Egungun Costuming in Abeokuta

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In contemporary Yoruba society in southwestern Nigeria, the judicious use of clothing is recognized as a means of building individual, family, and social group prestige. Every important social event demands that participants wear proper clothing made from the proper fabrics. At a gathering such as a funeral weekend, which includes a church burial service, wake-keeping, and other social events, members of a wealthy Yoruba family are expected to appear in a series of traditionally styled garments. These clothes, fashioned from expensive brocades, laces and velvets, or asho'fi, the locally made narrow-loom cloth, are a visible expression of self- and family affluence and pride.

Recognition of the importance of cloth and clothing is also mirrored in surviving ritual practices associated with the Yoruba indigenous religion. Sacrifices of cloth are often prescribed by the Ifa divination priests to petition or placate witches and deities (e.g., Bascom 1969), and special fabrics are worn as emblems of membership in religious cults, such as the Ogboni. Cloth also plays an important role in religious observances surrounding death. In a traditional funeral, the corpse is covered with layers of asho'fi by his children prior to burial (Lucas 1948:225-26; Parrinder 1953:43).

Fabric plays a role again in ceremonies a few days after the burial when a member of the Egungun ancestral cult appears impersonating the deceased man and wearing "cloths similar to those in which the deceased was known to have been buried" (Johnson 1921:29).

Egungun masqueraders do not appear only in the contexts of funerals. Dressed in enveloping costumes of cloth, members of the Egungun society represent the corporate spirit of the Yoruba dead and appear in a number of ritual and public contexts throughout the year. They appear individually at times of family and community rejoicing or crisis and as a group at annual festivals held in honor of community ancestors. Despite modernizing influences and religious change, Egungun masqueraders, as physical manifestations of "Yoruba power," continue to appear in the teeming streets of modern Lagos, in the large indigenous centers of Ibadan, Oshogbo, Oyo, Ilorin, Ife, Owo, and Abeokuta, as well as in the villages and small rural hamlets throughout Yorubaland.

In any particular locality, Egungun masqueraders come in many forms or generic types, which are emically labeled. Generic type differences are displayed in the formal attributes of the carved crest mask (if present), the cut of the costume, the kind, color, and condition of the cloth used, iconographic details in additive elements such as embroidery and applique and in the accessories attached to or carried by the masquerader and his attendants. These visual clues of costuming allow the knowledgeable spectator to place a particular Egungun into a hierarchical category of generic types, predict its behavior, speculate on its past accomplishments, and even say something about the socio-economic status and personality of its owner.

Egungun costuming can be quite spectacular. The crest and platter masks associated with Egungun masquerading are displayed in art museums throughout the world. However, for the Egungun cult members, the masqueraders, and their Yoruba audiences, it is the flowing cloth shrouding the performer's body that receives more attention. Ere, the carved wooden masks, are commissioned when an Egungun costume is first assembled and are seldom replaced unless damaged. The cloth of the costume is more flexible. It may be changed, altered, or added to each year. As such, it is the major medium for individual aesthetic and iconographic expression in costuming. The fabrics also play an important ritual role, taking on a supernatural aura with use in costumes. The cloth is a way of tying the Egungun spirit, also known as ara orun (citizen of heaven), to the cultural world of the living by enclosing it in a man-made cage of fabric.
At the end of the 19th century, Islam was an additional alternative to Christianity for military, trade, and religious affiliations. The Yorubas of southwestern Nigeria were diversified Yoruba groups who came together for mutual protection in an area of rocky hills during the Yoruba wars of the early 19th century (Biobaku 1957). First, a confederation of small hamlets settled by survivors of five Yoruba kingdoms displaced during this period put down roots in the vicinity of Olumo Rock. Later population growth transformed the clustered settlements into a walled city divided into compounds of those lineages to which Egungun cult membership is restricted. A costume may be corporately owned by an extended family, but most types are individually owned although relatives often share in the cost of assembling the garment and mask.

The making of the costume is a secret, and costly, process involving the separate efforts of a woodcarver (if a mask is needed) and a tailor who specializes in the making of Egungun costuming. Only when all parts of the ensemble are brought together and joined in a ritual act does the spirit of the Egungun enter the costume. The costume itself, when not being worn, acts as a shrine for the owner’s lineage has been advised upon by the owner throughout the year as needs arise. For example, if a woman of the owner’s lineage has been advised to appeal to the Egungun for a child, rituals will be carried out in front of the costume to call and petition the spirit. The woman may then put on the costume and appear outside the shrine room so that the woman, who is not allowed to see the costume dormant, may make direct petition. To give food or kill a chicken for the Egungun in such a case is referred to as “sacrificing the cloth,” thus indicating the ritual importance of textiles to this cult.

Before a costume can be constructed, an Itoko man who has been advised by a diviner to take up an Egungun or who freely chooses to become an owner must select the kind of masquerader he wishes to manifest. He can choose, often with the help of the diviner, from a wide range of generic types. These include such named types as Egungun babamaawo, erin, ode, arede, and kekere. The choice of a particular generic type is made on the basis of such factors as the age of the owner, the availability of inherited costumes, the obligation to take a deceased relative’s Egungun, cult affiliations, and individual wealth. An additional important factor that influences the owner’s choice of generic type is the behavioral role he wishes to project in public performances as a masquerader. Two diametrically opposed personality types are exhibited by Itoko masqueraders. On the basis of behavior patterns shown, masqueraders are labeled either Egungun jeje (jeje = gentle or quiet) or Egungun ijanjuku (janjuku = restless person). Egungun jeje are supposed to be calm and gentle. They are primarily concerned with singing and dancing in public, and are expected to exhibit admired behaviors, good taste, and at all times present an aesthetically pleasing image. The Egungun ijanjuku masquerader, on the other hand, deliberately breaks the rules of proper behavior, taste, and aesthetic form. The Egungun ijanjuku spirits cause the masqueraders to act like wild men (ipata). They are always “pushing,” fighting with other masqueraders, attacking members of the audience, and generally

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disturbing the peace during the festival. The Egungun ijanjuku masqueraders of Itoko, it should be noted, are particularly noted for their extreme rowdiness (Olajubu & Ojo 1977:265). These two personality types cut across other emic categories of Itoko Egungun masqueraders. Some generic types are only gentle, others are only wild; a few types can be manifested as either jeje or ijanjuku, whichever the owner chooses. The Egungun jeje and Egungun ijanjuku are considered to have equal spiritual strength to bless or curse the living, and either of the role extremes well played by a masquerader in public contexts will bring prestige to the wearer-owner—the ijanjuku through the fear it can provoke, the jeje through the admiration it can evoke.

In public performances, the differences between the Egungun jeje and ijanjuku are signaled not only in the behavior of the masquerader but also in costuming and in the formal attributes of the headpiece, the cloth and accessories carried by the masquerader, and in the behavior and dress of his attendants. The visual symbols that distinguish the gentle from the wild masquerader are clearly seen in the costuming of the Egungun ode, the hunter’s masquerader. Egungun ode can be manifested with a gentle personality, Egungun ode ‘laabo, or with the wild disposition of Egungun ode ijanjuku.

The basic costume worn by both types is made up of a distinctive carved wooden crest mask that rides on top of the masquerader’s head with cloth panels attached to screen the figure, which is clothed in an all-encompassing fitted body-suit. The primary generic identifier of the ode costume is the mask in the shape of a stylized male head with a distinctive hairdressing in which long hair is pulled in a tuft to the left side of the head to mimic the larger than ordinary caps worn by hunters. Hunters are said to stuff protective medicines into the peaks of such caps and twist them to the left when worn. This may explain the knob that occurs at the end of the hair tuft on ode carvings.

There are two basic forms taken by the ode crest mask (ere Egungun ode). The first is a single head with a conical base to fit the top of the masquerader’s head (Fig. 2). In a second, more elaborated form called alate (carrier of a tray), the carved head is the centerpiece mounted on a round platter to be carried on the masquerader’s head. The first form can be worn by both gentle and violent ode masqueraders; the platter mask is worn by only the gentle, slow-moving type.

An ode ‘laabo masquerader who came out in this alate type of mask in the 1973 Itoko Egungun festival is shown in Figure 1. Two male figures depicted on the front of the mask wear the oversized caps of hunters to indicate that the owner is a member of a lineage of traditional hunters, while animal figures symbolize the hunters’ power over them. A female figure holds kola nuts to sacrifice to this Egungun, stressing its ability to grant children to supplicants. On the back of the same mask, a monkey’s head, common to all ode platter masks, and more figures are portrayed. On the right, a masked figure depicting an Egungun babalaago, a prestigious type of family-owned Egungun, indicates that the owner has this masquerader in his compound.

It is interesting to note that despite the rich iconographic complexity of this mask and the quality of the carving, my informant’s spontaneous remarks of admiration were directed to the embroidered cloth panels of the costume, which he perceived as “very fine and costly.” Highly decorated panels such as those worn in layers by this Egungun are said to be obtained, in part, as gifts from grateful women who have been given children by a particular Egungun. In one case, I observed a cloth strip tied to the knob of an Egungun ode headdress and was told that it had been presented to the masquerader during the festival by a woman who had given birth after petitioning that Egungun the previous year.

The large alate masks worn by some Egungun ode ‘laabo such as that just described would not be worn by masqueraders of the ijanjuku type. The size and weight of the platter mask and the need to keep it balanced on top of the head are not compatible with the rushing, sudden movements that characterize the Egungun ode ijanjuku masquerader’s performance. These masqueraders tend to wear a relatively small version of the single-headed mask form,
which can be slipped to the back when the performer becomes agitated and lunges about.

In the simpler single-headed form of the ode mask worn by both masqueraders, the differences in the personalities are expressed in the facial features. The head of the Egungun ode 'laabo is conceived as beautiful, while that of the ijanjuku form is made deliberately ugly. In a typical Itoko ere Egungun ode of the gentle 'laabo type (Fig. 3), there is a symmetry of form, a smoothness of facial features, and attention is paid to the elaboration of detail. The headdress will have two or more tiers of hair “like a woman,” with the texture of the hair indicated in closely spaced, incised parallel lines. Symbols of supernatural power such as stone celts (edun ara) and medicine containers (ado) may be carved onto or attached to the mask to emphasize the owner’s power. When carving the ere of an ijanjuku type, on the other hand, the carver deliberately violates the canons of good form (Fig. 4). The eyes bulge outward, the cheeks may be puffed out, and the hair is carved in one tier with little indication of texture. In some versions, the hair is tufted to the back in the style of Eshu, the trickster of the Yoruba deities.

The differences between Egungun ode 'laabo and ijanjuku masqueraders are reflected in the cloth costumes. The ijanjuku masquerader wears a less elaborate costume with perhaps no more than three to four large cloth panels. The distinction between ode 'laabo and ijanjuku is also mirrored in the dress of their attendants. Important Egungun masqueraders do not travel alone during the Itoko festival parades. Male and female relatives of the owner, his friends and clients, and women who have successfully petitioned that particular Egungun, and the degree to which an owner successfully manipulates the personality and aesthetic costume to project a distinctive social presence in his Egungun masquerader is a matter for discussion and evaluation among knowledgeable spectators.

For Egungun owners who seek prestige by stimulating admiration for the beautiful, a second generic type of Egungun masquerader is particularly appropriate. This is the Egungun erin, which appears only in the jeje form and utilizes cloth as the major medium for iconographic and aesthetic expression. Egungun erin are the fashion plates of the masqueraders. They are the most richly dressed of all the Egungun and are the focus of considerable attention and discussion during the festival. These masqueraders are called erin (“elephant”) because of their size, their power to grant the wishes of supplicants or punish wrongdoing, and the amount of money needed to maintain them. They are owned by individuals, and in the contemporary context have gained the nickname “the rich man’s Egungun.”

Egungun erin are called “the rich man’s Egungun” with good cause. In 1973 it was estimated that at least 400 to 600 naira would need to be spent before an erin was ready to appear in the festival. New costume cloth and accessories would be purchased and money spent on rituals and the entertainment of the dancers, drummers, and attendants prior to the event. If the owner was not able to raise the necessary money from private and lineage sources, it was assumed that the masquerader would not appear in that year’s festival. Most men who chose to own Egungun erin could well afford the cost and thought it justified by the response that the masquerader evoked from spectators and by the continuing prestige attached to owning this most beautiful of Egungun.

The erin masquerader is a distinctive Abeokuta generic type. It is distinguished by the ere, or wooden crest mask, in the shape of a head with a human face and huge upstanding ears that allow it to tower high above the
heads of the crowd (Fig. 6). The mask is finely carved and intricately incised, but it is not the focus of attention. It is the cloth that is worn and the accessories carried that excite comment and allow critical assessments of the beauty of a particular Egungun erin masquerader.

The basic costume is a loosely fitted body-suit reaching to the ankles with appliqued or beaded panels hanging from the bottom edge of the mask. Embodiment of hidden, important presence... is restricted, in the main, to those who communicate with or become possessed by the gods, the king, the priest, and the herbalist-diviner" (1971:8/1). Design elements on the beaded panels include the interlace, a motif associated with leadership arts and kingship in the Yoruba area for over four centuries (Thompson 1971:8/2). Such beadwork is initially expensive—80 to 100 naira a panel in 1973—so panels are normally reused from year to year, while additive elements of cloth may be changed. Sometimes an owner who desires a new image for his masquerader will sell his panels to another Egungun owner and commission new ones of bead embroidery or cloth applique.

The netting surrounded by the highly decorated front panels is also a focus of decorative effort. While a hand-knitted netting (gbala) is used by most masqueraders to obscure the face while providing sight (Fig. 7), Egungun erin masqueraders seem to prefer some kind of shiny, reflecting, metallic mesh of imported make (Figs. 7, 9).

The crest mask is another focus of decorative attention and is “dressed” with colorfully dyed ostrich plumes, attached cloth cutouts, and garlands of beads that tend to obscure the lines of the carving (Fig. 7). A wand with ostrich feathers attached is fitted into the front of the mask to add to its impressive height. Ostrich feathers are also attached to the tips of the petal-like cloth necklaces fitted around the bottom edge of the mask, and necklaces of coins may be added to underline the richness of the decoration.

Accessories carried in the hand of the Egungun erin provide the owner with another opportunity to project beauty. According to one informant: “To go out without something in the hand is not so nice. There must be something nice for the people to look at.” “Something nice” for the Egungun erin is a fan (abebe) edged with ostrich feathers and a rattle made from a long-necked calabash (shere) (Fig. 9). The fan may be beaded or of appliqued leather. The rattle may also be beaded or covered with intricately paneled and appliqued cloth shaped to fit the calabash. These accessories contrast with the stout staff, whips, and cutlasses (Fig. 8) carried by Egungun ijanjuku types, and they reinforce the gentle image of the Egungun erin.

During the 1973 Egungun festival in Itoko, the parade of the Egungun erin on the first day was looked forward to by the community. Large numbers of people gathered on the major streets to await the masqueraders’ arrival as they descended from the sacred bush atop Oke Odogbo, one of Itoko’s rocky hills. The coming of each erin masquerader, carefully spaced for dramatic effect, was heralded by the sound of drumming, and those persons who were to accompany it as it passed through the town rushed to find it and its owner. When Egungun erin masqueraders appear in public, the owners usually do not wear the costume but accompany the masquerader in order to fully enjoy the audience reaction. For the Egungun parade, the owner and attendants wear their finest clothing, often asho’fi, to visually mirror and reinforce the public importance of the masquerader (Fig. 10). Attendants may also carry additional decorations (ero) associated with the particular erin. A young boy in the 1973 festival carried a carving indicating that the owner was a devotee of Erinle, a river deity. The theatricality of the Egungun erin masquerader’s appearance is further heightened when a man or boy moves in front of the crowd surrounding the Egungun, carrying a banner on which the name of the Egungun and its owner are proclaimed.

As the Egungun erin masqueraders passed through the streets of Itoko during the festival of 1973, they were discussed by spectators; their beauty was compared and innovations noted. My informant, who considered himself an expert on Egungun aesthetics, commented on each, comparing the quality of the decorative panels, the ostrich plumes and decorations of the mask, the design of the facial netting, and the excellence of the import cloth used to cloak the back of the costume. After comparing all the Egungun erin masqueraders who appeared that day, he declared that the one shown in Figure 5, along with another erin, was “the finest in all Itoko.” “It is,” he said, “a lot of money!”

I have described two major generic types of Itoko Egungun to demonstrate the multivocal symbolism of Egungun costuming. Through the use of costume and performance behaviors, the masqueraders project culturally shared values of religion and group identity. Simultaneously, the realization of each Egungun allows the injection of idiosyncratic elements so that the owner can symbolically make public displays of self-esteem. Egungun costumes, the cloth of the ancestors, do not merely honor the dead; for every owner they are also the cloth of the living. Egungun costuming is used, just as clothing is used in the secular realm, as a means of building individual and family prestige.

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