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Henry John Drewal

Whirling Cloth, Breeze of Blessing: Ancestral Masquerade Performances among the Yoruba

For Yoruba-speaking peoples in West Africa, cloth is equated with their most precious possession, children. The proverb *omo l'aso eda*, "children are the clothes of a person," points out that children, like clothes, are what one shows to the world and is judged accordingly.¹ Valuable textiles are what Yoruba use to celebrate the power and presence of their ancestors in exquisite masquerade ensembles known as *Egungun*.

In the world of Yoruba-speaking peoples, *Egungun* is the masquerade tradition that honors one category of spiritual beings--ancestors--those departed who are no longer present in physical form but who are still present in spirit. While these usually occur as annual festivals of remembrance, renewal, and re-dedication, they also take place at special occasions such as funeral celebrations or at moments of social crisis and catharsis like droughts, epidemics, or social upheavals. Yorubas use the full range of their artistic imaginations and powers of inventiveness (*imoju mora*) to give visible, tangible form and substance to the normally invisible presence of ancestral spirits. Using the unique qualities of textiles--their textures, colors, weight and flexibility--they create moving (both literally and figuratively) experiences of the spirits of their departed loved ones.

For Yoruba, these performances are serious business. At the same time, they are also serious play (*ere*), for Yoruba are creating an elaborate multi-media and multi-sensorial event that is meant to please and honor ancestors who, like all of us, enjoy homage and respect, as well as a good laugh! Thus many *Egungun* ensembles impress with their sumptuous materials and symbols of power and prestige, while others provoke laughter in their humorous or satiric portrayal of human (and divine) foibles. Yoruba strive to put on a good spectacle (*aworan*), a party for their departed family and community members. For Yoruba, the playfulness and surprise of improvisation are essential for the success of any artistic endeavor, whether object or event. Inviting the return of ancestors is to play with forms and ideas in order to make onlookers think in new ways about their world: not only about the shared past and imagined future, but themselves and the conduct of their mortal lives.

THE YORUBA WORLD

More than twenty million Yoruba-speaking people live today in their ancient West African homeland -- southwestern Nigeria and the southeastern Republic of Benin. The Yoruba diaspora is vast. Large communities of Yoruba speakers live in Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, and other West African countries. Yoruba descendants in the Americas (either by blood or by a sense of belonging) are uncountable. Large numbers live in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, Haiti, and elsewhere in the Americas, where Egungun performances honor the departed in such places as Oyo Tunji, South Carolina, New York, Chicago, and Milwaukee.

A number of key historical and social factors may help us understand some of the reasons for the dynamic cultural vitality and the deep and widespread impact of Yoruba religious and artistic traditions over several centuries. One factor may be that Yorubas have been for many centuries urban peoples. When we think about living patterns in Africa we often think of isolated villages scattered in rain forests. But this is not the case for the Yoruba who like to live in large urban settlements. The biggest cities in black Africa are Yoruba cities and they have been for many centuries. The sacred city of Ile-Ife is regarded as the place of origin of human life and civilization. From about 1000 BP, it and another urban center, Oyo, were major population centers. Urbanism is a key cultural trait that helps explain the richness, dynamism, and diversity of the arts and their importance in Yoruba society and thought. Unlike typical modern suburbanites, they live in cities, "commute" daily outward to their farms and markets, and then return at night for celebrations, rituals, and social gatherings of one kind or another. Urbanism breeds urbanity.

Oral histories suggest that Egungun masking developed in one of the northern Yoruba city-states, Oyo, that became the powerful Oyo-Yoruba Empire when it extended its influence far beyond Yoruba-speaking people in West Africa, because of its military prowess, in particular, its professional cavalry which controlled a vast area. The fourth ruler (*alaafin*) of Oyo was Sango, a renowned warrior. Because of his contributions and reputation, he became a divinity and joined the pantheon of deified ancestors known as *orisa*. The word refers to those individuals who distinguished themselves by the contributions they made to the world during their lives. As one of these, Sango is associated with thunderstorms, because of his hot temper and fickle, volatile personality. His primary symbolic color is hot red, yet this is balanced with cool white, because of his friendship with other more patient, cool gods like Obatala. Red predominates in many Egungun ensembles. Also, the double-headed drum sacred to Thundergod Sango, the *bata*, is the principal drum for Egungun. The drum's staccato rhythms and sharp, cracking sound are likened to a thunderclap and the flash of lightning.

Yorubas say of their culture that it is like "a river that never rests." This stresses the dynamic, ever-changing qualities of culture. Culture, in order to survive and thrive, must be ready to change, adapt, and move continually, the way a river does. They recognize that some shallow parts of a river change quickly, adapting to rapidly changing conditions. But they also recognize that other parts of a river are deep, move much more slowly, and change little. Yorubas consider the deep parts of their "river of culture" as harboring basic, fundamental philosophical concepts, foundational principles or *ipilese*--ideas and ideals that serve as guides to show them the way through lives filled with changes and challenges.

YORUBA IDEAS ABOUT THE COSMOS

Yoruba conceive of the cosmos as consisting of two separate yet interactive realms: the otherworld (*orun*) of invisible spiritual forces, and the world (*aye*) of the visible, tangible realm of the living. The otherworld is the abode of the deified ancestors (the gods and goddesses known as *orisa*), the spirits of specific sacred spaces (*iwin*), and the spirits of ancestors (*eegun*). In the world are those who have gained knowledge and wisdom during their lifetimes. These are special individuals such as kings and queens, elders, priests and priestesses, diviners, initiates, and masqueraders. These persons mediate between otherworldly and worldly realms. The otherworld and the world are separate and distinct realms, yet they interpenetrate. Crossing the permeable threshold are spiritual forces, like the gods who possess their devoted followers during trance ceremonies, and Egungun masqueraders who embody the spirits of their ancestors during performances. Using their inventive imaginations, Yoruba artists materialize those normally invisible ancestral spirits in the form of Egungun masquerade ensembles. Such masquerades are mediators who facilitate communications between the guardians of traditions, the ancestors, and their living descendants in the world.

The Yoruba have a revealing saying about *orun* and *aye*. They say: *aye l'oja, orun nile*, meaning, "the world is a marketplace [that we visit to do our business], the otherworld is home." What Yoruba are saying is that our time in this world is short and transitory. We must try to make the most of it. We have to take action based upon careful reflection and contemplation, so that we can take the right action. When we leave this world, we go to *orun*, our eternal home, yet Yoruba also believe in the possibility of reincarnation. If you make positive contributions during your life, a portion of your life force (*ase*) may come back again as a new person with a new spiritual head. Thus, for example, a new child may be born into a family soon after a grandfather or grandmother has departed. The parents go to a diviner to determine if the child is associated with the departed ancestor. If this is so and the child is

female, the young girl may be named Yetunde, or Iyabo, which means "Mother-has-come-back." If it is a boy and a grandfather or uncle has departed, they might name the child Babatunde, "Father-has-returned." Thus there is a notion of a spiraling life cycle--life, afterlife, and partial reincarnation that creates a new person with spiritual elements of a former life. This is not a closed system but is, rather, one that is continually renewed. Too, it reveals the intimate relationship between the living and their departed ancestors displayed so lavishly in Egungun masquerade performances.

What animates everything in the cosmos is life force, performative power, or *ase*. *Ase* is a crucial concept for the Yoruba, and one close to the Polynesian concept of *mana*. It is something that we all possess. Not only we humans but all that exists -- animals, plants, rivers, mountains, stones, words, etc. We strive in our lives to learn how to manage, manipulate and use *ase* to better our lives and the lives of those around us. Egungun performances possess the *ase* to strengthen the bonds between ancestors and their descendants and thus to assure good fortune in the future.

EGUNGUN -- MYSTERIES CONCEALED IN MAGICAL CLOTH

The vast majority of Egungun ensembles are communal, collaborative works of art. They are a labor of love by all family members, women and men. Everyone contributes to the creation of these ensembles. Those who can sew will prepare the cloth lappets, those who can carve will create wooden headdresses. Those who know how to crochet will create the cloth netting that covers the face of the masker. Those who can bead, embroider, or applique will prepare varied decorations for different parts of the costume. Those men who can "hear the drum" that is, dance well, will perform inside the costume (only men masquerade). Those women who can compose songs and sing well will be part of the large chorus that chants the praise poems and historical narratives of the lineage.

This collaborative artistic enterprise helps to create family unity and cooperation as it celebrates ancestors. Each person contributes his or her part to construct the most elaborate, elegant, and refined ensemble to honor those who are no longer among us in the world. Yet they are still with us in many ways. For Yoruba, ancestors are departed, not dead. They continue to play a role in human affairs.

A tradition that is family based, Egungun celebrates the continuity and vitality of the unbroken chain of ancestors from the past to the present and future. A Yoruba lineage includes not only the living but all the departed, as well as all those yet to be born or re-born. One type of Egungun, called *Egungun agba*, means literally "senior/elder Egungun". This Egungun probably honors a royal lineage as indicated by the beaded veil reminiscent of those on royal beaded

crowns. In addition to celebrating its royal heritage, this family's masquerade also honors its hunter and warrior ancestors. Animal horns with spiral patterns crown the headdress. Horns are typically containers for powerful medicines, empowering substances with *ase* that are used to protect and strengthen persons.

Due to the patrilineal basis of most Yoruba-speaking peoples, *Egungun agba* usually honor male ancestors while still symbolizing the entire lineage of men and women. But there is an *Egungun* masquerade that specifically honors foremothers. It does not come out as often as the others but only on the most important ritual occasions. In contrast with the elaborately embellished, multicolored ensembles for male ancestors, the masked embodiment of "our mothers" is simple and totally white. The color white (*funfun*) evokes a host of ideas -- enormous concealed power, or *ase*, coolness, composure, patience, age, wisdom, sanctity, and nurturance. The appearance of *iya agba*, the "great ancestral mother," brings assurances of protection and support.

Another type of *Egungun agba* known as *baba prikoko* ("ancestral father-who-walks- about") refers to the fact that such *Egungun* march through the town, visiting certain families, dignitaries, and sacred sites during their "outings." Such processions are like journeys or pilgrimages that re-enact episodes in the histories of ancestors and families. Their distinctive construction is a long train of cloth, a long tube of fabric that trails on the ground or is carried by a series of junior *Egungun* attendants. Older *Baba parikoko* are made of locally woven and indigo-dyed cloth known as *aso oke*, traditionally the most expensive and valued prestige cloth in Yorubaland. More recent *baba parikoko* cover this older prestige cloth with other expensive materials, textiles that come from markets all over the planet. Yoruba have been active cloth traders for many centuries (and continue to be today), buying and selling fabrics of every imaginable type and style. When they put together an *Egungun* ensemble they prefer the most expensive, most fashionable, most up-to-date styles to celebrate their ancestors. Thus, to honor the past, the family wants to demonstrate its vitality and sophistication--its active engagement with the present and with the global economy. They want to obtain the finest cloth they can find in the marketplaces of Nigeria, Benin, and the world, for this is an expression of their "buying power," status, and devotion.

If the height of a skyscraper is the symbol of corporate power, success, and identity in the capitalist West, then the length and elegance of *baba parikoko's* cloth trailing on the ground is a Yoruba symbol of family longevity, power, prestige, and presence. Making an *Egungun*, like the creation of all sacred arts among Yoruba peoples, is a sacrifice, an *ebo*. It is a tangible offering meant to secure good fortune through the support of ancestors and deities.

Each year, *Egungun* families add or replace the cloth in these trains, extending and refurbishing them with fashionable cloth to proclaim their lineage pride.

In a sense an Egungun ensemble is a history of textiles related to family history. As one peels back the layers upon layers of cloth panels, one is moving backward in time to the earliest textiles used to enclose the performer, usually the strip-woven prestige cloth, *aso oke*. Each layer represents the aesthetic choices of generations of family members.

Some Egungun combine exquisite cloth ensembles with elaborately carved headdresses. One from a hunter's family is distinguished by its dramatic coiffure, a long tuft of hair that descends to the left and terminates with an amuletic medicine container. Carved skulls of animals killed and sacrificed are intended as signs of the hunting prowess of a family's ancestors. Such ensembles do not celebrate specific individuals, but rather the collective ancestors of a family over many generations.

Elebiti is another type of *Egungun agba*. A panel of wood at the top is covered in cloth and moves on a kind of hinge. It is flipped forward and backward at different times during the performance. It has been likened to an animal trap, and may therefore be considered another reference to hunting.

Besides using printed patterns and colors on commercially made cloth, Yoruba often embellish and transform such trade cloth in inventive ways. One method is to pattern cloth using intricate appliqué and reverse-appliqué techniques. The variety of disk-like motifs, chevrons, spirals, and interlaces probably has sources in North African Islamic arts that came to Yorubaland via ancient trans-Saharan trade routes. The interlace motif in Yoruba arts is a sign of infinity -- the eternal spiral of life/afterlife/re-birth and regeneration -- and the complexity of life's problems and challenges. It probably comes into Yorubaland through Islamic sacred knot patterns that are widespread in Western Africa. Another important motif is the chameleon, which for Yoruba is a supreme symbol of transformation and liminality, like ancestors. Yoruba ideas about chameleons come from having closely observed their attributes and actions. These are creatures that can change colors in order to blend in with their surroundings. A famous Yoruba story tells of how the chameleon defeated all his enemies in a fashion contest since he could match whatever they selected to wear! Chameleons walk slowly like elders and have eyes that move independently; like ancestors, they can see the past as well as the future.

The construction of layered lappets of decorated cloth suspended from the top contribute a stunning vision when the masker is in motion. Egungun frequently whirl in circles, twist and turn, leap up and perform high-energy kicks. When they do, these panels flutter and fly outward on the air, creating an illusion of an ephemeral presence. The ancestors are present, as otherworldly spiritual entities, not as physical beings like us. The cool breeze created by their whirling panels is said to be a "breeze of blessing."

Egungun known as *alabala* have a distinctive style feature--a patch-work facing of triangles or squares of sharply contrasting colored cloth. Such an effect activates and energizes the dancing ensemble, reinforcing and heightening the ephemerality of these otherworldly spirits.

They play with each other and chase onlookers, creating chaos and laughter in the crowd. Some of the children are really scared. They run to their parents for protection. The older kids laugh and taunt the masqueraders. There is a lot of interaction between the audience, especially the kids, and the masquerades. Successful Yoruba performances are filled with a lot of give and take, interactions between masqueraders and audiences that give this multi-media, multi-sensorial experience its aesthetic power and energy. Everyone contributes her or his *ase* to empower the ancestors, selecting elements from the past and transforming them into vibrant visual statements about the present and about hopes for the future.² This is the dynamic of Yoruba culture, a river that never rests.

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Following Yoruba tradition, I pay respect (*ijuba*) to those who have gone before -- my elders, teachers, ancestors -- all those who "opened the way" and opened my eyes and mind so I would not "see through my nose" as Yoruba would say of an ignorant observer. I want to thank all my Yoruba friends, colleagues and teachers for sharing their knowledge with me during the many years that I lived in Yorubaland and since.