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The Arts of Egungun among Yoruba Peoples

HENRY JOHN DREWAL

Egungun masquerades are elaborate ensembles of cloth and other media that pay homage to forces affecting the living. The widespread distribution of Egungun throughout Yorubaland and the variety of its visual forms (even within a single community) require the combined efforts of scholars working among various Yoruba subgroups. The collection of essays that follows brings together the material, perspectives, and perceptions of different researchers examining Egungun within specific communities. Our common objective is to provide a more comprehensive and precise classification of masquerade types. Contributors were asked to present typologies for their study areas in addition to considering other aspects of particular interest to them.

The results, despite the different methodologies employed, indicate significant variations throughout Yorubaland and, at the same time, some intriguing similarities. For example, the Egungun type called *paka* (*paaraka*) in Iganna (Schiltz) has swirling panels of cloth suspended from a horizontal stick, while in Ila-Orangun (Pemberton), *paaka* are masqueraders for lineage ancestors having carved headdresses, skins, mirrors, packets of medicine, etc. In Ilaro, there are no *paka*, and the term is recalled only as an ancient name for all Egungun. Such comparisons, when systematically studied, may yield important information about the origins and development of this complex masking tradition. Particularistic studies when viewed together validate generalizations about Yoruba art and indicate the extent of artistic homogeneity and diversity among various Yoruba peoples. Existing among all Yoruba subgroups, Egungun is thus an appropriate subject for comparative analysis.

The classification of Egungun types, which might appear to be a fairly straightforward task, is in fact an extremely complex problem involving the comprehension of indigenous taxonomies. The contributors recognize the difficulties: the problem of distinguishing between personal Egungun names and generic terms for types (Schiltz; Houlberg, p. 56; Drewal & Drewal); the problem of determining "sets" where one masquerader may be regarded as within several type categories simultaneously (Schiltz); the practice of "layering," in which a masquerader wears one costume type over another and changes these during performance (Drewal & Drewal); and the variety of criteria used to classify Egungun as well as the range of variations within type categories. Such factors demonstrate the complexity attending the analysis of indigenous taxonomies and the classification of masquerade types. These same difficulties arise in the definition and use of the term Egungun itself.

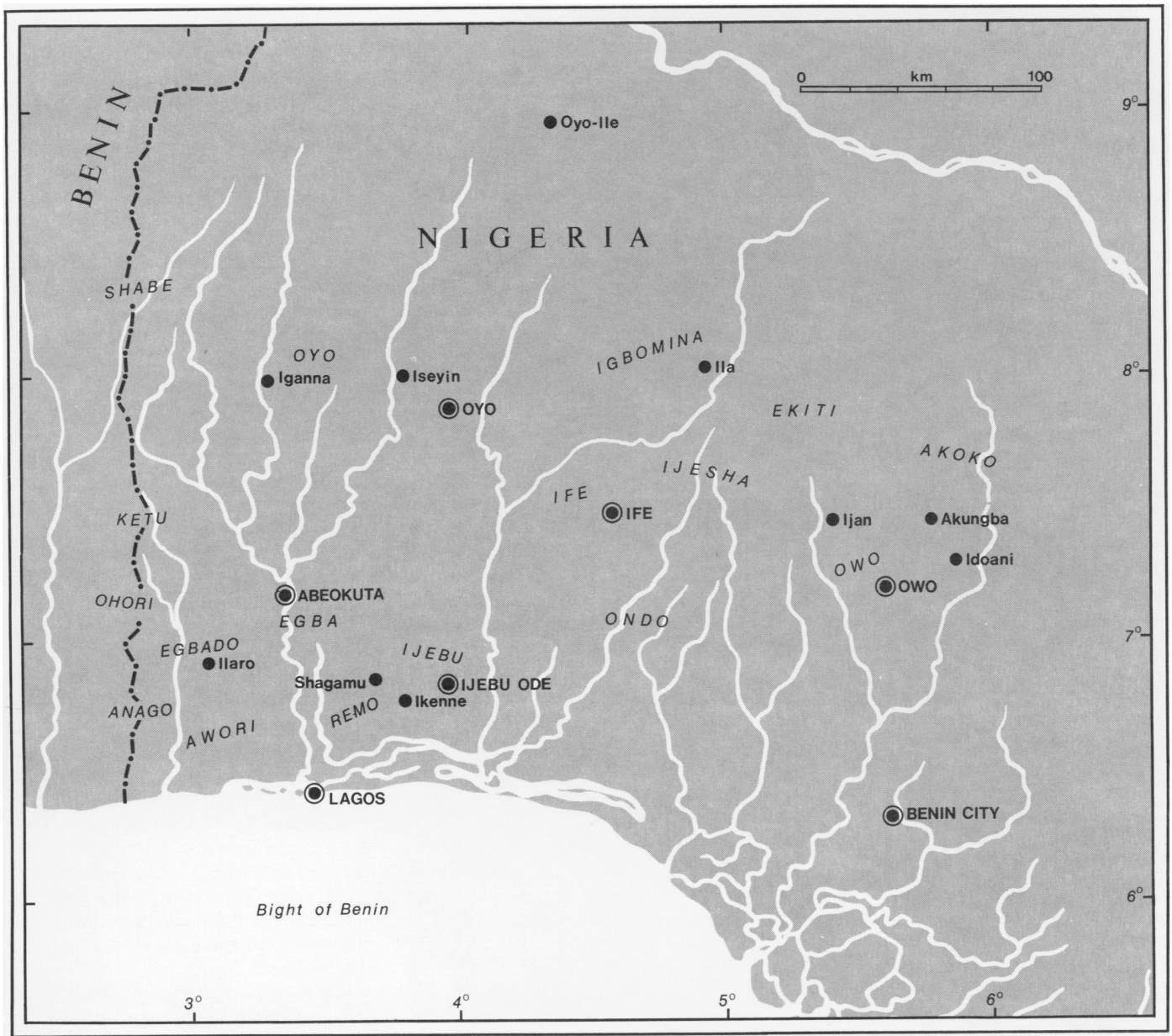
The definition of Egungun involves a number of fundamental linguistic, philosophical, and historical considerations. At the outset, a distinction must be made between the terms *egungun* and Egungun, which have often been used interchangeably in the literature. In its broadest sense, *egungun* (*egun*, *eegun*, *egigin*, *eigun*) refers to any masquerade or

masked figure. At the basis of this definition is the belief in the presence of some supernatural force. As the Yoruba art historian Rowland Abiodun has suggested, the term *egungun*, in its essence, refers to "powers concealed." The term *egungun* as supernatural power concealed may explain why some informants at Owo say that *egungun* are masquerades representing *orisa* (gods), while others state that they are the "incarnated spirit of an ancestor" (see Poyner). Among Oyo and Egbado Yoruba, some informants speak of the masquerade as their *orisa*, but this is probably in the sense of "something worshipped" rather than as a personified force such as Sango or Ogun. On the other hand, the distinction between gods and ancestors is not always clear. For example, the *orisa* Sango (god of thunder) is also a deified ancestor said to have reigned as King (Alaafin) at Oyo-Ile. What seems more important, however, is that both gods and ancestors are regarded as *ara orun*, "beings from beyond," whose power and presence can be invoked by the living. These are some of the concepts embodied in the term *egungun*, supernatural power concealed.

In contrast, the term Egungun, while within the broad category of *egungun*, refers more specifically to the masking tradition generally attributed to the Oyo Yoruba and associated with the honoring of ancestors. One Yoruba scholar explains the term as "... strictly applicable to masquerades found among Oyo sub-ethnic groups in Oyo, Ibadan, and Osun provinces. This type is also found in areas which at one time or another came under the political suzerainty or cultural influence of Oyo Empire" (Ojo 1974:46). Another states that the masquerade known as Egungun Oyo is "connected with ancestral worship" (Olajubu 1977:174).

Most writing associates Egungun with the ancestors, but what is the precise nature of this relationship, especially in the light of informant testimony linking Egungun with *orisa* in certain areas. While some Oyo Yoruba oral traditions link the origin of Egungun with the institution of "ancestor worship" during the reign of Alaafin Sango (Adedeji 1969), informants often specify that only some masqueraders, but by no means all, are literally "for the ancestors." Only those Egungun prepared for an ancestor (or ancestors collectively) and called Baba (Father) or Iya (Mother) are said to be, strictly speaking, for the ancestors. They may be of any type. Others (probably the majority) are for the ancestors in the sense of their being part of the Egungun society and thus partaking of the spiritual power of the forebears. Their presence honors ancestors by serving as evidence of a descendant's commitment to continuing the traditions of his predecessors and maintaining the reputation of his lineage.

It is in this context that one can understand how Egungun masquerades honor ancestors and at the same time serve as important status symbols for the living. A continuous and reciprocal relationship unites those from beyond (*ara orun*) and those in the world. An individual exists because he/she is part of a larger corporate entity, especially the *idile*, or lineage.



The *idile* includes all persons, whether deceased or living, who trace their origin to a common progenitor. Membership in an *idile* fixes an individual in time and space. It gives the person a deep sense of belonging, of purpose—a concept of self that is seen in terms of an unbroken chain of existence. One needs only to witness the emotion, the swelling of pride, evident when a person's lineage praise poem (*oriki orile*) is recited, for it is at such a moment that one senses self in the presence of all who have gone before. What one achieves in one's life (status, prestige, wealth, etc.) is not seen as a totally *personal* achievement, but rather something that glorifies the corporate entity. A lavish Egungun, then, magnifies the importance of both its owner and his lineage (*idile*). The layers of exquisite fabric are like a materialization of the eloquent verses of the lineage praise poem; they are praise to the *idile* members both living and dead.

Within this general discussion of Egungun, the essays may be grouped in the following way: the studies of Iganna (Schiltz; Houlberg, p. 56), Ilaro (Drewal & Drewal) and Egungun poetry (Adedeji) are clearly within the Oyo tradition; Ila-

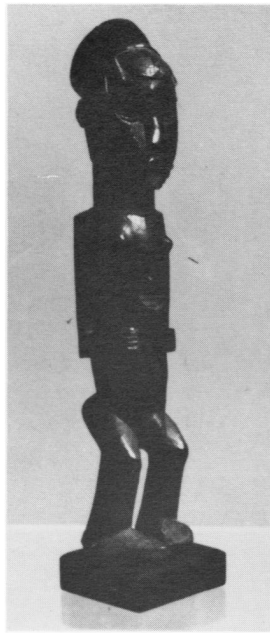
Orangun (Pemberton) and Ijebu-Remo Egungun (Houlberg, p. 20) appear to be strongly influenced by Oyo practice imbued with other elements. The area that is probably outside the Oyo tradition and clearly the combination of many cultural influences (both Yoruba and non-Yoruba) is Owo (Poynor), and it is for this reason the broader generic term *egungun* has been used in that study. The bibliography accompanying this collection of essays consists of works cited by each contributor together with other selected sources containing useful information on Egungun.

These essays on the arts of Egungun present new descriptive and analytic data based upon extensive field research in different parts of Yorubaland. They offer a variety of approaches to the study of indigenous classifications, suggesting that no single system applies to all Yoruba groups, and that more than one system may operate in a single area. In revealing the complexities of Egungun, this collection demonstrates the need for comparative studies as one way to develop and test generalizations about Yoruba art and culture. □

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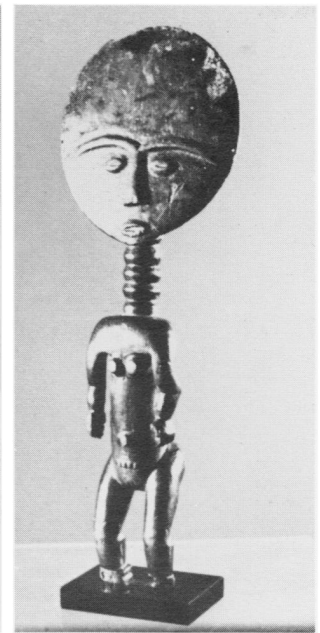
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1. BATEKE, 18"



2. IBO, 50"



3. AKAN, 16"

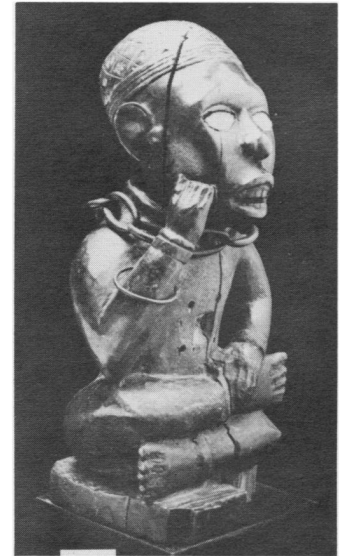
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Watch for these stolen objects!

1. Bateke standing male figure, wood, 18"; 2. Ibo male figure, wood, 50"; 3. Akan figure, wood, 16"; 4. Bakongo seated male figure, wood, 12". Stolen from Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Goldenberg, Los Angeles, on September 24, 1977. Write to 824 E. 29th Street, Los Angeles, California 90011, or telephone Mr. Goldenberg at (213) 232-4241 or 472-8702 .

5. Gere mask, 10½". Stolen from Pace Gallery, New York City. Write to Bryce Holcombe, Pace Gallery, 32 E. 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, or telephone (212) 421-3292.

6. Marka mask, wood, metal, 11" high. Stolen from Dr. Ralph Maercks, Coconut Grove, Florida, on February 10, 1977. Write to Dr. Maercks at 2298 South Dixie, Coconut Grove, FL 33133, or telephone (305) 858-1156.



4. BAKONGO, 12"



5. GERE, 10½"



6. MARKA, 11"

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Editor's note: For comparative purposes, the reader is also referred to an article on Egungun masquerades published after the manuscripts were submitted for this special issue of *African Arts*: "Some Aspects of Oyo-Yoruba Masquerades," by Chief Oludare Olajubu and J. R. O. Ojo, in *Africa* 47, 3 (1977).

DREWAL & DREWAL, Notes, from page 39

1. Research for this essay, conducted in the central Egbado town of Ilaro in 1975 and 1977, is based upon observation of five Egungun funeral commemoration performances, a complete film documentation (Super 8 sound), and interviews with specialist informants. This analysis should not be assumed to apply to all of Egbado. We wish to thank the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Cleveland State University and the National Endowment for the Humanities for financial support; the Institute of African Studies of both the University of Ife and the University of Ibadan for providing research affiliations; Raimi Akaki Taiwo, Omo Kulodo and Egungun member, for research assistance; and Adesina Taiwo (also an Egungun member), the Onibata, and the titled elders of the Egungun cult for their cooperation and friendship.
2. The generic types of Egungun that follow should not be confused with the personal names given to specific masqueraders by their owners. For example, a masquerader of the generic type known as *onidan* may be called by one or more praise names, *oriki*, such as *Ajobiwe*, "The-One-Who-Dances-Like-a-Leaf," an apt image for one whose flowing costume flutters as it whirls. The particular circumstances surrounding an Egungun's creation may determine personal names, as with the birth of some Yoruba children. One *alabala* type is named Ogunpari, "The-War-Has-Ended," since it was completed just as the Nigerian civil war stopped. Another is called *Ajofoyinbo*, "One-Who-Dances-for-the-Whiteman," because its first performance was for a visiting colonial official. A third is known as *B'ebó*, "Sacrifice," for, when a child was born, the *Ifa* oracle instructed the parents to make an Egungun masquerader. Upon its completion, the Egungun carried a sacrifice to the shrine of *Esu* to ensure the child's well-being. Personal names therefore relate in some way to the lives of Egungun members and identify masqueraders with specific owners, whether individuals or groups within the cult. They further reflect the fact that masqueraders of the same generic type are visually distinguishable.
3. The wife of the *Olo gbin* of *Ogbin* was raped by a gorilla (*ero*), and she gave birth to a hybrid son named *Ijmere*, who became the first Egungun masquerader. Collected by Joel Adedeji at Iwo. For the full myth, see Adedeji (1970:71-73).
4. *Itan Ifa* collected from Adesina Taiwo, central Egbado town, October 1975.
5. *Iba Iyaagan ko bi dudu gbogbo omo lo fi bi pupa*.
6. Adedeji (1970:74) refers to the masquerader as "Labala."
7. *Iba pelebe owo, iba pelebe ese, iba alelese ti ko hu irun ti o fi de ojungan*.
8. For comparable ideas in Benin, see Ben-Amos (1976:245 and note 6).
9. This patchwork facing is associated with the plant known as *koko abalaye*, a variety of cadalium whose green to yellow leaves have bright red and white patches. *Koko abalaye* is said to be found on every "proper" Egungun shrine and concealed within the masquerade cloth. A well-known Egungun song states, "Don't let the *koko* leaf tear, it is *koko* we use to signify *oje* [Egungun]." In other words, don't let the Egungun cloth tear and expose the secret.
10. Other performances may be commissioned for special occasions such as visits from dignitaries, arts festivals, and openings of

- businesses. These performances follow the funeral commemoration format. Hugh Clapperton (1829:53-56) witnessed one at Old Oyo in 1826 which, judging by his description, exhibits striking similarity to the ones currently being performed in Egbado.
11. The form and content of *onidan*'s invocation is very similar to that of the principal masquerader in *Efe/Gelede*, *Oro Efe*. See H. J. Drewal (1974:59-61).
 12. The mortar (*odo*) is an important symbol for both Egungun and Sango, the thundergod. Sango's storm is likened to the sound of the pestle pounding in the mortar. In the town represented by this study, mortars are said to attract lightning if left upright, and scrapings from the interior are used to make medicines. Sango initiates sit upon inverted mortars as their heads are prepared with vital substances to allow them to receive the spirit of their deity during possession trance. According to McKenzie (1976:15-16) the mortar "symbolizes the containment of the hard thrust of the pestle thrown down violently upon it." The mortar then alludes to power and resiliency. Inverted figured mortars in Sango shrines support the major symbol of the god's power, the thundercell (*edun ara*), just as the inverted mortar containing medicines supports and protects Egungun *onidan* during his invocation.
 13. A *bata* ensemble normally consists of four drums, three of which have double membranes and are suspended horizontally from the drummer's necks. The large head (*ojujo*) is played with the right hand, while the small head (*asasa*) is beaten with a leather thong (*awo*). The lead and largest drum of the ensemble is the *iyalu* (the mother drum). It, together with the *omele abo* (female *omele*), approximates the tones of the Yoruba language to speak. The third drum, the *omele ako* (male *omele*), establishes the rhythm but does not speak, and the *kudi*, the smallest and only single-membraned drum, fills in a rapid baseline beat and is played with two long, thin sticks by a junior drummer.
 14. *Aluwasi* rhythms open any ritual for gods who are considered in this area to be "on *bata* side," such as Sango, Oya, Osun, Ogun, Eyinle, and Orisa Oko. In other areas, however, this may vary significantly, and other drums and rhythms dominate.
 15. *Gbogbo mariwo e tu wo lori iwo yaa eru owo*.
 16. The same layering of masquerade types occurs in Pobe, Benin, among Anago Yoruba: the main performer *onidan* parades to the arena covered in costly cloth, monkey fur, and appliqued panels suspended from a carved wooden platform. Upon arrival, he sheds this outer costume to reveal a close-fitting garment with a tunic and cowrie-studded apron and begins to perform "miracles." The costuming of the Pobe *onidan* and the kinds of miracles he performs are quite different from the Egbado examples.
 17. One titled elder in this cult claims to have an *onidan* with more than thirty "miracles."
 18. Ulli Beier (1964: 194-195) was told that the dancing mat, called *Fafa* in Osogbo, is an imitation of *Agemo*, the Ijebu masquerader. Marilyn Houlberg, who has witnessed *Agemo*, confirms that indeed the *idan* of Egungun called *Alagemo* in Egbado is quite similar to the Ijebu masquerader. She notes, however, that the ones she saw appeared to have two people inside since the mat was 1.5 to 1.8 meters long. Personal communication, August 1977.
 19. This same ritual fashion also persists today in the Yoruba-derived cults of Bahia, Brazil, known as *candomble*.
 20. The mask of the Dahomean as well as prostitute and drunkard are carved in classical Awori style, most probably from the Awori capital of Otta. Their presence in this Egbado community suggests a number of factors affecting art in Yorubaland: 1) some artists had widespread reputations for excellence and may have received commissions from distant places; 2) some may have traveled widely (and regularly) as itinerant artists (cf. K. C. Murray cited in H. J. Drewal 1977:8); and 3) it is not unusual to find ritual objects from one Yoruba subgroup being used in another, thus making the definition of style areas extremely difficult.
 21. The Yoruba, referring to the cattleherding of the Hausa, say "Gambari-runama-de,eron gberan de." ("An animal has brought an animal") (Abraham 1958:228).
 22. *Olokiti*, the tumblers, were not seen in any of the three funeral commemorations in which they are said to take part and thus are not included in our discussion other than to note their place in the typology. Cult members indicated that the *olokiti* are not as common here as they were in the recent past because their work is dangerous.

