The Arts of Egungun among Yoruba Peoples

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E gungun 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 Igunna (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, egigun, 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 Poynor). 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” (Olayubi 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), Iloko (Drewal & Drewal) and Egungun poetry (Adedeji) are clearly within the Oyo tradition; Ilana-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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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 824 E. 29th Street, Coconut Grove, FL 33133, or telephone (305) 858-1156.