



The Content and Form of Egungun Ado Festival

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ABSTRACT

Festivals and traditional ceremonies are part of the cultural heritage of Africa. This is why the traditional *Egungun* festival in Yorubaland, till date, still enjoys indigenous monopoly. However, its resources as a unique cultural asset of Africans are presently under-utilized and therefore need to be further explored for greater relevance with the sophistication and demands of contemporary age. This, thus, constitute the subject of this paper. The paper, therefore, focuses on the exploration of the content and form of traditional *egungun* Ado festival in order to define the basis for its enduring value in Ado Ekiti. This is discussed from analytical and mythological perspectives. The paper establishes that for any art to thrive, it must remain dynamic. And more interesting, the paper unravels the dynamics, the beauty, the uniqueness and multiple potentials of this *Egungun* Ado festival. Through interviews, personal experience and observation, the paper posits that *Egungun* Ado festival plays pivotal roles in the social, religious and political milieu of the Ado people and has remained a rallying point. It concludes that *Egungun* Ado festivals with its rich content and form are crucial to the nation building process in African societies and in fact, capable of yielding great dividends in the global economy if appropriately explored. However, it is imperative that African countries implement credible cultural policies to index and protect the vulnerability of aspects of this Yoruba culture in the face of Western encroachments and onslaught of Islam and Christianity.

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Introduction

Ekiti, a state in western Nigeria (carved out of the territory of old Ondo State), was created on October 1996 alongside five others by the military under the dictatorship of General Sani Abacha. The state covers the former twelve local government areas that made up the Ekiti Zone of old Ondo State. It is one of the states that made up Yoruba land, the second largest language group in Africa, consisting over 20 million people. Others comprise today's Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Kwara, Ondo, Lagos as well as part of Kogi bound together by language, traditions and religious beliefs and practices. The word "Ekiti" as it is known today, denotes a "mound" and is derived from the rugged mountainous features of the State.

Ado-Ekiti, the heartland of Ekiti lies in the Southwestern part of Nigeria. Out the sixteen kingdoms of Ekiti, old Ado kingdom was the largest. According to traditional account, old Ado consisted of 150 communities, most of these must have been small villages and were apparently destroyed during the nineteenth century wars. "The metropole is Ado-Ekiti and the ruler is titled, *Ewi*. Even under British colonial rule when the kingdom became a district, it was still the largest in Ekiti division, by 1931, there were 23 towns and 13 villages or farm settlements (Olomola, 2000:29).

This paper is not intended to provide an encyclopedic reference for all traditional festivals in Ado- Ekiti or to account for their rituals. Rather, it focuses on the exploration of the content and form of a powerful deity of Ado-Ekiti community in the heartland of Ekiti, a principal Yoruba speaking people indigenous to eastern Yoruba.

The paper is structured into five parts. There will be a brief discussion of the meaning and nature of festival, the underlying keyword of the paper in the first section. This will be followed by the second section of the paper which examines the Yoruba religious identity. The third section discusses the content of *Egungun* Ado festival. The fourth part deals with the form of *Egungun* Ado festival. The final part is the conclusion.

The Meaning and Nature of Festival

Festivals are part of the cultural heritage of Africa. According to Olaoba (2006:443), they are structurally patterned to exhibit one or the other aspects of the cultural life of the people. To Adeoti (2000:346), the significance of festivals in African societies need no emphasis. "They lie at the socio-cultural and theological substructure of the society". Mbiti (1975:37) also expresses the same idea that festivals are religious ways of implementing the values and beliefs of a society. Through festivals, these values are preserved and transferred from generation to generation. Festivals are normally joyful occasions when people sing, dance, eat and celebrate a particular occasion or event, (Mbiti, 1975:10) remarks. Apart from these, festivals provide for the exhibition of artistic talents through music, drama, dance, poetry and carvings.

More importantly, according to Adeoti (2006:346), some festivals are occasions for the purgation of those obnoxious elements that may disturb the existing social harmony in a community or invoke calamities on such a community. Communal purification is an important aspect of African tradition that takes care of likely infractions and it is

conducted during some festivals. The manifestation of purification during festivals is based on the people's belief that festivals are occasions for the return of metaphysical beings to the human realm. As Ogunba (2002:25-26) has noted elsewhere, "The physical presence of supernatural beings at festivals of all categories is regarded as laden with purification possibilities and people do take advantage of them for their own benefits". The people use such occasions to purge themselves of "all the accumulated spiritual filth of the old year in order to enter the New year as chastened, reborn person", he further states.

Ayisi (1979:82-88); Nketia (1981:9-10); and Ogunba (1973:87-110) lend credence to the fact that festivals and traditional ceremonies are crucial to the nation building process in African societies. Structurally, songs, dances and feasts are essential features of festivals in African society. Songs and dances are obviously of dramatic value in African society.

Clearly identified elsewhere, are the salient features of festivals:

Fundamentally, all traditional ceremonies have some glaring features such as songs and music, dance drama and acrobatic displays which are meant to entertain, inform and educate the participating audience. These features, however, usually explain the dynamic and symbiotic relationship among members of the society and living dead. The spirit of the ancestors thus becomes involved for spiritual participation, especially in the unfolding dance-drama. What emerges could best be described as dance of god, dance of man. In a nutshell, justice and fair play, at that point in time, apparently becomes ritualistic and spiritualized. The serene atmosphere provides an avenue for occasioning comic relief in all its ramifications (Oloba, 2002 :38-39).

The cult of the ancestors called *Egungun* had its basis in the belief that the 'spirit' of a human being never dies. It continued to influence the life of the community from another plane after it left the physical body. With time, according to Adedeji (1998:117) "the *Egungun* metamorphosed from being just a physical representation of the spirit of an ancestor invoked only during funeral rites", into a well-structured cult with an internal hierarchy and officials that wielded considerable power in the spiritual life of the community.

The foregoing and many other preliminary and major critical assumptions have conspired to create the template for the topic of this discourse "The content and form of *Egungun* Ado festival" in Ado-Ekiti that connect the community as a whole. With few exceptions, much of what is classified here as *Egungun* festival in Ado could also be found in other Yoruba communities. However, specific variations caused by local peculiarities make an interesting study. *Egungun* festival is 'premodial' among the Ado people because the festival is timeless for it is centuries old, while the beliefs and worships associated with it constitute traditional ideologies and taproots of ethnic culture.

The Yoruba Religious Identity

Yoruba believe family in the existence of a High God commonly called *Olorun* or *Olodumare* (see Lucas, 1948:48; Idowu, 1962) whom the Ekiti – Yoruba call *Abarisa*, that is Father God. He is dedicated in local folklore as creator and sustainer of life, ruler of the sky, the perfect arbiter and final Judge (Olomola, 2000:60).

However, he is too passive and remote to satisfy man's immediate needs. In the words of Lucas (1948:46), "The absence of organized worship of *Olorun* by means of which full and uninterrupted allegiance to him could be secured has led to the worship of multitudinous gods", from major gods to minor ones. Such gods serve as intermediaries between God and men. The void thus left, according to Olomola (2000:60), is filled by a myriads for deities, *Orisa*, supernatural beings, *anjonu*, nature spirits, *iwin*, the ancestor, *awon agba* and entitles such as *Egungun*, literally translated as masquerades.

These gods must be worshipped in appropriate places by their devotees who believe that their supplication would be answered. In pursuance of the same line of argument, Ogunba (2010:191) remarks:

The god in the traditional Yoruba or African society, was closer. He monitored more closely than the Christian God or the Muslim God. The Muslim/Christian God has been described by anthropologists as a *Deus remotus*, the remote god. Some call him *Deus otiosus*, a lazy God, who retires, who is in the sky and doesn't care much about what human beings are doing. But in our traditional society, we could call on our god to come and do something and in many cases, he comes periodically. *Agemo* god, for example, comes every year and stays in the community for a whole month, so you can lodge all your complaints. You can call him to help you punish somebody who has offended you and so on. Because of these factors, morality was stricter than we find now.

Thus, religion in the words of Adebawale (2000:23), is thus "a way through which man communicates with or hopes to have relations with that which lies behind the world of their ordinary experience". Hence, religion has continually dominated the life of the Yoruba.

The practice, of masking is worldwide, according to Olomola (2000:60) especially among the peasant societies. It is common and in some cases, is strongly with ancestral worship and it is a very crucial factor in traditional religion. Among the Yoruba, it is generally call *Egungun*; while the Ekiti- Yoruba call it *eigun*.

The masquerade phenomenon among the Yoruba consists of a variety of visual forms and associated rites: each of these is strongly associated with particular sub-groups. Lucas (1948:137), as quoted by Olomola (2000:60) reveals that the *epa* type is common among Ekiti and *Igbomina* sub-groups; the costume consists of wooden motif, cloth and palm frond vests while the masker's hands and legs are uncovered. The *epa* dances and its devotees sing. The second is the Oyo type; based in old Oyo from where its tradition diffused as *gelede* or *agbegijo* among the *Ketu*, *Egbado Egba* and *Onko* Yoruba, and *Agemo* among the Ijebu. The costume in Oyo consists of cloth often times without headpieces. Another variety is the Ado type, its tradition is based in old Ado kingdom and there it has diffused among other Ekiti communities as well as their *Ijesa* and *Akoko* neighbors.

The Content of *Egungun* Ado Festival

Egungun Ado festival is one of the festivals in Ado that attract people from far and near. Indeed, so powerful was the belief in and worship of *Egungun* that it was one of the very few deities (others are *Ogun*, the god of iron, *Osun*, *Odudu* and *Orisa ala* fertility deity) that people used to supplicate for the gift of children. Many of the old members of society in the various Ado towns and villages as a result, bear such

name as *Eigunlae* (*egungun* in trustworthy), *Eigunmuko* (*egungun* gave me this), *Eiguntola* (*egungun* is worth praising) and *eiguntunsin* (*egungun* deserves worship) (Olomola, 2000:26).

Egungun Ado represents the collective wisdom of the people. The ceremony performed annually during the *Egungun* festival is that which cannot be rivaled by any other festival in the town. The ceremony is lavish with huge sum of money towards the success of the festival. Cows, goats and other animals are killed, alcohol and palm wine is in abundance. The displays and outing generally occur between August and November although the displays may occur at other special occasions such as initiation or investiture and funeral ceremonies of deceased member of the society. On such occasions, "the usually large audience are entertained with etiological tales of supposed origin of natural phenomena, traditional history and narratives of actual life experiences" (Olomola 1984:36). These stories are usually illustrated fully and inundated with proverbs and anecdotes to guide, teach and entertain. Thus, *egungun* was a very important medium and agency of dissemination of information about Ado history and folk wisdom.

On the first day of the festival, a man known as *Olori Ugbo* (that is master of the grove) starts offering sacrifices to the *Egungun* deity before the journey into *Igbo-Igbale*. Officially, the *Egungun* festival is signified with the journey into the forest called *Igbo-Igbale* (forest of mystery), while in this forest, the initiates which are mostly men with the inclusion of oldest woman in the *Egungun* cult known as *Yeye eku* (that is mother of mysteries), offer sacrifices to the *Egungun* deity and Esu which is known to be a very mischievous god. Things like goat, sheep, bean cake and local gin are offered as sacrifices to the *Egungun* deity and *Esu*.

The *Igbo-Igbale* (forest of mystery) is the first place that *Egungun* Ado initiates go to offer sacrifices to the *Egungun* deity. Only men are allowed to go to the *Igbo-Igbale* with the exception of the *Yeye eku*, who is the only female initiate in the *Egungun* Ado cult. If the present *Yeye eku* is not powerful enough to accompany them into the *Igbo-Igbale*, another *Yeye eku* is immediately selected and the present one must die. After the *Egungun* initiates have performed all the necessary rites and scarifies, they go to the *Olori Ugbo* or *aoro* to pay respect and for intercessory prayers to be offered on their behalf.

After the initiates have performed all the basic requirements, they go ahead to perform what is called *iwode* which means parade. During this period, the initiates who are already transformed into *Egungun* as a result of their flamboyant dressing and also as a result of sacrifices offered to the *Egungun* deity, parade the streets, entertaining people by dancing and performing tricks. The people, in turn gave them money.

A visit to the *Ojude Oba* which means the king's palace is the final action performed during the *Egungun* festival and it is mainly carried out on the last day of the festival. It is compulsory for the *Egungun* Ado to perform and pray for the king because the king rules over the entire community. It is also a sign of respect for the *Egungun* to perform for the king.

The *Egungun* Ado festival is usually a grand celebration, celebrated within the period of eleven days; each day dedicated to a different activity. The annual festival witnessed a lot of feasting, processions and dancing as all the *Egungun* from different quarters of the town were bought out to celebrate. This was the general pattern in Yorubaland. On the

first day of the festival, apart from the special rituals and sacrifices, there was usually a lot of merriment and license. These was a lot of feasting also organized in individual households and quality and quantity of food, together with the accompany merriment became a matter for competition among households. Other highlights of the festivals included whipping, men, women and children would whip and flog one another with cane to please the god.

Egungun Ado festival has become a tradition handed down from one generation to the other. This is manifested in the celebration of *Egungun* festival annually. The festival brings worshippers and non-believers together and they are bound together at least during the ceremony. Consequently, it is obvious that the norms of the cult have become embedded in the culture over the years. This is why it has become essential to preserve its indigenous touch. This is enhanced by the fact that it promotes unity in the social, religious and psychological sense.

The Form of *Egungun* Ado

Egungun is central to the traditional religion of Ado people and it is their principal tutelary deity, second only to *Abarisa* (that is Father God) in terms of benevolence. *Egungun* Ado, according to Olomola (2000:61), is a subject of popular legends and has been credited with powers to control the forces of nature and bestow blessings, such as rain in times of drought and children to barren women who sought its assistance through the priests.

Egungun Ado consists of two main categories: the little ones and big ones. The little masquerades which include *esisie* or *owi* whose costume is fully made of fibers: and variety of *abimo*, whose costume consists of vests and a variety of motifs depicting he-goat, *abonrangi*, ram, *agbo*, boboon, *gborogi*: and buffalo, *efon* are associated with children. The *esise* group of masquerades danced while most of the *abimo* chant folk tales. Among the masquerades, the big ones are associated with adults and professionals. They consist of two main varieties, namely, *ede* and *eigun're*. Up to the 1960s, "these masquerades were familiar in many Yoruba-speaking communities where they entertain their audiences with wide variety of folktales, folk songs, proverbs, praise poems, traditional histories, witticism, philosophy and magical displays (Olomola, 2000:61).

As properly documented by Afolabi Ojo (1971:142), the shrines of *Egungun* Ado *Ugbo eigun* were located at the various groves of very huge and tall trees and dense undergrowth at the outskirts of each Ado community. The maskers and other adherents, were generally expert herbal dispensers, *babalawo*, many of them were oftentimes very reputable (or notorious?) for their possession and use of powerful (and harmful) charms. In times of drought or epidemics, *egungun* priests used to invoke their deity with necessary sacrifices for desired relief, in times of crisis, the priests used to impose curfews, *isede* in order to bring situations under control. *Egungun* priest also used to complement the traditional police, *efa*, as guardians of public morality and sustainer of the tone of society; assisting in the arrest and execution of notorious criminals and other societal enemies. It was also part of preparations made before the military chiefs went to the battle field as the spirits of the ancestors were invoked to lead the living to victory.

Some ferocious *egungun* actually followed the soldiers to the war front. Oguntuyi (1953:40) records an incidents in 1892 when, at a critical stage in the wars between Ado and its southern neighbor, Ikere, *egungun* priests and maskers

accompanied Ado soldiers into battle and reportedly won an astounding victory over the enemy.

The *Egungun* tradition in Ado, of course, was highly technical and professional. The demands of its priesthood *aoro* or *ude*, are such that novices generally attached themselves to masters for a number of years, learning all the necessary arts. *Egungun* as Olomola (2000:63) further states, had its own cult or guild made up of prominent *egungun* priests, performers, as well as novices and few women. The officers were organized in a hierarchy, each town and village of the old kingdom, including quarters in Ado-Ekiti, the metropole, had its own organized priesthood, headed by a male officer titled, *Olori Ugbo*, that is master of the grove. The *Olori Ugbo* of *Oke-Ewi* had below him several lieutenants, the most important being the *elegiri* serving as a police officer. Female officials in each local organization consisted of the *Oloodan*, the little virgin, aged about 10, who usually danced half-naked before the *egungun* (Oguntuyi, 1976:26-27), the *olomodeyin*, who was a grown-up woman former, *Oloodan*, while the most senior title was *Yeye eku*, that is mother of mysteries, who was usually a sexagenarian.

Admittedly (Olomola, 2000:62), *egungun* symbolized the totality of the culture and ways of life of Ado people and exhibited the best in their aesthetics on account of the great skill involved in the making and maintenance of their complex costumes, motifs and headpieces. The wood motifs of the *abimo* type, especially those depicting the heads of animals totems, are excellent works of art. The *esise*, apparently the most complex requires painstaking effort, cutting fresh fronds of date palm into fine stripes, drying them until they become white and weaving them into trousers, vests and hoods. The headpieces of the powerful ones, *ede* group consist of a maze of ropes, overlaid with a large number of variety of beaks, feathers and talon of birds, skulls and claws of animals, with the result that each headpiece is often very impressive and fearsome. The costume of *eigun're* group, consists of two or three pieces of snow-white or sky-blue woven cloth, so intricately made that they constitute the hood and costume covering the entire body. The hood is overlaid with a variety of 'crown'; that of the male, the cock, *akiko*, is cock's comb-like, while that of the female, *arudi* is made of tiny reeds. The *eigun're* wears a pair of leggings which also serve as pads, and make the footsteps apparently 'noiseless'. A hood consisting of two or four stripes with beautiful fringes interlaced at intervals with little mirrors hang down the rear.

The dramatization of cultural life in Ado through *egungun* Ado festival usually enhanced justice and fair play as well as propriety of manners. This is why immoral behaviors and unethical social malaise were collectively rebuked through abusive songs during the celebration of *egungun* Ado festival in Ado-Ekiti.

Despite the fact that several scholars have argued that globalization have many negative effects and implications for developing regions and particularly Africans, Oyeshile (2004:18), however, posits that "there is no doubt that the contemporary African is now part of a post-colonial and globalized who shares multiple cultural experiences". The African should not only imbibe, learn and acculturate foreign influences; Africans should be positive contributors to the pool of global resources, especially culturally. Finally, this paper agrees with Sotunsa (2009:420) that the content and form of *Egungun* Ado festival is a unique cultural asset, which must be documented, promoted, "explored, harnessed

and exploited for the advancement of indigenous cultures and technology in a global context."

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is evident that *Egungun* Ado festival plays a prominent role in the lives of the Yorubas and their community. In fact, in Ado, *Egungun* cult is a way of life. This is why *Egungun* Ado festival is celebrated annually in Ado-Ekiti. Moreover, the culture of a society is its source of uniqueness and self-realization. Importantly also, this paper has given a more comprehensive treatment of the subject and has shown the multiple potentials and enduring value of *Egungun* Ado festival which have attracted modern writers of vastly different philosophies and world views.

It has been demonstrated also in this paper that *Egungun* Ado festival with its rich content is not only a source of unity but also a form of dramatic expression of these cultural qualities. Apart from the contents highlighted above, so wide and diverse are the forms of *Egungun* Ado festival. The opinion of this paper is that *Egungun* Ado festival can be used for purposes of cultural tourism, which in turn, is a means of economic development of the country. Therefore, its use should be encouraged and not condemned because the art is capable of attracting international patronage, if developed. A committed and balanced projection of African culture can attract honour and respect for a people and their civilization. It is therefore, anticipated that the priests and adherents of traditional religion in general should jealously guard and fight to preserve their exalted citadel in the face of formidable odds.

Notes

1. *Egungun* literally translation is masquerades. The practice of masking is worldwide. It is a very crucial factor in traditional religion. Among the Yoruba, it is generally called *Egungun*, while the Ekiti-Yoruba call it *Eigun*.

2. The whipping (flogging) aspect of the *Egungun* parade has been traced to Nupe influence on Oyo *Egungun*. See Adedeji, "Egungun", p. 123.

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