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THE ROLE OF SCULPTURES IN YORUBA EGUNGUN MASQUERADE

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A vast body of literature already exists on African sculpture, largely because of the more than century-old fascination it has held for the Western world, which pioneered the study of African arts. The contents of this literature, however, have generated a lot of controversy. Appreciation of the functions of the sculptures has suffered because the initial criticism has largely been done by writers unfamiliar with African cultures. In most cases these writers were without the necessary firsthand knowledge of the conditions in which this art was produced (d'Azevedo, 1973), because it was not until after the turn of the 20th century that art itself began to be a subject of field research (Gerbrands, 1957). To these early writers, therefore, the producers of this art remained largely anonymous, and the social functions of the art objects have been the subject of endless guesswork. This led to African art objects being branded with such terms as *idols* or *fetishes* (Gerbrands, 1957).

Almost all the early writers were anthropologists who were more interested in the cultures and only studied art as a social variable playing a role within a certain given, notably religious context. Sweeping generalizations through the anthropological lens and the application of Darwinism (for details on Darwinism see Gerbrands, 1957; Ojo, 1988) to the study of African art led writers to liken African art to child's play, a by-product of instinct that developed ex-nihilo. At the time, European culture was viewed as the pinnacle of the development of human cultures. Thus admiration for African artistic expression, which has always existed as noted by Thompson (1973), was ignorantly passed over by these writers through ethno-

centric bias. These writers defined nearly all art objects employed in African religious context as objects of worship and props for magic and rituals, as if it were only the ritual and the religious intention that led to their creation.

As Darwinism (see Gerbrands, 1957; Ojo, 1988) was replaced by historical approach (see Marian & Sieber, 1973; Sieber, 1986) to the study of African art, African art was recognized as equal to other people's art. In fact, Einstein considered it even better than European art (Ojo, 1988). Therefore, some later writers have shown that African art objects are not always objects of worship, nor do they all represent gods or spirits. This however, has not put an end to the controversy. A look at Yoruba art employed in religious context would, perhaps, provide an adequate background to the issue of understanding the nature and functions of African art. This explains, partly, why Egungun masquerade of the Yoruba is chosen as a case study.

The Yoruba, who live in the western part of Nigeria, are noted for artwork in bronze, terra-cotta, beads, stone, and wood, for which they are especially famous. They have been described by Fagg (1968) as the producer of the most extensive arts in Africa. This view has, however, been countered by Bascom (1973), who, having seen the Baule art, considered the description an overstatement. Bascom, however, agrees that the Yoruba are surely one of the most prolific producers of art in Africa.

The products of the art traditions of ancient Ife and its neighboring towns provide evidence of the exploits of the Yoruba in art. Clapperton (1829), who was probably the first White man to pass through Yorubaland to the Old Oyo capital,¹ reported the high artistic tradition and the refined taste for ornamentation which he found among the people in the early 19th century. Aganju is said to have had his palace in Old Oyo embellished with brazen posts. The artistic taste of Ladigbolu, one of the kings of new Oyo (1911-1944), is still fresh in the memory of the people, to use Adepegba's (1983a) expression.

Egungun masquerade is one of the popular, and widespread manifestations of the Yoruba culture; its connection with ancestor worship and its sociopolitical importance are vital to Yoruba cul-

ture. Aside from the fabrics in the costumes, a close study has not been made of the paraphernalia, especially the sculptures, used in Egungun masquerade. Some of the sculptures have appeared in photographs, but they lack an accompanying discussion of form, symbolism, or functions. Aside from this, at a period when traditional values are more than ever being mixed with foreign values and when existing traditional sculptures are of a perishable nature (they are mostly of wood), a study like this is expedient.

The Yoruba word *Egungun* is used in two different contexts, in both cases serving as a noun. When used in its broad sense, it is the Yoruba generic word for all types of masquerades or any masked, costumed figure (Adepegba, 1984). This same word, however, when used in the minor sense, refers to the Yoruba masquerades connected with ancestor worship, hence they are called *Ara orun* (heaven dwellers). This article uses *Egungun* in its minor sense, covering the Yoruba masking tradition associated with ancestors.

The activities connected with Egungun are handled by the Egungun cult, basically a male cult, the membership of which is open to boys of a very young age (Kalilu, 1987). Johnson (1921), Beier (1964), and Olajubu (1970) claim that it is a secret cult. The reason for not initiating women into the cult may be historic, but it is basically because women are not supposed to see *ibo*, the main object used in sacrifice to Egungun, as any woman who sees it will never get pregnant.² Women are not initiated into the cult except a woman who happens to be of triplets, *Ato*, *Ogogo*, and *Amusan*, who are sacred to Egungun cult.

The festival in which Egungun masquerade takes place is celebrated once a year in most Yoruba towns, usually for a week or two sometime between the months of June and December. During the festival, the initial rituals and sacrifices take place in individual shrines (*Ile Sanyin*) or community groves (*Igbo Igbafe*). Then masqueraders with their helpers and relatives parade the town, in many cases, accompanied by drums. Of interest during this festival are the occasional whipping of each other by male youths and the intricate dancing steps usually displayed in open spaces by the masqueraders and their followers.

For different reasons, sculptured objects in various media and subjects are used in Egungun masquerade. Sculptures from some Yoruba towns – notably, Ogbomoso, Oyo, Aawe, Illora, Fiditi, Ibadan, Iseyin, Modakeke, and Ejigbo – have been studied. However, only samples that are randomly but carefully selected will be discussed here. Assorted materials such as leather, iron, lead, and brass are used. Wood, which seems to be the cheapest material, however, is used in the largest number of sculptures.

None of the sculptures are used permanently as shrine objects; they are either attached to the costumes or they are used during parades. None of these objects are common to all the Egungun masquerades. Each object is used by those who need it.

In the collection, masks predominate. These masks range from single-faced to multiple-faced types. The preference varies considerably from town to town. For example, in Ogbomoso single- and double-faced masks seem to be preferred, as four-faced masks are almost completely absent. In Ilora and especially Fiditi, the four-faced type is equally common with other types. These four-faced masks are similar to Gelede masks in form and iconography, except that they lack the surmounting superstructures characteristic of Gelede masks. And unlike the other types, they are generally well-treated in ways suggestive of delicacy of forms and flesh.

The masks come in the form of head masks and a very few helmet masks, but face masks are completely absent. The masks use both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic subjects in naturalistic, abstract, or stylized forms. Most of these are in the form of human heads depicted with face masks, while the zoomorphic figures are all in abstract forms. The zoomorphic masks are not as numerous though; in fact, in some towns none are seen. This, however, is not enough a reason to doubt their existence in such towns.

The wood used for the masks is never chosen randomly. As masks are to be carried, light wood is needed, and for the masks to last long, the wood should also be tough. *Iré* (*Funtumia Africana*), which does not crack easily, is not often used. *Ọmọ* (*Cordia milienii*), *Erinmodò* (*Raciodendron heudelotti*), and *Arère* (*Triptochiton Schleroxylon*) are also used.

A representation of the masks was selected for discussion; two represent the zoomorphic type, six represent the anthropomorphic type, and one is completely abstract and nonrepresentational.

ZOOMORPHIC MASKS

The two masks in this category belong to Sobo and Fíínú Egungun masqueraders from Ogbomoso. Sobo mask is a horizontally worn, double-faced mask that represents a crocodile rendered in abstract. The crocodile is abstracted into long protruding jaws, more than a third of the length of the mask, which is condensed into a belly-like structure forming the body of the crocodile. The other end of the mask shows smaller jaws, which almost mirror the ones in front. No limbs are depicted. The eyes, two for each face, are represented with circles carved in low relief. It is notable that this aspect was applied to the human noses in Yoruba carvings. The small circles that represent the eyes and noses leave us with little classificatory material. The mask can be termed a fusion of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features. Crisscross engraved lines at the top represent hair. The teeth are suggested by small triangular-shaped movements on the jaws. The blue-painted mask is full of animal grace and beauty, which transcend the powerful rendering of the elongated form.

Fíínú is a blue-painted, horizontally worn mask, a ludicrous and grotesque representation of a doghead. The facial forms are reduced to complete geometric shapes. The nose is represented by a long barrel-like form, complemented by two ball-like bulging eyes. The ears are represented by long back-stretched foliate forms typical of a real dog. Unlike anthropomorphic masks, face marks are not depicted on these zoomorphic masks.

ANTHROPOMORPHIC MASKS:

The six anthropomorphic masks belong to Akínkúnmi, Kongbá, Mákẹ̀sándùn, Olúkòtún (from Aawe), Olúkòtún (from Ogbomoso) and Kògbérégbè masqueraders.

Akínkúnmi mask is a double-faced type representing a human head treated in naturalistic style. The mask is characterized by the unconventional treatment given to the nose, which descends right from the forehead. The drooping eyelids resemble those of a substyle of the Nomoli of Mende people of Sierra Leone. This is not, however, to suggest any historic or artistic link between these two ethnic groups. A comb-like and roughly treated structure runs across the top of the mask. The ears are represented with very stiff, almost semicircular forms, and the mouth is too small for the face. Seen from the side, the blue-painted mask looks tawdry because of the roughness of the surface.

Kongbá mask is the biggest of all the masks representing the human head. The mask is of a very high artistic excellence, with a touch of color perfection. The crown is painted light blue, a color that is also applied to one of the eyes, while the other is rubbed with the blood of an animal used in sacrifice. The rest of the mask is painted in immaculate white. The face markings are intricately painted with the light blue color of the hair. The eyes of the mask are bulbous forms, with one eye different in shape from the other. One of the eyes is ball-like, while the other is not. The mask is decorated with two long cigarette-like sticks that stand for the teeth. None of the other masks displays such adroit handling of paint.

Mákèsándùn mask is also different. The positioning of the face makes the mask look skyward. The mask is characterized by bulbous eyes that occupy a large portion of the face. Slight attention is given to the treatment of flesh as evident on the cheeks. However, the chin is not naturalistically treated. The crown, which accounts for almost half of the mask, features an elaborate coiffure, which merges with the ears. The mask is painted white with dark blue hair; the eyes are covered with lead plate. Face marks are intricately engraved on the cheeks and chin of the mask.

Another interesting mask is Olukotun, otherwise known as Elére from Aawe. This is a moderate-sized, single-faced mask with an almost conical appearance when seen from the front. The forms on this mask betray a style in a class of its own. The eyes are summarily represented with two white-painted, unconventionally shaped shallow sockets, each dotted with a blue-painted form that serves the

purpose of the pupil. Another unconventional characteristic is the ears, positioned on a level below the eyes and terminating on the same level with the lower jaw. All these give the mask a humorous appearance.

Olúkòtún from Ogbomoso is a double-faced mask standing on a very thick neck. The mask is the most naturalistically treated, with soft and well-rounded forms. The facial features are well-proportioned. Each of the heads has a well-treated comb-like form at the top. Quantities of blood on it have congealed to form the characteristic crusted surface in dark-brownish color.

Kògbérégbè is an indigo-dyed, four-faced mask carved on a flat pedestal. The eyes on these faces are bulbous without any representation of eye lashes. The coiffure depicting a Yoruba hairstyle is almost identical on the four heads. Forms such as the eyes, nose, lips, and cheeks are delicately treated in a manner suggestive of flesh.

Other masks, especially those recently carved, are not very interesting. Most of them lack the boldness and vitality of typical Yoruba carvings. A ready example of such is the Amúlúdùn mask from Fiditi.

NONREPRESENTATIONAL MASKS

The nonrepresentational masks come in the form of helmet masks, which are peculiar to the Egbe costume. Because the masks in this category are covered with headgear, the masks are simply carved into a plain helmet structure with a flat form that stands straight at the center of the helmet. This serves as a stand for the headgear.

The mask is decorated with engraved lines in simple geometric shapes, rectangles and squares which serve as contrast to break the monotony of the plain surface.

STAFFS

A large portion of the staff is decorated with triangular shapes chiseled into the wood. For effective contrast, the geometric design

is broken with two ring bands, and at the end of this design are placed two human heads, each on a neck. The necks finally join at the base. The heads are given soft naturalistic treatment.

Surmounting these heads is an anthropozoomorphic figure with human features from head to the waist and fish features from the waist down. The head of this figure, partly covered with white cloth, is oversized, with a disproportionately thick neck that joins the cylindrical body. The staff is polished into a brownish shade.

Apart from the masks and staff, other objects have been identified. These are decorated whisks, statues, miniature mortars, pestles, death wands, swords decorated at the hilt, iron and brass bells, and whips decorated with spiral lines. Other objects include a Sango ceremonial axe that belongs to Oya, The Alaafin's Egungun masquerader in Oyo. Miniature drums of various sizes are attached to the costumes.

Research shows that not all the sculptures are carved in the towns where they are used. The collection betrays different styles within the same town. In Ogbomoso, for example, only a few are in the style of Abógundé, the local carvers. Though these sculptures are in the dominant Yoruba style, the collection shows local and individual stylistic variations, with six substyles so far identified. This shows that Yoruba style permits variations and that at times styles do not cut across ethnic boundaries. The art history implication is that the classification of African art on the basis of ethnic origin may not be supported.

The images used in Egungun masquerade are not in any way representations of gods or spirits, and neither are they objects of worship. The proposition that indigo-drenched headdresses of the Egungun cult among the northern Oyo definitely represent spirit inquisitors (Thompson, 1969) does not seem to be supported by any evidence yet known. Most of the anthropomorphic masks bear the face marks of families or lineages of the owners, but because Egungun is not thought to be a member of any particular family or lineage, the association of any Egungun figure with any particular individual is mostly based on the ownership of the Egungun costume.

The sculptures are not all that important in Egungun costume. The most important thing in the costume is the pair of socks known

as *bàtà*, the only irreducible unit of the cult paraphernalia. An interview with the head, deputy head Alágbáà, and the chairman of the Alágbáà Council in Ogbomoso³ confirms this fact. The chairman said:

Ìdàràsí ni èèrè
Èèrè ọ̀tọ̀, Eégún ọ̀tọ̀

Sculpture images are for decoration.
Sculptured images are different from
Egungun spirit (deity).

Only three out of the nine major Egungun masquerade types, as so far identified (see Kalilu, 1987, pp. 33-34), use a mask, and such use is prominent in only one type. Their “optional” use shows that the masks cannot be objects of worship or representations of Egungun spirit. Houlberg (1977) has shown that no Egungun masquerader in Remo uses carved wooden images and concludes:

Since there are several carvers in the town who produce carved head-dresses for Oro and Agemo masquerades, one can assume that Egungun masquerades are confined to the choice of the medium of cloth by choice. (p. 20)

Premberon (1978) has also revealed that:

Not all Egungun Paaka have carvings, carvings have nothing to do with the power of a masquerade but at best reflect the pride and affluence of the owner and the lineage to which it belongs. Most Egungun paaka are made entirely of cloths. (pp. 42-43)

Adepegba (1983), basing his study on Oyo, claims that the Ọ̀sayìn figure and not the masks are usually worshiped, hence the Egungun shrine or grove is at times referred to as Ilé Sanyìn, the house of Ọ̀sanyìn, The exception to this is the case of Onídán masquerader of Ọ̀jònbòdú quarters in Oyo, where the sacrifice was made to the face net and the leggings. In Akálà compound, Oyo,

the sacrifice witnessed in 1988 was offered in front of the costume to the unseen Egungun deity.

In Ogbomoso, the most important object used in sacrifice is the *Ìbo*, a small object that contains medicines, which are usually prepared for masqueraders by the Alagbaa. *Ìbo* is kept in a small pot or calabash, where it is soaked with animal blood during sacrifice to Egungun. In cases where blood is rubbed on any part of the mask, image, or amulet, it is to neutralized the negative effects of forces in the medicines attached to the masks or the costumes.

The *Ìbo* being used in sacrifice is not the Egungun deity but a magical prop through which the worshipers amplify their prayers in order to attract the necessary natural forces for their prayers to be translated and answered. The object of worship to which they offer sacrifice is not the masks or the images. The *Ìbo* can be likened to incense and oil which the Christians use in prayer but do not worship as God.

The images are, therefore, some sort of adornment or embellishment to enhance religious activities against the coming of rival religions, because the success of any event and religion is usually measured, among the Yoruba, by the number of spectators and followers. This fact is clearly illustrated in the Ifa corpus, *Ogbe Wehinwo* (cited in Adepegba, 1983b, p. 15), which goes thus:

‘Bi a ba gbon sasa
 Eran ogbon ni won on fun ni i je
 Bi a ba go lago juu
 Nwon a fi eran were lo ni wo
 Ogbon die, were die
 Ni o difa fun Otonporo
 Ti i se omo iya ere
 Otonporo, o p’iwa re da
 Ki o le leni leyin bi Ere’

If a person is very wise
 He is wisely dealt with
 If a person is very foolish
 Attempts would be made to treat him like a fool

A bit of moderation in behavior
 This divination is cast for Otomporo
 Which is similar to Ere
 Otomporo could you not change your ways?
 That you may have a large following as Ere has.

Òtòm̀pòró is a type of Yoruba masquerade which uses face masks and is feared for brutality in whipping the audience. Therefore very few people attend. However, Ère (sculptured images) is considered an object of admiration, and its usually large audience is considered a triumph and therefore success compared to the failure of Òtòm̀pòró.

Other evidences to buttress this could be found in some Yoruba maxims. The Yoruba says *Òṣùpá se bí ère wọ̀lú* (the moon phased like a sculptured image/object of admiration) and *Ò n gbé 'nú ère'* (literally, you are reworking the nose of a sculpture or you are introducing anticlimax). These maxims portray sculpture as object of admiration and climax of physical and artistic beauty.

The iconographic possibilities of the sculptures also lend weight to this fact. The masks are used in the afternoon ceremonies; they are meant for decoration and entertainment. Therefore, on their own, there is no awe attached to them. The variety of subjects confirms the entertainment and decorative character of the masks. Egungun masks are indeed purposely designated as art, and not art by metamorphosis as labeled by Ojo (1982, 1988). William Fagg (cited in Beier, 1958, pp. 16-17) has already pointed out that many African masks which the art critics have described as frightening and inspired by "cosmic fear" are merely ludicrous in character.

The staff with the anthropozoomorphic figure does not even have a symbolic meaning attached to it. The colors used on the masks are not symbolic either. They were chosen and applied on the basis of what the owners thought would best appeal to the audience.

Leo Frobenius (1913) has commendably observed that "the figures and other fragments and symbols are never actual representations of the Gods, but rather the priests and others engaged in sacrificial or other ceremonials in honor of some particular deity" (p. 196). A similar view has been expressed by Kevin Carroll (1978), who asserts that "people do sometimes identify a carving as Sango,

Obatala, Oduduwa, etc., but there is usually nothing in the carving to support the identification. The carvers usual intention is to portray a worshipper” (p. 68).

Some of the masks are images through which some physical and philosophical aspects of human life are satirized. Certain important events in the life of masqueraders are commemorated through their Egungun masks. Many masks are even memorial in intent. In an attempt by the masqueraders to immortalize their names and images, they usually carve the masks as portraits. The pride of being identified with one’s family is a quality usually displayed by the Yoruba, hence masks are carved with lineage attributes like face markings. Such masks may not perfectly resemble the masqueraders; but features such as face markings are descriptive details of the family to which the masqueraders belong.

Other objects, too, are not of religious import. The whisks are to enhance the costumes, though a very few of these objects have some magical importance. But the type of images carved on them seem to have nothing to do with the magical import.

Rather than being conceptual, sculpture in Egungun is generally visual, with no obscure symbolism attached. Therefore, the Yoruba world is not heedless of individualism and pomp. The use of images in Egungun masquerade is born out of the Yoruba’s high regard for sculptured images. It seems, therefore, that it is a sweeping generalization to assert that African art objects are seen only as fetish materials, representations of spirits, and objects of worship.

It is possible that the philosophical and religious thoughts of the people serve as the basis for many of the objects, but the claim that “this is in order that the art objects can function and be looked upon as sacred, religious objects and not as mere aesthetic objects does not sound plausible” (Olapade, 1988). And the assertion that the objects “are not accepted as traditional artifacts if they do not serve those ritualistic purposes” (Olapade, 1988, p. 91) does not sound likely either. After all, the carving of ordinary walking sticks or house posts with forms depicting the philosophical attributes of the people does not necessarily turn such objects into religious or sacred objects; yet such things are “accepted” by the people. The traditional Yoruba are noted for their production of carved doors,

posts, walking sticks, exquisitely decorated pottery wares, and other sculptures that are used completely out of ritual context.

Fagg and Plass (1964) have suggested that the term *fetish* should not be applied indiscriminately to African art in general and that Yoruba art is humanistic rather than obscure and esoteric. Frobenius (1913) and Carroll (1966) have shown that Yoruba art objects are not representations of gods, nor are they objects of worship. The bronzes and terra-cottas from Ife are not idols (Adepegba, 1983).

The original purpose of the Esie figures might be different, as the present worshipers of the images cannot be identified with the manufacture (Adepegba, 1983). The Gelede masks, as suggested by Beier (1958), are meant for entertainment, and Adepegba (1983a) has shown that *àrà* (creative intention) is the factor that underlies artistic creativity among the Yoruba.

In another religious context, the Landers, on their journey through Yorubaland, saw *bàtá* drums (sacred to Shango and used in the related religion) profusely ornamented with plates and figures. These figures, they claim, “were all carved in solid brass” and had “hundreds of little bells . . . suspended round their edges (the drum) for ornament rather than use” (Hallet, 1965, pp. 68-69).

Richard Lander (1830) summed up the Yoruba’s strong use of ornamentation in religion when he observed: “The principal fetish-hut at *Katunga* is the largest and most fancifully ornamented of any of a similar kind in the interior of Africa” (p. 199). This salutary statement is vitiated by his later comments that the images were the gods of the Yoruba. The simple fact that the images were depicted kneeling as if in worship indicates that they couldn’t have been the gods but some devotees. Thompson (1969) cites Eyinle Pottery Sculpture as one of the exceptions to this “rule” because minor details on Eyinle sculptures seem directly motivated by praise pertaining to the underwater king. However, Thompson’s statement that facial marks on the foreheads and cheeks of the figures often resemble the marks on the patrons of the pot shows that those figures may represent devotees or other personages depicted with the attributes of the god.

From the foregoing it will be clear that the images used in Egungun masquerade, as well as in other traditional Yoruba reli-

gions, are generally for embellishment and not in any way a representation of gods and spirits or objects of worship. Therefore, the unconscionable view that all African art objects represent only spirits, that they are objects of worship and rituals only, cannot be substantiated.

NOTES

1. Although some writers claim that a Frenchman was said to have traveled to Old Oyo before Clapperton, this Frenchman seems not to have left any record of his visit. Clapperton (1829, p. 39), in accordance with his experience in Old Oyo, asserts that he was probably the first man to reach Old Oyo.
2. Information collected from Elder Alabi, the Alagbaa council chairman in Ogbomoso, on August 4, 1987.
3. Information collected from Sunmaila Akanji, owner of Omowumi mask and staff, in Ogbomoso in June, 1987.

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