

OSOGBO

Model of Growing African Towns

Edited by

C. O. ADEPEGBA

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Institute of African Studies,
University of Ibadan
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Chapter Eight

EGUNGUN IN THE PERFORMING ARTS OF THE YORUBA: THE CASE STUDY OF OSOGBO⁺

Dele Layiwola

Preamble

The origin of performing arts of the Yoruba is almost always synonymous with the origin of egungun masquerade and costume dances. Though Joel Adedeji (1978) writes that the first known historical accounts of Egungun theatre, also termed 'Alarinjo'¹ are found in the annals of Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander (1829, 1830, 1967), the origin of the craft traces itself to centuries before that time.

In the new world, for instance, the egungun masquerade dances transformed to aspects of what is called the "Jonkunnu", a folk dance which invokes the memory and personality of ancestors at funeral ceremonies and at harvest festivals. Sylvia Wynter (1970), in making references to the seventeenth century record of these dance performances witnessed by Sir Hans Sloane Wynter (1970: 37) hazards, as Orlando Patterson does, that the origins of mask dances are likely to be from three sources:

1. The yam festival activities of the Mno secret societies of the Ibo people.
2. The recreational activities of the Egungun secret society of the Yorubas.
3. The Homowa harvest festival of the Ga people.

I am only concerned with the second source above. *Pace* Wynter goes on to say:

All three have to do with the impersonation of ancestral spirits by masked dancers at festival, usually connected with agricultural activities. The primary annual festival of the Egungun of the Yoruba is "a masquerade performed by male members of the Egungun cult in order to make visible the ancestral spirits and to command their power. ... The festival which celebrates the earth and its fertility - the harvest festival - is, therefore, intimately linked to the evocation of the ancestral spirits; and the gods or forces of nature. The folkdance of the living is made more alive by the presence of the spirit of the dead.

(Wynter: 37)

My major concern in quoting at length from the earliest references to the egungun cult and dances is the import of the claim that the origin of Egungun performing arts arises from the funerary cult of the dead. Aspects of Yoruba history have testified to the fact that the entertainment aspect of the egungun derived, at the close of the 16th century, from the Egungun cult of ancestor worship. The professional troupes which spread through Yoruba land from about 1590 onwards merely distilled the "imitative" aspects of the cult for the purposes of dramatic entertainment. (Adedeji, 1978). The ceremonies of the cult that are charged beyond mere entertainment, and which are meant to represent the tragic aspect of the egungun performing art are preserved as cult rituals which are periodically re-enacted at non-public festivals and for particular exigencies. Thus, in terms of formal distinction, the two sub-genres of the *tragic* and the *comic* are still patent (Layiwola, 1986: 403).

Origins

The egungun is the conclave of ancestral spirits who now inhabit a chthonic realm; primarily described as 'heaven'. Hence the term *Ara Orun* as earlier described by Babayemi (1980: 1), and Adepegba (1990: 3). Generally speaking, the egungun are only incarnated at egungun festivals; at the funeral ceremony of a dead parent (Johnson, 1921; Delano, 1937); or as a stabilizing factor in the time of crisis, during which an Egungun may emerge to visit vengeance on a witch or a felon. According to Henry John Drewal, Rowland Abiodun has expressed the view that egungun may be represented as "powers concealed" (Drewal 1978), and he seemed to have been supported by Adepegba (1990) that egungun may represent any spirits at all. There are certainly individuals who create for themselves new egungun either because the need arises or merely to satisfy creative yearnings; Adepegba himself gives a concrete example:

At Iseyin, near Oyo, the late Oyelowo of Basorun's compound constructed an egungun masquerade from bird feathers. He is said to have done it when he was young, in order to satisfy creative yearnings (p.7).

Whilst Adepegba's assertion is perfectly tenable, a subtle distinction must be made on the issue of nomenclature. There is a nuance between the institution of Egungun as a brotherhood, and the applied use of egungun as costume display. Indeed, the use of Egungun in war strategies as in Ife and Oyo, belong to the latter category. It is also in this respect, it seems to me, that we must understand the late Alapinni of Oyo, Chief Salawu Adeleke (Adeleke, 1965), when he asserts that Egungun shoes and costume could be made for a child born through the support of Egungun or an Abiku who is now made to live by the grace of the Egungun. Essentially, the point I am making is that at any point in time, the egungun refer to a benevolent assemblage of ancestral divinities who incarnate for good. At other times, there are semblances of egungun used to score a creative point, or used for the purposes of entertainment. Still, Adepegba's focus remains the newest attempt at costume classification in Egungun history.

The origin of egungun has become a source of inimitable speculation. In this respect, let us examine a few of the myths and oral traditions as have been found in Ifa mysteries and in the lineage chants of egungun groups. We will thereby erect a model for the purpose of analyses. According to Babayemi (1980), in *Odu Oturupon Meji*, it is narrated that when a man dies, his spirit takes leave of its body to stay in heaven as an Egungun, the corpse is then draped in cloth and buried. It is believed that as the corpse is fully concealed in draperies, so is the egungun who is then called an "ara orun"; the contingents of heaven. There is another version of this story which the present writer collected from the Ifa priest, Ifatoogun (1989), which claims that the cognomen "ara orun" is derived from "ara orunmila", the primordial diviner, when the other gods, out of envy, accused him of lacking kith or kin. This, in any case, shows that egunguns have attributes of gods.

Under the Odu (or sign) of *Owonrin Aseyin*, the story is told that Ijimere, the pataguenon monkey, raped a widow who went to the farm to fetch firewood. In vengeance, the woman went back to the spot and lured the animal into repeating the act but deceived it into putting its genitals in between the split bow of a fallen tree. The woman released the bow and the animal was trapped to death. Meanwhile the woman was pregnant, and she later had a son who became the king of the town. This Oba had difficulties making any of his wives pregnant, so an Ifa priest was

consulted. The priest later revealed that proper obsequies were not conducted for the late father of the king, and unless this was done, the king's wives would not have children. The king's mother revealed then that the actual father was a monkey. The Ifa priest prescribed that the skeletal remains of the monkey be carried from the forest grove into town with pageantry and the funeral rites observed. A general announcement was made on this account and the bony remains was draped as a long cylindrical bolt. The procession was conducted at night to avoid profane gazes. However, those who spied on the procession marvelled at the longish nature of the drapery and expressed: "Ah! How longish the bones of the king's father were!" which translates in Yoruba: "egungun baba oba ma gun o!" It is reported that the word for masquerade, *egungun*, is a mere tonal transposition of *egungun* which means bones or skeleton. A similar version of this story is recounted by Adedeji (1970).

The Ifa sign of *Ogbèrikúsá* narrates that at the institution of the world, there were certain imperfections about its nature. At every ten to fifteen years interval or so, there were always seismic and other disturbances. The other divinities on earth were very worried and perplexed, and sought an end to the disturbances. It was then that the Supreme being, *Olodumare*, sent a certain order of spirits who knew the solution to come and salvage the earth from turmoil. They came disguised and performed their various rituals round the earth. After the usual fifteen to twenty years, the disturbances ceased. The other *orishas* or divinities then expressed the satisfaction: "Eyi gun; eegun", meaning "this is stable, the world is stable". (Ifatoogun, 1989). The version collected by Babayemi (1980: 10) observes that the spirits were called "Se aiye gun", that is, "those who made the world stable".

There are also other Odu recitations of Ifa which border on stories about *Egungun* or its origins. Some others which I have collected from the priest *Ifatoogun* are *Owonrin eleeGUN* (or *Owonrinsogbe*): Under this Ifa sign, it is told that *Orunmila*, the primordial diviner once got married to a princess called *Ese*. *Ese* had difficulties begetting children, so *Orunmila* consulted the oracle, *Ifa*, which told him to prepare a sacrifice of eleven cockerels distributed freely among the *Egungun* hierarchy. *Orunmila* thereby undertook a trip to the town of *Oje* where *Egunguns* were the autochthonous inhabitants. Under a low-roofed resort where *Egunguns* were wont to pass time, he found the consortium of *egungun* fraternity in a row. He then freely distributed the eleven cockerels among them. The eleventh recipient then asked him why he exhibited such generosity. *Orunmila* confessed that he wanted a favour of fertility for his wife, *Ese*, who had been barren since he married her. The eleventh *egungun* called *Amuludun* then summoned

Ese and uttered prayers in a ventriloquial voice, saying that Ese would be blessed with a child. That very month Ese became pregnant and she, much later, returned to the town of Oje with great delight, singing and dancing, and with the gift of more cockerels.

In “Iwori Oreku”, we also find a story pertinent to the mystery of egungun. It is told that at the beginning of egungun craft and tradition, “Pepeye”, the duck, and “Aguntan”, the sheep, boasted that they had perfected the craft of Eegun, and would like to tour the town of Oje, the autochthonic settlement of Egungun, to perform for professional accreditation. Before they act out, they consulted a diviner who advised them to offer sacrifices against the wiles of evil rivals who may cast spells on them and frustrate their performance (see also Adedeji, 1978: 34). They both discountenanced the oracle’s advice and went about boasting of their mastery of egungun performances and acrobatic display. In no long while, however, they arrived at Oje town with their troupe and drummers and announced that they had been there to perform for the king. Thus, the next day, they launched out and began their display of dances and magic. In the midst of this display, the oracle was proved right. Evil men in the audience cast a spell on the sheep and the duck. The sheep could not regain its voice again, and thence spoke with the usual ventriloquism, “agooooo! agooo o!”, which is clearly different from that of the goat. Likewise, the duck could not remove its robes which it had hitherto used for magical display. Much effort helped the duck but about the ankles, the cloth could not be removed without it losing too much flesh so there remained a vestigial web. It is for this reason that the foot-web became the duck’s lasting legacy. Both animals were much disturbed by the humiliation and took instant decisions to save their faces. The duck used its residual charms to sprout feathers and wings, and flew away over forests and seas but became weary and so returned home. The sheep wandered likewise but became home-weary and returned home where they became household pets to this day. The best they could do with their voice is now to crackle or simulate the voice of egungun.

The fruits of our research testify to the fact that there are other Odu signs in Ifa mythic and historical corpus which confirms the stories of egungun. However, we are not convinced beyond every iota of doubt that they recount the origins of egungun. They merely recall events that are related to egungun activities, healing, bestowal of wealth or children and others. Needless to say that such stories would, of necessity, post-date the origin of Egungun because they refer to the institution of egungun after it had been entrenched. Such instituted activities of Egungun are likely to be in the second phase of egungun history rather than in their earliest phase. Such

other Odus or cantos would include Okanran eiegun (also called Okanran Ogunda), Obara Osa and such others. Many oracular renditions of Ifa corpus are intimately connected with the institutions of egungun that most of them have cantos on egungun myths and activities. Sometimes there are different versions of the same story. What we have done here to avoid replications and superfluity is to create a representative model from which we can draw analytical conclusions. By so doing, rigorous textual analysis can be adopted, and worthwhile academic exercise may thereby evolve.

In all, we have reproduced above, in translation, five models. The last two - owonrin eiegun and Iwori Oreku are clearly manifestations of egungun activity after the institution had become established because in the first of the two Orunmila went to pacify the egungun at Oje where, according to the tradition, they had fully settled into a guild. The favour rendered to Orunmila derived from an earlier precedent, and so that sign could not have told of the origins of the egungun. In like vein the other, Iwori Oreku, also told of a story which concerned the second generation of egungun craftsmanship. That was the stage where professionals made efforts to perfect their craft through public contests and rivalry. We learnt that certain practitioners who went on a display at Oje failed to realise the motive of their goals. These characters were symbolically termed the sheep and the duck. Also, contest and rivalry were generally attributes of an already established craft. We therefore avail ourselves of these two models as not representing the origins of egungun mysteries.

The origins of egungun would lie in our analyses of our first three models. First *Oturupon meji*. We earlier recounted from the rendition that ancient Yorubas believed that when an elderly person dies, he is transformed into an "ara orun", that is, an inhabitant of heaven. He or she is thus remembered as a costumed figure. The costume acts as a veil to shield the now sacred personality from profane gazes. There is also the indication that, once a person dies, he loses his immediate personality, and though the essence of character remains from a past life, the tangible, physical form is shed in favour of an ethereal one. This, however, still retains the outlines of the physique as it was at death. This Ifa sign almost certainly accredits the re-enactment of the dead as it is being practised in the Iseku funeral rites of the Yoruba. A dead ancestor has become an egungun, and Johnson observes of the same:

The representing forms are human beings of the exact height and figure of the deceased, covered from head to foot with cloths similar to those in which the said deceased was known to have

been buried, completely masked and speaking with an unnatural tone of voice.

(1921; 1976; 29)

The same aspect of dramatic re-enactments on behalf of the dead has been variously remarked by Delano (1937), Babayemi (1980) and Adepegba (1990). There is a tempting fascination to draw the parallel similarity between the dead invoked at a funeral ceremony and the wistful expectation of egungun carried out by Orunmila as we earlier cited under the Oturupon Meji sign (Fatoogun, 1989). It is interesting that Orunmila demonstrates that by sheer force of will, it is possible to recreate costumed figures in disguise for the purposes of make-believe and stratagem. This has been adapted for warfare in Yoruba history (Johnson, 147-8; Robert Smith 1965, 63). So much for the first model.

Our second model, *Owonrin Aseyin*. This Ifa citation also believes that the egungun cult emerged from a pristine example of a funeral procession, at the centre of which is a costumed figure. The sociological ramifications of the story is very important. It seeks to show that, in fact, the character which was first costumed in disguise was a Pataguenon monkey who was said to have raped a widow who went to the farm to gather faggots. As we narrated above, the son from the pregnancy became king and couldn't procreate. In order to protect the genealogy, Ifa ordered that all the customary funeral rites should be performed for the late father of the king. This was carried out as a religious rite in the dead of the night, and the draped skeletal remains became the first egungun figure to parade the town. Well, this is a mythic tale with a kernel of truth but it has embellished the truth to give it a folkloric tune and memory, so that the tale is "sweet" and easily remembered.

In identifying patterns of association in the structures of the story, it is interesting to note that the funeral obsequies of the king could not have been delayed for so long after his demise unless there was an emergency, or at least an anomaly (see Adedeji 1970: 72). In my opinion, it could also be argued that the funeral rite which was, at the time, customary could not have been totally forgotten if the character concerned was a member of the human community. But we know that the monkey had no relatives who would have insisted on the rites being observed.

It, perhaps, should be recalled here that it has been mentioned in oral history that king Sango, Oyo's third Alaafin, instituted the elaborate cult of the dead to remember his fathers (Adedeji, 1970: 79; Layiwola 1986: 394). There are women in charge of the mausoleum where the egungun are

incarnated and worshipped. It is however difficult to say whether the instance cited in this Ifa verse precedes that of the Sango institution. As I have cited elsewhere (Layiwola 1986), I believe that the Ifa citation is an earlier instance, and Sango's is only a broadening and an institutionalisation of the original concept.

The last of our models is the citation of *Ogberikúsa* where it is recounted that the egunguns were sent to rid the world of seismic disturbances and other forces of instability. They appeared as costumed figures to conceal their essences and carried out their stabilizing mission among men. Hence they made the world set and stable i.e. "se aye gun" or "eegun". In the oral traditions I collected from the priest Ifatoogun (1989), he implies that an extension of egungun's stabilizing factor is the fact that when the world is afflicted with witchcraft; or the dread disease, smallpox; or indeed with premature deaths, the ancients were wont to incarnate the spirits of egungun in the community. This will then relieve the world of the spiritual unease hitherto rampant. If this indeed is so, we might relate a more contemporary source in which egungun origin story has taken on more flesh and blood. The authoritative Alapinni of Oyo, the late chief Salawu Adeleke vouched in 1965 that his was the last word on the origin of egungun mysteries and drama and that any other should be regarded as mere hearsay and incidental fabrication.

Chief Adeleke narrated that egungun originated from the household of the Alapinni - one of the Oyomesi (chieftain) of the Alaafin. The earliest Alapinni had three sons namely: Ojesanmi, Ojewumi and Ojebemi. Their father had a great difficulty begetting children. So in his efforts to beget them, he sought the guidance of diviners and soothsayers. A certain Ifa priest successfully made for him a fertility charm with a specie of yam called *Iho*. He was told that if he would cultivate the given specimen of the *Iho* and sell it to the public, he would beget children. This turned out as advised but a major proviso in the matter was that those children begotten at the instance of the *Iho* fertility charm were never, on pain of death, to taste of the *Iho* yam. They could partake of all yams but not the *Iho* type. So when the children were old enough to go to the farm, their father warned them thus that the *Iho* yams, though attractive to see, were not to be tasted by them.

On a certain occasion, however, the boys got to the farm, and having worked hard, became hungry. They scoffed at their father's warning arguing that he tasted of the beautiful *Iho* yams but forbade them from taking same. So they cooked the *Iho* yams and ate their fill. Consequently, a great pang of thirst beset the threesome and they sent the youngest of

them to fetch drinking water from a nearby river. He set in the river and drank ceaselessly until he died in the river. The other two became worried when he did not return and, one after the other, set out to look for him; in turn suffering the same fate. When they did not return home their father became worried and set out on their trail. On the farm, he found out from the peelings and left-overs that his children had eaten of the forbidden yam. He searched everywhere but found no trace of the boys. He reverted to the diviner who assured him that he would find the children if he went to the river near the farm to call on them each day. The Alapinni went each day to no avail. On the seventh day the diviner or *babalawo* assured him that he would get a reply from his children. The atori whip was one of the totems used in the ritual preparations for their search, so the Alapinni beat the ground with it as he called on their names:

Ojesanmi o o o !!!
 Ojewumi o o o !!! Calls
 Ojebemi o o o !!!
 T'ee ba je If you refuse to hearken
 E d'opipi, e d'oyo You become a featherless fowl²
 E d'olukoro abe ata o You become the Pataguenon monkey³
 Ojesanmi o o o Indeed you become as sewer as a
 pepper pill.
 Ojewumi o o o [calls again]
 Ojebemi o o o

In a response to these salvos of calls, the three boys answered in a chorus from the depths of the river:

O o o o ... Awa ree o, meaning
 Yes! here we are.

But they now spoke in a ventriloquial tone of voice and no longer resembled human beings in appearance. So their faces had to be veiled to avoid profanation. They then sang as they emerged from the river with the gathered crows providing the antiphons as well as the chorus for the songs:

Sekete mo ti wa mo ti n s'awo
 Sekete mo ti wa mo ti n s'awo

that is:

From youth I have been a cult initiate
 I have been guardian of secrets.

They also sang:

Lead: Ila o so

Chorus: Okooroo
Lead: Ila o s'oja
Chorus: Okooroo
Lead: Oja ni Tede
Chorus: Okooroo
Lead: B'uju mi o k'oba
Chorus: Okooroo
Lead: Aya mi o bale
Chorus: Okooroo
Lead: Atoole s'edi gbodo
Chorus: Okooroo
Lead: Afapole s'enu rebe
Chorus: Okooroo
Lead: Opo o l'enuu s'eri
Chorus: Okooroo
Lead: Foro foro foro
Chorus: koo s'enu foroo
 owo de
 boo s'enu foroo
 owo de
 boo s'enu foroo
Lead: N'ile Ipaapinni⁴
Chorus: Enu wa, me lee papinni - Gbongbo
Lead: N'ile ipaapeje
Chorus: Enu wa, me lee papeje - sukuta
 [Drum epilogue]

"The children have become Ara Orun", the people said, "it is only fitting that we should now worship them as orisa (deities)". The egungun, now veiled, led a festival procession into town, as a multitude has hitherto gathered. The following music and song thereby ensued:

Ohun taa pe l'egungun de
 Ohun taa pe legungun de
 Ohun taa pe l'oosa nii gb'eni)
 Ohun taa pe l'oosa nii gba'ni) 7 times or more
 [Drum epilogue]

translates:

What we call egungun is here
 That which we term egungun has come
 What we call oosa (orisa) favours one
 That which we call orisa remedies.

In view of the physical transition which they had undergone, the egungun could not any more live normally amongst humans. Therefore when they got into town, a secluded area was built for them called *Igbale*. There they remained permanently. The Alapinni instituted the *Igbale* by putting one of his chiefs as charge over the place. The whole populace accredited Eegun as orisa and the barren went there to be blessed with children. It is also used as an institution against witchcraft and forces of disequilibrium. If a child is an *abiku* they seek from the Egungun a peculiar kind of shoes or footwear for it which will enable it to live. This is how Egungun worship and tradition spread far and wide.

The Alapinni concluded with the aphorism: “*pataki oje, ko ju ile Alapinni lo*”. That is to say, the most vital of oje (egungun) mysteries lies with the Alapinni. Any elected Alapinni is first taught the origin of the Yoruba masque theatre. “The rest of the origin stories about the egungun”, the Alapinni says, “is mere hearsay”.

In our analytical models, the Alapinni’s account conflates models one and two in that it affirms in our first model that Egungun dramas are concerned with the *iseku* funerary rite of an ancestor and second, that it has to do with the search for children and the continuity of the race. It only merely hints at our third model which is concerned with the egungun as a force of maintaining social as well as cosmic stability.

In accrediting Egungun as orisa, the whole populace exercised an aspect of Yoruba democratic thought which believes that even deities must await nomination from the human community. The saying goes thus: “*Laisi eniyan, imole ko si*”, meaning “without men, neither will there be gods” This voluntary election by man of the rulers of his own universe is the primal act of indigenized democracy. This more than begs the temptation to compare the words of Sylvia Wynter in analysing the history of the new world as the indigenization of the black man:

The history of the Caribbean Islands is, in large part, the history of the indigenization of the black man. And this history is a cultural history - not in ‘writing’, but of those ‘homunculi’ who humanize the landscape by peopling it with gods and spirits, with demons and duppies, with all the rich panoply of man’s imagination.

(Wynter, 1970: 35)

That exercise of the creative imagination which man employed to establish himself on his cultural landscapes is what he uses each time he creates a

cultural archetype similar to the original. The egungun masquerades of Yoruba folklore have become the maskers and mummers of Caribbean dances.

The Alapinni's story of how a specie of the Iho yam was used for the begetting of the three children who later became the original egungun would seem to confirm the theses of Patterson (1967) and Wynter (1970) that egungun performances are linked with yam festivities. The fact that the egunguns emerged from the river also curiously confirms Babayemi's (1980) speculation that the original founders of egungun must have lived near a river. In the lineage praises (oriki) of the notable egungun lineage, the *Igbori*, Babayemi records the following:

Onigbori son of Kulodo
The son of Kulodo Awubi

(trans. The son of the man who died in the river
and who spawned a noble genealogy)

The son of Kulodo Awusi Eyo

(trans. The son of the man who died in the river and became a
delight in Eyo)

The son of the man nicknamed "There is a spirit of the dead" at
the brook who came from Igbori.

Who says that Onigbori has no brook?
That they drink water from the water of death?

Who is the owner of Aasa river?

Who owns Ekoru river?

Who owns Dobode, the river of Ipakun?

Who owns the ever clear water of the brook of the Queens?

Dobode brook is now only a few inches deep.

(Babayemi: 59)

This extract from the lineage chants (oriki) of Igbori lineage seems a poetic transposition of the original story recounted from the Alapinni of Oyo. But is established beyond any shadow of doubt that the shrines of egungun is almost always situated in the course of a stream. Babayemi's point here is interesting:

Some of the oriki make mention of a bigger volume of water like River Moshe and River Niger. Here again the relationship

between egungun, Oya and Sango is demonstrated as they are all connected with rivers in one form or the other. In every Oyo Yoruba town *Igbale* (the egungun grove), is usually located where a stream passes through the grove, and there are funeral rites relating to the egungun lineage that must be performed by the side of a stream. The coffin of a head of an egungun lineage such as *Igbori* is usually made in form (sic) of a canoe (oko), and dragged on land round the town as if on water. It is believed that the deceased would sail to meet his ancestors with the canoe.

These and many other traditions found in *Igbori*, *Ikolo* and *Ogbin oriki* make one to suggest that the Oyo Yoruba lived very close to a big volume of water in their early history (p.14)

The conclusions that we could draw from myths and stories of origins are that: first, the egungun is confirmed as a costumed or masked figure with supernatural powers. Second, that the egungun, great or small is an ancestral reincarnation concerned with both religious worship as well as with entertainment. Third, that the egungun is the ecological parallel of the autochthonous human community after it had settled from migrations and wanderings. It is at that stage that it now has time to institute a religion and a source of entertainment (cf. Verger, 1965; Layiwola, 1987). Having erected a theoretical framework of this kind, let us now go on to one representative example of an Egungun Dance Festivity.

The Example of Osogbo (1989)

There are two kinds of masquerade festivals in Osogbo annually. The first is Egungun Olele and the second, Egungun Odun. Egungun Olele takes place towards the end of March when beans are harvested, and the festival derives its name from that crop. The second festival takes place towards the end of June when the new yam is just ripening. Of this, a member of the Osogbo cultural heritage council has written:

On the day that Alasore masquerades will go to the market place to dance, Kabiyesi will send New Yam and a big cock to chief Alagbaa to take to the market and the Alasore masquerades will go to the market with the new yam. That will be the first day that New Yam will be in the market for sale in Osogbo township.

(Egungun Osogbo Festival pamphlet, p.13).

The celebration of egungun Olele festival in Osogbo takes about nine days at which commencement supplicatory rites are performed at the egungun

grove called Igbomoko or Igbo Igbale. The king, the Ataoja of Osogbo, provides about seven items for the Alagbaa to perform the initial rites. These items are:

1. Olele (the bean pudding)
2. Eko (corn meal)
3. Abata kolanuts (multi-focal kola nuts)
4. Orogbo (bitter kola)
5. Schnapps
6. Corn beer (sekete)
7. Alligator pepper.

After the offering at the egungun grove by the Alagbaa (the administrator of egungun matters) and the Ojes (the egungun practitioners and custodians), they dance to the palace to inform the king of the successful ritual. The Ataoja will fete these guests at his palace along with other traditional chiefs, princes, relatives and friends. The egungun worshippers will leave the palace laden with gifts and proceed to the residence of the Alagbaa for further celebration. The ceremonies usually start on a Thursday and end on the following Friday.

On the fourth day of the festival, a Sunday, there is a special dance revue for the king in the market place. The first episode is a dance by the royal masquerade, Opeleba, at 10.00 a.m. for the king and his chiefs. There is also a ritual observation by the Opeleba on this occasion. This masquerade is wont to hold a cudgel¹ and it initiates the mock-fight of chasing the king out of the market. The king must then flee from the hot pursuit of Opeleba. Since the market centre is just a stone throw to the palace, the Ataoja takes refuge in the palace and from a safe distance jeers at the masque. Later that evening a cluster of senior masquerades will gather at the palace to bless and perform for the king. He reciprocates with gifts, dance and cheers. The royal masque, Opeleba, is of some historical significance and we shall return to it presently.

During the rest of the week, masquerades will roam the town offering prayers, performing dances and entertaining people. The drummers are never too tired composing new songs and modifying old ones. The Alagbaa spends so much entertaining guests and egungun lineages. His compound is always a beehive of activities. The men go along the procession with the egungun, the women stay at home to do the cooking. On Thursday before the end of the festival, the Opeleba dances for the king at 10.00 a.m., all the other masquerades follow suit at 4.00 p.m. On Friday, the closing day of the festival, Gogoru, the ritual masque visits and dances

for the king. The celebration of egungun odun follows more or less the pattern except that it lasts eight days and not nine.

The Royal Masquerade, Opeleba, in Osogbo Masque Tradition

Aspects of Osogbo history which my informants narrated to me at Osogbo (22/6/89), except in some minor details, tally with the story of Osogbo's origin recorded in the pamphlet published by the Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council for the egungun festival of 1989.

The story is told that the founder of Osogbo is Oba Olarooye. He was sired by Laoge, who was of Ijesha stock, a descendant of the Owa. Olarooye's mother, Osu, is of Oyo stock having been fathered by the Alaaḥin of Oyo. Laro's (Olarooye's) father lived at Ipole which suffered from perennial water shortage. Laro then sent out Timehin at the head of a hunting group to prospect for water. It was when Timehin and his men discovered River Osun, a sure source of water supply that they went to invite Oba Olarooye to the site. Olarooye then moved his people to found Osogbo.

Now, the Alaaḥin regarded Olarooye as an amiable son-in-law, so he sent him a mask (Ago) called Ayo. This was a sort of cultural relic. This was then stationed at the Bode (outskirts) to collect *Okokan* (token payment) from travellers because he had nothing to fetch him earnings. His post where he sat was *Ita Olookan* on the way to Ilesa where he received alms and gifts. Ayo was always masked. Once a woman carrying palm oil in a gourd, a kind of receptacle called *eba* arrived on the scene from Ilesa. She suddenly ran into the egungun (Ayo), and out of sheer fright, she fell and broke her pot of palm oil. She died of shock from that encounter. News were sent to Oyo and to Ilesa over the unhappy event. That same day the Alaaḥin sent emissaries to Osogbo, and that was the first day that dundun drum and music was brought to Osogbo. The Alaaḥin sent to the Owa of Ilesha who also arranged that an appeasement (*etutu*) be performed to assuage the evil. The dundun drum then struck the note:

O pa eleeba, o pa elepo

meaning:

He killed the carrier of the gourd containing palm oil.

The first phrase of the drum was thus constricted to read:

Opeleeba (o pa eleeba)

That masquerade, long a property of the king, thus became known as Opeleeba, and no longer as Ayo. The point where the palm oil carrier was consumed in immolation is today known as *Ita Obokun*, in Osogbo. According to the head of the Opeleeba family, Alhaji Asiru Awoyemi, Opeleeba is the only masque owned by the king, all others are "strangers". Olarooye sired the Ataoja's mother called Abogbe who then begot Ataoja from her marriage to an Ofa man.

It is clear from the narration that from the inception of Osogbo about 1650 (pamphlet: 26) the egungun institution of Oyo has flourished in the region. It is thus a confluence of Oyo and Ijesha traditions.

The other lineage which has special claim to the Oje lineage of egungun performance are from the Ajabala lineage but they have now been converted to Islam and would not demonstrate the craft to us. Indeed, Alhaji Asiru Awoyemi, the head of Opeleeba lineage also agreed to talk to me after much persuasion because he was a muslim leader who would no longer actively meddle with the mysteries of egungun performance.

Other Elder Egunguns

Apart from Opeleeba, there are about two dozen other elder masquerades in Osogbo, and about a dozen other smaller or younger masquerades. All of these go about on various days of the egungun festival performing to the populace and blessing them with prayers and supplications. They could continue to appear for nearly three months until the advent of the Osun festival in the month of August. One interesting phenomenon about the festivals in Osogbo in particular, and in Yorubaland in general, is that the representatives of each festival are expected to feature in festivals other than their own festival. For example, the priestesses of the Osun deity must pronounce their blessings on the egungun before they dance for the king in the palace. On one of such occasions, I could not photograph an Alasore masquerade belonging to the Alagbaa until I had taken permission from the *Iya Osun* in the palace. Equally, bata dances of Sango worshippers, the dances of egungun, the dances of Obatala feature selectively at the festival of Osun. Some of my informants told me that all the various gods operate on the basis of communal respect and mutual cooperation to uphold harmony and peace. Hence, each festival meant the participation of virtually the whole community.

It is interesting to note that in the analysis of the origins of most of the major egunguns, our theoretical models constantly recur. Let us therefore discuss just four representative examples of the most important masque dramaturges in the Osogbo egungun festival. There are Gogoru,

Doorogbo, Arewayo and Olowolake. It is pertinent to recall that our three models are thus outlined:

1. The egungun performance as Iseku ceremony for the dead.
2. The egungun as a medium of granting children and continuity to the lineage and race; and
3. The egungun performance as bringer of stability and cosmic balance.

The Gogoru mask was originally from Oba, a suburb of Osogbo. He comes from Balogun Agoro's compound. The masque is wont to hold a mystical staff surmounted by a bird. He is believed to have magical as well as supernatural powers. It is recalled that he came to Osogbo when the town was in crisis and he helped to rid the town of the disturbances by conveying the requisite sacrifices to sacred spots. This vividly recalls our third model prefaced by the ifa sign, Ogberikusa where it is recounted that egunguns were sent to rid the world of the forces of instability. Because he is believed to possess the power to give children to the barren, he is also allied with our second model.

Doorogbo, otherwise called "The Father of Twins", belongs to the Oluode's compound in Osogbo. The Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council represents him thus:

Oluode Aturuku consulted the Ifa oracle for children. The oracle revealed that Aturuku would have twins through Doorogbo, an ancestral spirit who would visit the earth as an Egungun. A masque and offerings must therefore be made for the spirit It is believed that he protects the compound from diseases and the entire people of Osogbo from epidemics.

(1989: 15)

Here, our first and second models are at work.

Egungun Arewayo is an ancestral manifestation. It belongs to the Olasigun lineage. Olasigun had consulted Ifa oracle on how he could have children. The Ifa oracle promised that he would have children if he would worship this ancestral spirit at the annual egungun festival. This experience corresponds with the narrative account of the Alapinni of Oyo. (IAS, 1965). Here our models one and two apply.

Olowolake, the last of our examples, was inaugurated by the lone survivor of a triplet. In Yoruba tradition a triplet is a congenital initiate in the mysteries of egungun. In order that this child, Olojede Ogunjimi might

survive, the oracle ordered its father to institute an egungun masque for one of his ancestors known as Olowolake. This masque offers special prayers for the progress and stability of Osogbo township. In the story of this example, there is a conflation of our three models.

The fact that the role of most egunguns in Yorubaland has to do with the purging and stability of the world necessitates that most egunguns carry the symbol of such roles. When an ancestral masque is not carrying a whip, it will be seen to carry a cudgel, a prayer rattle or a mystic staff. The whip is symbolical of adjudication and chastisement which ultimately leads to the purgative and regenerative forces consequent on chaos and cosmos. Often, the martial display of whip contests by youthful celebrants at egungun festivals is not mere sport; it is meant to underscore the motive of endurance as the medium of atonement in the ritual play of cosmic forces. Sin and atonement became the eternal play between the manichean concepts of good and evil, life and death, being and non-being. This consequently ushers in a surfeit of moral or conceptual abundance and well being; the kind of which reconciles man to the tamed horrors of environment.

The Yoruba Cosmos and the Conceptual Annihilation of Death

Children and grandchildren seem to carry the implicit guarantee of lineage or ancestral continuity, but the aged seem to prefer the guarantee of immortality that is personal or immanent. The egungun incarnation of the dead perhaps serves the purposes of this guarantee. Peter Morton Williams (1960) has rightly observed that the fact that the living continually acknowledge the spirits of the dead shows that they are never free from their influence. He further writes:

The egungun rite is a masquerade performed by male members of the egungun cult in order to make visible the ancestral spirits and to command their power. A prominent man, provided he has lineal descendants, may hope to have an egungun mask bearing his name, and to have songs sung in his praise while his egungun parades the town.

(1960: 36)

Among many African communities as among the Yorubas, the passage of an ancestor is not complete until he has been re-enacted in a terminal drama. The conceptual basis of this is quite interesting. When an old person dies, a term of forty days or so elapses and his or her household plans for a final burial rite. The concept is believed to exorcise the household of the spirit of the dead person. An elaborate drama is then presented in which a character of about the same stature and physique

'incarnates' and mimes the nuances of action characteristic of the departed parent. The ritual actor that impersonates the dead man has the force of an egungun as he is considered sacred in the same degree. He recounts the various tendencies since he died and apportioned praises or blame accordingly. He is sacrosanct and his pronouncement is law. The old man offers prayers at his grave and says his farewell. It is often an occasion for junketing (see Delano, 1937: 115-116; Peter Morton-Williams, 1960: 36-7).

The point of Peter Morton-Williams is pertinent: that the household performs the ceremony as a mode of structural re-ordering of relationships within the set up of the lineage. The ceremony is thus the dramatic resolution of the chaos that results from the death or transition of a lineage member, who now becomes a 'tragic' hero in the battle of forces within his community and cosmos.

But the dead are set at a distance and their power circumscribed by a series of rites. Shortly after the death of an old man, before the so called second burial, he is represented by egungun dressed in his own clothes and hat. The egungun tells the assembled sons, daughters, widows, and their progeny of all that has happened in the household since his death; he rebukes their misdemeanours, and assures them of his continued watchfulness and interest. That is the last simulation of his actual bodily appearance.

(Morton-Williams: 36)

The lineage and the community thus employs the medium of dance and ritual theatre to accept the experience and chaos of death; and reconcile themselves to the structure of a new cosmos in which the ancestor is wished away. Thus, his simulated personality is distanced as an embodiment of the seasonal mask. If for any reason his role is to be recalled, it would be as the embodiment of egungun. This then soothes the consciousness, assuring it that death and life is an unbroken continuum; and that death is a necessary result of the partaking of life. That is how the society is rid of raw, internalised energy that may otherwise be pessimistic in outlook or destructive in action. There is catharsis. This is more mildly put in another exegesis on Drama and the African worldview:

Ritual Theatre, let it be recalled, establishes the spatial medium not merely as a physical area for simulated events but as a manageable contraction of the cosmic envelope within which man - no matter how deeply buried such a consciousness has latterly become - fearfully exists.

(Soyinka, 1979: 41)

The contradiction which the dead gives the fulsome appearance of life among the living is thus subsumed by the declaration that egungun, the masque of the dead, is sacrosanct, and its animators could not be violated. This seems similar to what Morton-Williams says again:

By making egungun, the Yoruba, while attempting to diminish death, are also in fact dramatising it. Evidently, the fear of the power of the dead added to the fear of their own deaths would make the continual presence of egungun uncomfortable. The full play of ancestral power is not only limited in scope, it is also restricted in time, as if it were important that the dead should be segregated and the living be insulated from them.

(Morton-Williams: 36)

It is also for the same reason that in separating the erstwhile dead from the human community, the mask as a numinous element becomes a crucial medium in the performance of this role. The added significance of carrying the mask inheres in the fact that it becomes the accrual of an added persona. And this is actualised in the animation of the mask in dance. It is this dance that sets the kinaesthetic pace of a symbol in motion.. The mask takes on its role and the dancer possesses an extra dimension that foists the illusion of role playing. The dead, or any distant phenomena for that matter, is thereby called into actuality. This is what makes the illusion believable, as if the performer is truly the dead man. The dancer speaks in a ventriloquial voice and is transformed into an egungun. The truth of this lie is only well borne out by the assertion of Janheinz Jahn:

Only in the unity of mask and dancer, only in action is the muzimu (the departed) mask the carrier of supernatural forces, the carrier of the muzimu forces, which the dancer conjures up in a disguised voice. In this process the dancer never asserts that he is a 'spirit', as has been often alleged. 'Every pagan is fully aware that there is a human being under the mask. Most people will clearly recognize the human shape under the mask. After all the "owner" of the mask who is not a cult member knows quite well that he has had the mask made himself and that he asked the alagba (sic) (i.e. the impresario) to find him a dancer. But it is believed that the spirit of the deceased may be invoked to enter into the masquerader during the dance.

(Jahn, 1961: 171; Beier, 1956: 383)

The above shows that in the dance play of mortuary rites, there is a fundamental resolution of ambiguity in social relations and epistemological

categories. Relations and affines of the deceased are brought together to lament the loss of a loved one as well as to celebrate the annihilation of death. In similar mortuary dances of the Lugbara of Uganda, John Middleton, amongst other things, observes:

One wails for the deceased but is joyful that the disruption caused by his death has been repaired.

(Middleton, 1985: 168)

Or as Pemberton III appropriately mentions of the egungun masquerades of the Igbomina Yoruba:

More importantly, where the need to move beyond the kinship group is greatest and conflict is most likely to occur, those areas are made public festivals in which both the bond on kinship and the relations that constitute citizenship are affirmed.

(Pemberton 1978: 47)

This is not unlike the resolution of chaos and cosmos as we have described above.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that social conditions under which festivals have been conceived, and the ends which they are supposed to serve, continue to change with epochs. The temporal sequence of an agrarian community will transform when it becomes an industrial centre of the twentieth century. This is largely the same with the primary location of this research. Like the subconscious resolution of ambiguities in egungun dances, the social needs of egungun dances, and the communal accommodation of them are becoming blurred. This cannot but be so in a changing network of ideologies and social preoccupations.

Not least among these is the gravity of christian as well as islamic influences on the world-view of the various lineages concerned with egungun worship and dances. Many of them, now largely adherents of Islam have laid their masks to rest and a lineage head confided to me that he could only hold discussions with me if I would not record or broadcast his interviews. In his words:

How do you want me to defend the contradiction that a muslim leader is making authoritative claims on egungun traditions. I certainly do not want to incur sanctions on my activity. Please be mindful of how you broadcast the things we discuss here. Would you?

One must be eager to admit that this is a peripheral manifestation of the real problem. The ordering of time, social relations, resolution of metaphysical crisis have all changed to the physio-technic hierarchy of a modern complex society. Traditional calendricity now adheres to new rules of an urban setting. Many of the youths who would otherwise tend a mask are gainfully employed in the cities and in industries. There, a socio-economic change has imposed on them such other obligations as are squarely different from those of ancient agrarian societies that gave birth to the egungun. There were many aspects of the egungun festival traditions which are in total accord with the solar movement of the seasons; and a disruption of the season meant a disruption of those traditions. This was the reason why there were aspects of the ideological projection of the egungun phenomenon which regarded it as a stabilizing factor. In my interview with the Ifa priest, Mr. Ifatoogun of the Institute of African Studies (1989, *op. cit.*), he did imply, that any time there was a protracted season of drought, or of rain, or there was a sudden outburst of epidemic, the egungun would be summoned to re-set the balance of the world. That, it seems to me, is the periodical recurrence of the primal miasma which he recalled to me in his recitation of *odu ogberikusa*. A structural transposition shows that ritual drama thus becomes a stabilizing, even redeeming factor in the seasonal play of forces between chaos and cosmos. This predictable concept of time, incidentally, is also a structural process among an East African people, the Lugbara, as John Middleton has written:

However, there are occasions when this process is disrupted and there are then disorder and confusion in social relations: These occasions include the end of an over-long dry season when people are waiting in desperation to plant crops; the end of an unusually wet growing season when too much rain will prevent ripening and harvesting of crops; and the period between a death and the redomestication of the soul as an ancestral ghost.

(Middleton, 1985, 167)

These are then resolved with specific kinds of dance dramas.

Finally, a human angle to the whole concept of egungun dance as a mode of structuring time in society calls to questions the pattern of social relations and economic exchange. Each dance occasion is always a period of fulsome celebration and feasting. The Alagbaa, as the grand impresario, is at the hem of a damnable expense for which no single individual can claim to have resources. He buys food, drinks and gifts for celebrants who are always to be found in his household for at least half the period of festivity. In a society where the communal gathering of harvest is no

longer the norm; where each individual relates to his employer on a one-to-one basis, how can he afford such bazaar for which only himself, and perhaps the king will pay? Certainly the whole concept of the dance in festival has to do with continuity and constraints either in social relationships or in boundaries of consciousness. In realistic terms, new societies dictate new methods of adaptiveness. New mythologies like Islam and Christianity, and certainly, a new network of social mode of production and distribution has altered the fate of festival dances for now and for the future. Whether that fate is altered for the better or for the worse, the reader is left to hazard his/her own conclusions.

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NOTES

- + This research is partly supported by a Senate research grant of the University of Ibadan. For this, we are grateful.
1. Itinerary dancers/performers.
 2. The name *opipi* is onomatopoeic for batting wings, perhaps due to a frustrated ability to fly..
 3. Also called *Ijimere*.
 4. This phrase, *Ipaapinni* derives, I suppose, from *Alapinni*. The *Alapinni* is the sole impresario of the *egungun* mask dramaturge. He is also its political head. *Ipaapinni* here means *Ipe* + *Apinni*, i.e. the summons of the *Alapinni*. I also think that the etymology of *Alapinni* is *oni pinpin eni*, i.e. the assigner of roles, almost as in the sense of a play producer, the *regisseur*, or even more aptly, the *metteur en scene*, that is the controller of staging and production together.
 5. A characteristic child which dies soon after it is born. Meant to be a plague on its mother.

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