the community. During crises such as the failure of the rains or an outbreak of an epidemic, the egungun are brought out to perform rituals and cleanse the community. Egungun are also employed in such situations and circumstances as when an evil person has to be banished from the town or a king is to be deposed. In essence, it is egungun's function to perform most of the cleansing actions in the community. Some egungun also function as commentator on social issues in the most satirical manner, particularly through the use of songs, ribaldry and masks.

These manifold functions of the egungun make it valuable source material for dramatic performances; consequently, every aspect of egungun festival is a

performance. The rituals involved in the festival also provide a rich plot for drama. The main focus of the rituals is the elaborate process of chanting, dancing and sacrifices which are dramatic performances in themselves, following the definition of Rotimi (1981):

Ritual displays that reveal in their style of presentation, in their purpose, and value, evidences of imitation, enlightenment and or entertainment, can be said to be drama (77)

Egungun festival is a major cultural event and like most cultural events in Yorubaland, Ifa oracle is consulted to divine the most auspicious period to organise it. The staging of the festival in different Yoruba towns is not consistent as each town has its special festival days and method of organising the festival. However, one thing is common: the festival usually falls during the harvest season as this is period when the people are free from their agrarian activities. It is also the period when there is abundant food and ritual materials. The mode of worship and duration of the festival vary from place to place, but the general sense behind it is the same and that is seeking communion with the supreme God through the ancestors who have, by the incidence of death, acquired more powers in the world beyond. Generally, the festival lasts between seven and ninety days. The festival has acquired a status of the major festival in some of the towns. Because of the significance attached to egungun in Imesi-Ile and the uniqueness of the festival as well as the fact of knowledge – I am most familiar with the organisation of egungun festival in the town – I describe the ritual performance involved in the biennial version of the festival in Imesi-Ile.

Imesi-Ile: A Settlement that became a War Camp

Imesi-Ile is located in the north-eastern part of Yorubaland, in present day Osun State. The first settlers occupied the present location of the town several centuries ago.

Situated on a range of hills, Imesi-Ile boasts of about seventeen dialects due to being a war camp for the Ekitiparapo war, the last major internecine war among the Yoruba people in the nineteenth century.

Oral history has it that three original settler-families – Eye, Odunmorun and Ako – lived for a long time before an Ile-Ife warrior prince joined them and made the secure place his kingdom. The prince, Jalorun, established the kingship system. It is difficult to categorically state how long the town has been occupied but there have been forty-four kings since Jalorun (Owa Ooye Saga) in the town. Gradually, other groups of people came and populated the place, living in relative peace until the advent of Kiriji war between the Ekitiparapo and the Ibadan overlords in 1877². Several Ekiti kings came to reside in Imesi-Ile during the war, and some of their people stayed on after the war, till 1893, because of the uncertainty of the Peace Agreement signed to end the war in 1886. Each of the war settlers occupied particular spaces in and around the town and practically retained their dialects, their customs and their ways of life. However, the kingship system in Imesi-Ile absorbed the settlers and offered them hierarchical positions in the political system of the town.

Egungun Festival at Imesi-Ile

While the New Yam festival or observance ceremonies for other divinities serve as the beginning of a new year in most other towns, egungun festival marks the beginning of a new year in Imesi-Ile. Almost every household in the town has a major

² For more on the Ekiti Parapo (Kiriji) War, see S. A. Akintoye (1971), *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland, 1840-1893; Ibadan Expansion and the Rise of Ekitiparapo*, New York: Humanities Press.

egungun and every grown-up man in that household either has an egungun or belongs to a guild with a joint egungun.

The origin of egungun in Imesi-Ile can be traced to the Otu-Okoko family who migrated to the town about the beginning of the seventeenth century. The family is a branch of the group who opposed Alaafin Ogbolu proposed move of the capital city from Oyo Ighoho back to Katunga. When Oyo Ighoho was broken up, they departed and wandered until they got to Imesi-Ile, where they settled. They brought with them the egungun cult and in no time, the whole town had embraced the cult.³ Most of the egungun that perform major functions in the yearly ritual are from the family, because, although the festival is now embraced by the whole town, the performance of the rituals is still left mainly to the elders of the Otu-Okoko family.

The festival period in Imesi-Ile usually falls between the months of March and May and extends between twenty-eight and thirty-five days. On a market day, the eve of the commencement of the festival, an elder egungun, the *Alagbaarara* is led by the chiefs and priests of egungun cult to the market to officially broadcast the dates to the community. The initiates however would have known ahead of this date and would have started preparing for the festival. The *Alagbaarara* collects the ritual materials like salt, dry fish, sheabutter cream, palm oil and roasted bean powder from the market women. The women regard this contribution as their offering to the ancestors for granting life and sustenance during the past year as well as prayer offering for a more favourable new year. The materials collected are mixed with giant land snails

³Interview with the *Emiile* of Imesi-Ile, Chief Alonge (1988).

earlier contributed by each household in the town and taken to the *Igbale*, the grove where the shrine of egungun is situated.

The ritual for the commencement of egungun is usually performed by the cult chiefs and some elder egungun. The ritual would be performed to invoke the spirits of the ancestors to grant understanding, peace, love and goodwill during the festival period and through the coming year. Prayers are said by the priests for each and every household and for the good administration of the town by the king and his chiefs. Sacrifices are then made at the shrine, at the royal tombs in the king's palace, at the tombs of important individuals and warriors, and at the town square to propitiate Esu whose main representation is at the town centre, where all roads meet. The snails' shells are cracked over the shrine in the *Igbale* and also over the shrine of Esu. The rest of the ritual materials are then taken to the shrine of Otu-Okò, the man who brought egungun to Imesi-Ile.

After the sacrifices, another egungun called *Agan* declares the festival open by greeting and praying for all the chiefs and all the households individually. This is performed at the *Igbale*. Then the ritual performers proceed to the king's palace where they are joined by the rest of the community to sing songs and dance round the town in a ceremony called *Yeuke*. This takes place in the evening.

At night, all the egungun from different households and groups parade through the town and end up at the ancestral stream in the outskirts of the town presumably to wash their costume prior to emerging the following day. The ritual of washing the costume is a symbolic one considering the type and amount of materials used in

making the masquerades. This also symbolises washing away all the evils of the previous year from the town. Only the initiates of the egungun cult could participate in this ritual procession. No woman or non-initiates into the egungun cult must view the procession. In fact, no woman is expected to know the secret of egungun except *Alapinni*, the only woman chief among the egungun priests.

The following day, the egungun come out, starting with the dancers and the poet-egungun in the morning. The *janduku*, consisting of the law keepers and the disciplinarians also come out at this time to maintain law and order during the period of the festival. It is their duty to discipline erring public members who want to get too close to the secret of the egungun. Sometimes they discipline other egungun who either by their actions or utterances unwittingly want to reveal the secret of the cult, by either whipping them with the *atori* whips that most egungun carry or by taking them to the elders of the cult in the grove for stronger sanctions. Some other offences for which egungun are punished include flogging adults, coming out in undignified costume or being disrespectful to pregnant women because the child in the womb is assumed to be another ancestor re-incarnating. Tradition forbids anyone – whether masked or not – from exposing the face of an egungun masker under any circumstances. Doing this means exposing the spirits of the dead ancestors which for ethical reasons must not be seen by mortals. The author of such action is instantly taken to the *Alagbaarara* who after considering the circumstances of the case with the elders of the cult and other senior egungun, decides on what the offender must do to appease the ancestral spirits. In the olden days when such an act was considered a sacrilege, death penalty would usually have compensated for the offence.

Throughout the festival period, the egungun come out but not in as large a number as the opening and the closing days. The climax of the festival is the dance and prayer for the people by the eldest egungun of the Otu-Okò family, *Eyekeye*,⁴ but the main point of the festival in Imesi-Ile is the biennial event when *Ladunwo*, the twin white-clothed ancestral spirits emerge.

A day before the final day, a group of elder egungun exposes their legs which are symbolically white, while dancing before the king. This act is to remind the general populace that a transition into ancestral stage is imminent for everybody. They then move to the sloping flat rock in front of the *Igbale* grove where they dance and expose their legs again for the people. At night, all the egungun without an exception move through the town in a procession singing their valedictory songs and bidding farewell to the living. As in the beginning of the festival, they end up at the ancestral stream to 'wash' their costumes for the ceremony of the final day.

The final day of egungun festival in Imesi-Ile is a convivial day. People arrive from other towns to witness the spectacle. Egungun start to come out from the early morning hours. The egungun who first come out are the praise-singers, the poets and the dancers, followed by the *janduku*, then the comedians and lastly, the senior ones with their drummers and retinue of egungun, praise-singers, men and singing women. The logic behind this order is because most of the earlier egungun are out to entertain, exhibit their dancing ability and wits, collect money or playfully whip the people.

⁴*Eyekeye* is so called because the costume is made from feathers of different birds. Although it is the eldest egungun of the Otu-Okò family, it is not the eldest egungun in the town. The eldest egungun is called *Esuku-baba-Igbado* (Husk-father-of-Corn) reputed to have been brought to the town by the Nupe immigrants who arrived before Otu-Okò but was not totally accepted by the townspeople (interview with the *Emiile*, Chief Alonge, now late, 1988).

***Ladunwo*: A Performative Ritual**

Ladunwo, the two egungun masked as male and female, come out very late in the afternoon to round off the festival. The maskers of *Ladunwo* are usually selected from the Otu-Okò family and the selection and masking is kept secret even from many initiates of the cult. The outing of *Ladunwo* is most colourful. The preparation for this outing starts at dawn on the day. This early preparation consists mainly of rituals and prayers for an auspicious outing for the *Ladunwo*. Elaborate rituals are performed with snails and palm oil for peace at the major egungun shrines in the town, at the tombs of great warriors and men, and lastly at the *Igbale* where the *Ladunwo* is finally dressed in the mask.

In the evening, when the people and the egungun are all assembled at the market square, in front of the king's palace, with the king himself seated on his throne, all the egungun start parading along the route the *Ladunwo* would take from the *Igbale* to the market square, twitching their whips high above their heads and shaking their bell-gongs and rattles. This procession is executed seven times, with songs and dances, before the *Ladunwo* appear before the throne, covered in the voluminous. At this stage, the *Emiile*, the chief priest of the egungun cult, asks the king whether he should remove the *Agan* apparel covering the *Ladunwo*. He poses the question three times. This is to give the king the chance to either disappear into the inner chambers or remove his crown and cover his face, as it is a taboo for the *Ladunwo* to dance the three different ritual dance steps before the ancestors or any of their representatives, except other egungun. And it is the belief of the Yoruba that the king represents the

ancestors on his throne, but as he is still living, the *Ladunwo* cannot dance the ancestors' dance before him, but rather before the throne.

The action of the *Emiile* also signals the womenfolk to loosen whatever style they have plaited their hair, if they have not already done so, as it is believed that any woman having the hairstyle of the female *Ladunwo* is already one with the ancestors and is not expected to be alive at the next festival season. And since only the inner initiates of the cult know the particular mask the oracle picked, all women loosen their hairstyles. Also as a mark of respect, everybody removes any head cover they might have on.

Immediately after the action of the king and the womenfolk, the *Agan* apparel is removed and the *Ladunwo* are revealed before the people. The *Ladunwo* are figures of human beings in white costume with wooden head masks. Every part of the figure is white except the top of the head, which is black, signifying eternal youth. The male figure is in *ibante*, a short groin protector made of black velvet while the female figure is in a *yeri*, a skirt also made of the same material as the *ibante*. The male holds two silver swords and has beads on his neck, signifying both a warrior and a king while the beads-bedecked female holds two black horsetail emblems, symbolising royalty and at the same time, because of the black colour, identification with the common people. The beads on the female figure are crossed over the shoulders and extend to the waist where they complement the *lagidigba*, the female waist beads, that are worn over and above the *yeri*. The drummers then start beating their set rhythms for the *Ladunwo*'s dance.

The *Ladunwo* dance to three ritual rhythms in front of the throne. The dance is to the ancient *Gbedu*⁵ and *Ganganun*⁶ drums. The first dance steps are regal steps danced to the rhythm of *Gbedu* drums and akin to the royal dance at installation, except that it is more mystic and the meaning of the drum rhythms connotes blessing for the towns people rather than a series of advices and warnings, if it is beaten for an installation. The two other dances are more intricate and faster in rhythm. But the performance is the same – a depiction of ancestors who are above all human beings reliving their lives to nurture the well-being of the living. Then, in a dramatic manner, the female *Ladunwo* kneels before the male and the male pats her head and pulls her up. This is accepted as the ancestors reminding their descendants of the age-long respect, love, care and understanding that is expected between a man and his wife. After this, the *Ladunwo* pray for the present occupant of the throne and the inhabitants of the town, as well as the visitors.

Then, they move, with the senior egungun clearing the way, along the set route, praying at the five set points on the way, to the flat rock in front of the *Igbale*. The five set points are the ancestral tombs of the first three settlers in the town, the ritual seat⁷ of the *Alapinni*, the only woman initiate of egungun cult and the political head, and the seat of *Yeye Oro* (Festival Mother), a woman chief who acts as the link between all the priests of the different divinities and the women of the town. The title

⁵Drum usually reserved for royalty in Yorubaland.

⁶*Ganganun* is a drum set unique to Imesi-Ile and the Obalufon compound in Ile-Ife. The set is reserved for the rituals of Obatala, but in Imesi-Ile, it has become a hybrid of other drums, most especially *Bata* and *Gbedu*.

⁷The ritual seat of the *Alapinni* as well as that of the *Yeye Oro* (Festival Mother) are spots where rituals were performed to *Alapinni* (as deity) and where all the gods assemble symbolically, respectively.

is usually given to a woman who has been very active politically and culturally in the town, and who is an initiate of the *Ogboni*⁸ secret society.

Before the *Igbale*, the *Ladunwo* have their last performance for the people. The *Ladunwo* dance to seven different ritual rhythms, starting from the slow and sedate to the fast and energetic, all to different beats from the *Ganganun* drums, and repeat the action expected between husband and wife before blessing the people and the town again. Throughout the dances, the people sing and rouse themselves with appraisals of how desirable it is to become an ancestor. They totally participate in the ceremony – as audience, as collaborators, as participants. The prayer of the people at this time reflects their innermost wishes and an opportunity to witness the next biennial outing of the *Ladunwo*, and if their destiny has already decreed that they will not be alive then, a prayer for them to become an ancestor. There is another brief drumming after which the *Ladunwo* disappear into the *Igbale*, until the next time.

Closing Rites

It is apparent from orature that the egungun cult as we know it today was formed with the responsibility of the ritual veneration of the ancestors and of organizing the festival when the ancestor is supposed to visit the world as a costumed figure. There are many festival performances in Yorubaland including the Obatala, Edi, Obalogun, Ogun and Sango among others, but the form of Yoruba traditional performance culture that is most expressive is egungun. Its origin as a performance culture known as the Alarinjo (travelling theatre troupe) is traced by Joel Adedeji to around 1590,

⁸*Ogboni* is a secret judicial society that recognises the earth as the “mother” of all human beings. The members pledge solidarity to one another and the spirit of the earth and support one another under *all* circumstances.

during the reign of Alaafin Ogbolu of Oyo kingdom. The egungun tradition informed the theatrical productions of the Alarinjo theatre troupes and, by adoption, the Yoruba Travelling Theatre troupes.

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