



Typology of *Egungun* Iyamoye

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.1124.3263>

ABSTRACT

Art has always been part of human lives, manifested in all endeavours of which *Egungun* tradition is one. *Egungun*, a Yoruba word means all types of masked costume figures which can also be described as an embodiment of the spirit of the deceased persons who are believed to have lived a good life and who periodically return from *Orun* (spiritual realm) to *Aye* (earth) to bless their children. There are different types of masquerades with zoomorphic structures in Iyamoye, a town located in Ijumu Local Government Area of Kogi State, which borders Ekiti State and is a gateway town to other parts of the country. The *Egungun* festival in Iyamoye, which takes place in the month of July and spans between five to seven days. Some are celebrated annually while others are not. The festival is marked with lots of merry-making, as the town witnesses boom in all facets of business ranging from farming, trading, lodging and accommodation and many more. There is however a dearth of scholarly study on *Egungun* tradition in Iyamoye, hence this research.

The study, an art historical one, employed participatory observation of *Egungun* festivals and oral interviews, and descriptive method to examine these masquerades. The masquerades were classified based on their origin, uniqueness, characteristics, costumes and forms in their physical appearance. Literature materials on *Egungun* masquerading tradition generally and in other places in Yorubaland were consulted for a robust knowledge.

Findings revealed that some of the masquerades behave wild while others are cool and calm, The costumes are basically machine-made fabric with the dominance of red colour in all the costume, with very few wooden carved masks, an indication of the absence of wood carvers in the town. There are variations of colour in the *Egungun* costume in visual perspective which reflects artistic strength in their illustrations. The colours and motifs have cultural and symbolic meanings in the people's worldview. The art objects, costumes and the wearer are venerated before and after the performance. The love for brotherhood is displayed as this helps in the development of the socio-political, socio-economical and socio-cultural life of the people

KEYWORDS: EGUNGUN, IYAMOYE, MASKED, COSTUMED FIGURES

Introduction

Art has always been very much part of the Africans life, manifested in every aspect of their life, work, play and belief world. The Yoruba are traditionally rooted in their religion, and the people are blessed with many artistic traditions which make them more successful and useful in various fields of enterprise (Kalilu and Areo 2013). There is always a very strong relationship between their religion and Art (Akintonde, 2013) No major achievements in the life of an individual, group or community is considered possible without the active support of the supernatural, and ritual in such a community becomes constant aspect of life (Biobaku 1973). The Yoruba always migrate with their religion and associate rites of which *Egungun* dramaturgy is one (Adepegba, 1984).

Kissick (1993) attest to the fact that the Yoruba were possibly the most complex and urban African society in reality as they occupied the western parts of Nigeria and the South Eastern parts of the Republic of Benin and Togo through transatlantic slave trade. They also extended to South America and West Indies, thus becoming the most African Diasporas in notably, Cuba and Brazil (Falola, 2017). Areo and Areo (2012) noted that Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria are renowned for their vibrant cultural environment. Textile usage in its multifarious forms takes a significant aspect in the peoples culture; used for protection from the elements, to clothing the dead before burial, to honouring ancestors in *Egungun* manifestation of the dead and as status symbol for the living. The people believed in life after death and reincarnation. Old people who have lived a good life therefore, don't die but are believed to have transited into ancestors and returned as *Egungun* periodically to see to the well-being of their offspring. Yoruba believed strongly in the existence of supernatural powers which gives support to their living in all ramifications (Awolalu, 1979).

Egungun, a Yoruba word means all types of masquerades or any dreaded and terrifying masked costumed figure (Adepegba, 1984 and Kalilu, 1991). The term refers to all Yoruba masking traditions. However, *Egungun* being referred to as *Ara-Orun* (heavenly dwellers) may be used in a more precise manner to mean the Yoruba masquerades associated with ancestral reverence (Kalilu, 1993). The Yoruba believe in the extraterrestrial

powers and action of sacred objects, specifically produced for the performance of peace and tranquility of their community. The art works used in ritual for the worship of gods are also used in the shrine as utilitarian articles, altar decorations and spirit trapped objects for mystical powers based on the complex nature of the tradition (Biobaku 1973). *Egungun* specifically serves as a means of communicating with the Supreme Being through ancestors. Masquerade is the representation of power and authority for the cleansing of society and its inhabitant (Seiber, 1956). *Egungun* is an expression of the continuing and dialectical relationship of the living and the dead as well as the relationship between the living members of the family.

Egungun masquerade is one of the mostly accepted and widespread manifestation of the Yoruba culture in which fabric is used abundantly (Kalilu, 1991 & Areo, 2016). Colourful parades of different textiles have become a cultural symbol of the unity of purpose in the designing and production of the *Egungun* costume. It's alliance with ancestors' worship and it's sociopolitical significance are vital to Yoruba culture. *Egungun* is treated with respect and dignity because it is believed to have been imbued with powers and authority that whatever it says come to pass (Ibrahim, 1994). *Egungun* is regarded as an important cultural phenomenon purposely deployed as sources of spiritual powers, military amours for the physical protection of the user (Campbell, 2015).

Egungun is an age long tradition in Iyamoye, whose starting point may not be determined. It can also be owned by families or individual and may be named accordingly. Every *Egungun* has its shrines *Ile Sayin* (community groove) or *Igbo Igbale* (masquerades groove) where all the *Egungun* are dressed, fortified and prepared for the mission ahead. The festival is celebrated annually, usually for a week or two sometimes between the months of June and July (Kalilu, 1991).

The Iyamoye *Egungun* is colorfully costumed and dance to entertain spectators and to make atonement to *Eledumare* for a bountiful harvest for the year and to display at special occasions such as the demise of an elderly or the King (*Obaro*). *Egungun* are often visualized as an ensemble of visual art form. The attire of *Egungun* varies from place to place, some use woven clothes, *Moriwo* (palm fronds), *Iko* (Raffia) or beads, all in highly planned beautiful form (Kalilu 1991). The art objects used in the tradition has something deeper than its artistic value. The artist play a very important role in the *Egungun* cultural tradition, as they serve as agents for translating values into visual metaphor aimed at sustaining humanity in body and spirit (Lawal, 2012).

The use of full range of artistic imagination and powers of inventiveness (*Imoju Mora*) to give apparent, concrete form and substance to the naturally invisible presence of ancestral spirit in performance of the *Egungun* dramaturgy are serious business as well as serious play (*Ere Idaraya*) (Kalilu, 1991).

Areo (2017), (Abokede 2018), (Ayinmode 2005), (Famule, 2004), (Adepegba, 2021), (Olabaju & Ojo, 1977) and (Orthenberg, 1975) have studied either *Egungun* or Epa masquerade in respect to their origin, classification, costumes, masks, paintings, spiritual identities and functions. *Egungun* is described as an embodiment of the spirit of the deceased persons who are believed to have returned from *Orun* (the spiritual realm) to visit their children. This shows that *Egungun* wears special outfit made from different colourful materials which are designed and produced with a touch of excellence which captures the attention and visual interest of the viewer. This explains the realities of costume as an important component of the *Egungun* tradition.

***Egungun* Types in Iyamoye**

Egungun Ekiri (Figure 1) is one of the most dreadful and terrifying masquerade in Iyamoye. It has a long history in Iyamoye. It is owned by the *Oke-Aro* people who are the founding father of Iyamoye (Illiasu, 2015). The *Egungun* started as a result of the rate of evil occurrences and calamities such as; drought, bareness, witchcraft, diseases and many more that happened in the community at that time. These issues and many more became source(s) of concern to all and sundry, as everyone in the community had a share from these evils. Hence the for need to fortify a masked costume figure, *Egungun Ekiri*, to warn the evil perpetrators.

Egungun Ekiri has a dreadful and terrifying look, it has a facial covering which makes it look like an owl with a big head and an angular body structure and adorns a red coloured regalia and white *felefele* (head cover). The overall garment of the masquerade is in red colour and it moves slowly and may not be noticed in its movement till it gets to its destination. It equally has a single cowry at the middle of the fore-head which signifies purity, wealth and light. This portray the *Egungun* as not being poor, but that it lives in affluence and wealth. The costume is embellished with charms and amulets for ritual fortification. The *Egungun* is not featured annually, only when the need arises owing to the sacred spiritual veneration, atonement and fortification. The artistic touch of the *Egungun* costume and posture is appealing to the eyes because it can be noticed or sighted from a distance, as it moves around alone without followers, drummer and chant singers.



Figure 1: Egungun Ekiri

Egun ngun Ehanle (Figure 2) is a masquerade of the *Aaye* people where the current *Obaro* (king) resides. It was started as a result of enemies' invasion of the territory. It was meant to protect and entertain the people. The masquerade is exclusively strong, powerful and mysterious. It has facial structure like that of a bat with lots of circular shaped medicinal charms arranged artistically on the face for visual perception and also for decorative purposes. These charms are beautifully and artistically arranged in an exclusive manner with a flowing black-coloured machine made from well knitted colourful fabric running from the face down to the thigh. It wears a red-coloured veil, yellow face cover, *Akoh* (raffia palm seed) tied to the legs, white socks, a pair of slippers and holds *Atori* (cane) to compliment the body structure and form which makes it appear more dreadful and terrifying.

The masquerade costume is of varying colours ranging from yellow, blue, red, purple, white and black. These colours have different meaning and are symbolic to the masquerade cult members. Yellow indicates progress, success and wellness, blue symbolises love and joy, red for ferocity and terror, purple for royalty and priesthood, white for purity and peace while black symbolises spiritual and physical powers. The *Akoh* (raffia palm seed) tied to the legs are to announce the arrival of the masquerade and to produce sonorous sound that compliments the beat from the drums during dancing. The masquerade is also, very restless and energetic in nature and in its physical appearance,

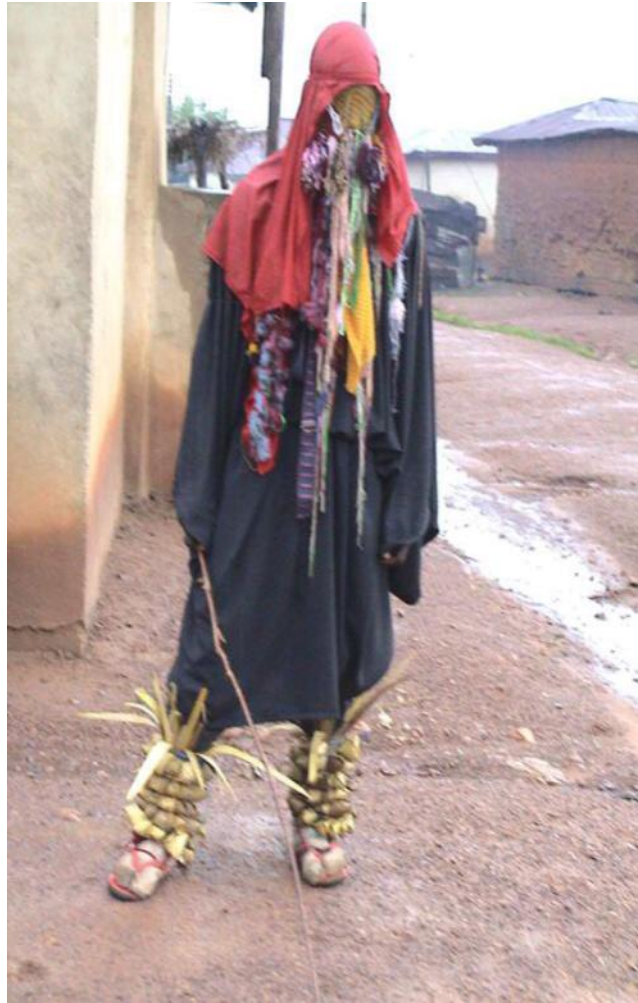


Figure 2: Egungun Ehanle

Egungun Aigba (Figure 3) is a masquerade from *Idofin*, and has a facial structure like that of a cat, a mysterious animal that belongs to the carnivorous family. This *Egungun* has a round big head, an extension of a long mouth which extends to the knee. The head is tied with a red coloured fabric like the cap of a clergy. It also wears a red-coloured veil, *Felefe* (head cover) with white zig-zag lines on black background resting on its shoulders. A floral motif pattern designed on the fabric with variation of purple and black colours looking attractive and beautiful from a visual perspective is also part of this *Egungun* costume. The *Akoh* (raffia palm seed) tied on both feet adds glamour and value during display or performance by the *Egungun*. The structure of the *Egungun* is oval in shape. It has pallets of well decorated feathers which are well arranged on the soft carved wooden mask. These feathers are gotten from a mysterious bird called *Eye Atiro* which feeds on ripened hot pepper, plantain and banana.

The colours on the *Egungun Aigba* costume are red, black, white and purple with various meanings attached. Red stands for ferocity and terror, black for spiritual and physical powers, white for purity and justice, purple for royalty. The zig-zag lines on the face cover imply that life is full of “ups and downs”. The leaves motif pattern on the costume indicates the evergreen nature of the tradition and that the tradition remains with the



Figure 3: Egungun Aigba

Egungun Okutegba (Figure 4) is a masquerade from *Itegba*. It has a zoomorphic structure with pallets of feathers on carved wooden mask. *Owo Eyo* (cowries) are attached to the head which gives a semi-circular shape. The *Egungun* presents a fine knitted black-coloured shining silky material with a snake-like design covering the face down to the thigh. It wears a red-coloured veil that covers the head down to the arms. The regalia has black background colour with white and blue design. The body structure is cylindrical in nature which gives the masquerade elegance and beauty to behold from an artistic point of view. The colour composition is superb, showing colour harmony in clear terms as the colours complement one another in aesthetically appealing way.

The feathers and *Owo Eyo* (cowries) on the forehead are indication of strength, spiritual power, agility, wealth and prosperity. The masquerade has a very strong alliance with *Ebora Oliko* (deity) of the *Itegba* people, which is revered, cherished and worshipped because of its spiritual powers. The masquerade is termed to be the chief priest of the *Oliko* shrine where people come to seek for powers and one or more spiritual solutions to their problems, ranging from barrenness, ill-luck, diseases and many more.



Figure 4: Egungun Okutegba

Egungun Ipobi (Figure 5) is associated with the *Igbawu* people. It is very strong, powerful and famous among the people. It has a big round head and bulging facial expressions to depict a wild animal ready to devour its prey. The red coloured veil covers the head down to the round shoulders with green and white stripes over-sized regalia flowing down to the knees. The masquerades wears a black coloured *Sokoto* (trouser), which has a beautiful laced *Akoh* (raffia palm seed) tied to both feet with a pair of snickers for easy movement.

The masquerade shows agility, strength and power in its physical form which it to always look restless in its appearance. The structural form of the masquerade indicates that it has speed, when it comes to running after a culprit. The masquerade represents the spiritual manifestation of dramatic entertainment and religiosity of the people as it is believed to have a link between the spiritual and the physical world. It also holds the *Atori* (cane) to complement its costume.



Figure 5: Egungun Ipobi

From time immemorial, *Egungun* Iyamoye have demonstrated the required resilience to fight crime and also entertain the people, as it has the accolade of being called *Eye Orun* which literally means (divine bird) owing to its well articulated costume and spiritual powers. (Houlberg 1978) noted that *Egungun* are colourful and part of the local cultural elements. Diamola and Jeje, (2005) provided more insight by describing *Egungun* as beings from the spiritual realms that pay tribute to the physical world to bless the people. Famule (2004) classified *Egungun* which consist of Iyamoye, Ekirin-Adde, Egbeda-Egga and Iyah Gbede based on their physical attributes. The Iyamoye *Egungun* costume is machine-made fabric. Aremu, et al (2012) asserted that changes in the society have affected the Yoruba *Egungun* tradition negatively as modernity has reduced the reverence associated with the costume and has relegated it to a mere visual aesthetic value.

Egungun Iyamoye shapes, types and sizes are zoomorphic in structure. The masks are carved from soft wood and mostly designed with feathers, cowries and pallets all in well-articulated manner which connotes beauty in the visual perspective, it also has spiritual inclinations and virtue. The masquerades are categorized into two, based on their origin, uniqueness, characteristic and costumes as *Egungun Lile* (wild, strong and powerful) and *Egungun Elere* (gentle, playful and entertaining). Wild *Egungun* are smart and restless while gentle *Egungun* are slow and calm, purely for carnivals and entertainment purposes.

The costume and the wearer are usually venerated before and after the practice. *Egungun* types in Iyamoye can be differentiated by the colours of their *Felefele* (face cover) which the people know and are already familiar with and because the *Egungun* custodians agreed to make it so. The fashion trends in the society are often noticed on the *Egungun* costume, meaning that *Egungun* are constant reflectors of fashion tendencies in the society. The audience, therefore often look forward to the *Egungun* performances to see how new and current fabric and fashion accessories are used to enhance the glamour and elegance of the *Egungun* costume form.

However, there is a decline in the use of locally produced fabric such as *Kijipa* and *Aso-etu*, both locally handwoven fabric of the people due to high taste for trendy, imported and exotic fabric materials. The masquerade cult society believed that colours play important role and significance in

the tradition, especially red colour which is an allusion to both the spiritual and physical virtue in the *Egungun* practice. The *Egungun* cult members contribute in the designing and production of the *Egungun* costumes as some of them are fashion designers and hunters while carving is given out to specialized individuals outside Iyamoye a reflection of the absence of wood carvers in the town.

The *Egungun* festival is usually for a week (seven days) except on Friday and Sunday when Muslims and Christians observed their religious worships respectively. The celebration is kicked off with the consultation of *Ifa* (god of divinity) by *Babalawo/Onifa Oba* (Chief priest of the king). This takes place two weeks before the commencement of the festival with all the *Egungun* cult heads from different quarters/ villages in Iyamoye in attendance. This is to provide for ample time for the cult members to perform their ritual sacrifices and veneration, mend their costumes if need be and make available food items for consumptions for the members of their family and to inform the people of the community to prepare ahead for this interesting and entertaining festival.

The celebration is usually in the month of July. The exact date that the Iyamoye *Egungun* tradition began cannot be traced to any year in order to forestall history from being distorted; Several attempts to get the actual year it started prove abortive, but the origin is hinged on the history of how Iyamoye as a town came into existence many millennia ago. All the *Egungun* mentioned above have long history with the Iyamoye people as they served as law enforcements agents in the community, apart from having individual roles.

There is also, the period of stock-taking usually eleven (11) months after the celebration to access the outcome of the festival to know the level of success and failure during the celebration. This is in line with whether the gods are happy with the atonements and sacrifices performed during the celebration. This is usually measured by the kind of harvest from the farm produce and the occurrences among the people, such as success, progress, barrenness, ill-luck, diseases, or evil acts in the town..

It is a taboo and almost a death sentence for an *Egungun* to fall or for anybody to raises his hand against the masked costumed figure. Women are forbidden to laugh or speak disdainfully or identify the person behind the masked figure or unmask the *Egungun* in a public place. *Egungun* are fortified with different spiritual powers to retain ritual potency for the task ahead. They speak in guttural voices to give the impression that they are not ordinary human beings.

During the *Egungun* celebration, the town witnesses serious business boom as traders, farmers and hoteliers make bumper sales and profit. It is a period where the people are happy, pay visit to one another in a full blown atmosphere of merry-making. The sons and daughters in diaspora, and other visitors come around to grace this fun and memorable tradition in Iyamoye. The palace of the Obaro (king) is always busy as the palace is the first point or place of visit by the *Egungun*, drummers, singers and the followers. The king will bless the people and declare the festival open. This is usually on the first day and this action is again repeated to close the festival. On the first and the last day, the *Egungun* will go round the town performing spiritual cleansing, making atonements, offering sacrifices and veneration for the land to yield bountiful harvest for farmers, praying for traders and all other legitimate businesses, blessing strangers and the indigenes of the land.

The tradition began to show steady decline with the advent of Christianity and Islam in Iyamoye. This has brought a significant negative impact on the tradition because the former are equated with civilization and progress while the tradition is linked with backwardness, voodooism and something fetish and diabolical, hence the tradition is derogatorily tagged as 'paganism'. It is further presumed that the *Egungun* art objects are 'unhygienic' (juju with magical powers), barbaric, old-fashioned and primordial. There is also the problem of extinction as some of the powerful and dreadful *Egungun* have been abandoned because of the kind of sacred and spiritual sacrifices performed before and after these types of *Egungun* can be celebrated. In addition, most of the elderly custodians of *Egungun* have either died or have been converted to these foreign religion that preaches something different to what the people knew hitherto. Some youths who are supposed to take over the tradition see the custodians as less educated people who are just wasting their precious time on something that have no significant value. In the *Egungun* costume dynamics; there is therefore, the danger of losing the fleeting changes and trends occurring from time to time as occasioned by prevalent and compulsive factors of social change. This problem is worsened by the perishable nature of the materials used by the *Egungun* in Iyamoye.

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