

Egungun

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Egungun is a Yoruba-based masquerade tradition that involves the masked representation of the ancestors and/or òrìṣà who appear (in masque) at specific events to commune with the living. The word, egungun, refers to two things: the collective spirits of the ancestors, and the masquerade tradition held in their honour. In contrast, the term Egungun, while within the broad category of *egungun*, refers more specifically to the masking tradition generally attributed to the Oyo Yoruba and is associated with the honouring of the ancestors.¹



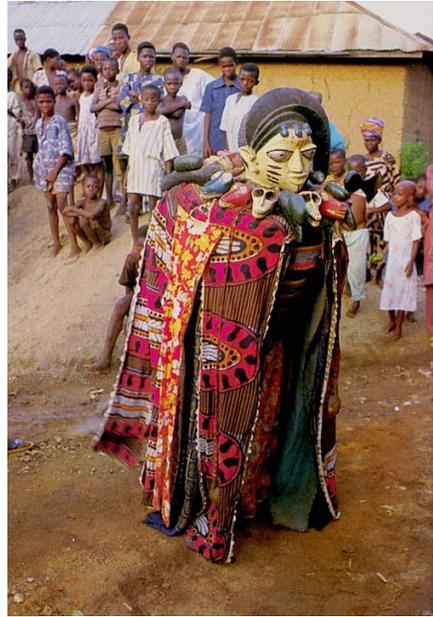
Egungun mask

Egungun costumes are made of multi-layered, multi-coloured, and multi-patterned material that is draped from the head to the toe of the masquerader – also regarded as the impersonator – whose role is to represent the spirit of the ancestor as though it is the ancestor who is garbed before the people: hidden, yet present. It is important to note that the face of the masquerader is always masked, or veiled, and that not all masques represent egungun or the spirit of the ancestors.



Egungun costume

The egungun masquerade is characterised by certain traditions and mystical tenets that are universal to traditional West African spirituality and unique to the Yoruba. The egungun tradition, being concerned with ancestor worship, is intrinsically linked with the spirit world since the masquerades “perform the essential function of regulating the relations between the world of the living and the world of the dead”.² The Yoruba, therefore, “keep in constant communication with their ancestors whose spirits are believed to be closer to them than the *òrìṣà*”.³ According to Babayemi, it is dangerous for ancestral spirits to dominate the day-to-day affairs of the living, but the “occasional physical appearances of *egungun* vividly demonstrate the closeness of the ancestors to their survivors”.⁴



Egungun mask atop costume

The egungun engages in a cycle of reciprocity with the spirit world. The ancestors may be invoked collectively and individually as the need arises, and the ancestors may possess a devotee after demanding masque. However, as with other religions, there is a designation of an ‘inner circle’, or Council whose members are the ones permitted to commune with the spirits. The egungun council typically presides over decisions to hold egungun masquerades, especially outside of the annual festival, which is usually organised collectively when the spirits of the ancestors share fellowship with their physical relatives on earth.⁵ Hence, a masquerade is staged after consultation with Ifa, and done to specifications required by the oracle.⁶

The egungun masquerade typically appears in two major contexts: the annual egungun yam festival and at funerals. “Members of the cult in consultation with the Oba of the town fix the annual festival and any other appearances of egungun as they deem necessary.”⁷ According to Babayemi, the Council “executes the functions of egungun and they guard jealously the mysteries of the cult. They are to be informed by the individuals who want to perform ritual offering or sacrifice to his or her ancestors [and they] give guidance and directions [to the community] as to how individuals can commune with the ancestors.”⁷ Notwithstanding, annual festivals are

typically held in November and usually last for seven, fourteen, seventeen, or twenty-one days,⁸ while, for funerals, they come out for seven days following a death.⁹

Egungun that fall outside of the annual yam festival are, more often than not, concerned with funerals where an egungun is held to help the spirit of the recently departed become one of the ancestors. For purposes of invoking the ancestors for help, the “place of call is usually either on the graves of the ancestors, *Oju Orori*, the family shrine, *Ilerun*, or the community grove, *Igbale*”.¹⁰ It is also significant to note that 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”.¹¹

A similarity among the Yoruba sub-groups (eastern versus fundamental western) that are steeped in the egungun cult is that “they are believed to affect human fertility; they can counteract witches and other antisocial forces; they are associated with agricultural fertility; and their rites are often performed in conjunction with new yam festivals”.¹² The difference between east versus west is that west strictly adheres to ancestor worship while the eastern egungun is not believed to be a manifestation of the ancestor, but rather the *òriṣà*.¹³ The primary function of the eastern Owo egungun, for example, is said to be “to wipe away death, pestilence, convulsion and many mishaps”.¹⁴

The role of lineage or family ties is a very critical aspect of the Egungun masquerade. This is typically demonstrated at the time of a funeral where a funereal egungun is engaged and male members of the family of the deceased ‘come out’ in their ‘lineage *egungun*’ which serves as “a source of blessing and pride to the family”.¹⁵ The lineage therefore becomes stronger when each family member displays his or her loyalty through praises, thereby immortalising the deceased’s name.¹⁶

Endnotes

1. Drewal, Henry John, “The Arts of Egungun Among Yoruba Peoples,” in *African Arts Journal*, XI.3 (1978): 18.
2. Houlberg, Marilyn Hammersley, “Egungun Masquerades of the Remo Yoruba,” in *African Arts Journal*, XI.3 (1978): 20.
3. Babayemi, S.O., Egungun Among the Oyo Yoruba (Ibadan: Oyo State Council for Arts and Culture, 1980) 1.
4. Babayemi 1.
5. Babayemi 2.
6. Gleason, Judith, Oya: In Praise of the Goddess (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) 131.
7. Babayemi 4
8. Babayemi 2.
9. Houlberg 20.
10. Babayemi 1.
11. Babayemi 14.
12. Poynor, Robin, “The Egungun of Owo,” in *African Arts Journal*, XI.3 (1978): 65.
13. Poynor 65-67.
14. Poynor 67.
15. Babayemi 1.
16. Babayemi 2.

