

The Importance of Traditional Religious Festivals among the Yoruba: The *Egungun* Festival in Ogbomoso

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Abstract

Egungun is a festival that is celebrated throughout Yorubaland and without exaggerations an impressive annual festival with an historical importance that brings people together from far and near to see the evidence of the Yoruba strong religious beliefs. This paper traces the origin of *Egungun* festival in Yorubaland and the uniqueness in Ogbomoso and enumerates its importance to the socio cultural and economic development of Ogbomoso. The study obtained its data from both oral (primary) and secondary sources such as interviews, textbooks, journals and archival materials. The study concludes that *Egungun* festival has substantial way to aid economic growth and one of the last cultural heritages of Yoruba body of culture.

Keywords: *Egungun* Festival, Traditional Religion, Ogbomoso, Yoruba

Introduction

In every society, there are special occasions when people come together to celebrate important events. Such events may be secular like the workers Day or Independence Day, which attract people from all walks of life and bring people together in designated venues mainly for special broadcast or entertainment. On the other hand, the events may be religious like Christmas and Easter for Christians, Eid el-Fitr and Eid el-Kabir for

Muslims. The celebration of these events is known as festival and it is marked by public enjoyment or religious ceremonies.²³⁰

In Nigeria, as well as among the Yorubas, festivals are observed by adherents of traditional religion. They mark important social and religious events in the lives of the people and they culminate in series of performances, entertainment, merry making, rites and ceremonies. Moreover, festivals are the most joyful and religious activities in Yoruba traditional society. As Asare Opoku cited, “festivals are rituals which recur at regular intervals and which have as their purpose the expression of beliefs held by a particular community”.²³¹ One of the attributes of Yoruba traditional religions is the festivals which are being celebrated with pomp and pageantry in all parts of Yorubaland. It was believed that the religious aspect of most festivals are culminated by social activities but the facts still remain that the traditional festival in most Yoruba societies are celebrated to commemorate historical, cultural or religious events that are of great importance and significance to the community. Most festivals are associated with specific divinities, spirits or ancestors and they are religious in outlook. Among the Yoruba, each divinity has an annual festival associated with him or her and this is called *Odun* (festival). *Odun* also means year and used in relation to festival, which means “annual festival”. This means that major festival among Yoruba come up every season or year. In the light of this, celebrants, therefore, pray on festive occasions that: *Aseyi Samodun* (just as we celebrate this festival may we

²³⁰Asare Opoku, (1990). “Religions Theme in West African Festival”, *Journal of International Religions Foundation*, Vol 4, No 1, p. 997

²³¹ O. Awolalu and A. Dopamu, (1979), *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan; Onibonoje Press and Book Industries, p. 158

celebrate yet another year). *Egungun* festivals among Yoruba are celebrated in honour of the ancestors and universally celebrated throughout Yorubaland.

The Founding of Ogbomoso

Ogbomoso is a city in Oyo state, southwestern Nigeria. It was founded in the mid-17th century. According to 2006 census the population was about 1.5 million. It is the second largest city in Oyo state and also among the most populated cities in Nigeria. It is the 3rd most populated city in southwestern Nigeria after Lagos and Ibadan.²³² The principal inhabitants of the city are the Yoruba people. There are people from other parts of Nigeria and other West African countries who are resident in the city. The area that is called Ogbomoso today is between Igbon and Iresa, Aresa to the west, Onikoyo to the east, Olugbon to the north and Timi of Ede to its south direction. Ogunlola (first *Soun* of Ogbomoso) noticed smoke oozing from some nearby locations. He took courage and approached these places and discovered other hunters. The first one was Aale at a place now called Oke-Elerin quarters; the second called Onsile at the site now known as Ijeru quarters; the third was Orisatolu at Isapa quarters; and the fourth was Akandie of Akandie quarters. The descendants of the first three of these hunters are up to now the Aale of Okelerin, Onpetu of Ijeru and Onisapa of Isapa quarters. There is no more Baale Akandie. Ogunlola was of Ibariba descent, he and his wife Esuu, built their hut by the side of the ajagbon tree near present Soun's palace. Ogunlola after discovering of these hunters took the initiative to invite them to form the Alongo society. The primary objectives of the society were defence against *sunmoni* (slave

²³² Wikipedia, origin of Ogbomoso. Retrieved on 10th May, 2024

prowlers), to allow its people hunting of wild animals and get mutual assistance. After each day's hunting they would retire to Ogunlola's hut where they were treated with beans and other meals and were served with *sekete* wine brewed by Ogunlola's wife from fermented guinea corn. They also engaged in discussing current affairs and planning.²³³

Esuu, the wife of Ogunlola, introduced the worship of *Orisapopo* (*deity by the roadside*) to Ogbomoso. The worshippers were distinguished by white beads worn round their necks and wearing of white dresses only. During the time, the Ibaribas, under the leadership of Elemoso, attacked Oyo-Ile near current Ilorin city. Elemoso caused a devastating havoc among the Oyo people, so much that they feared him in battle. Elemoso consequently laid siege on Oyo, causing famine and untold hardship among the people. Ogunlola was in prison at Oyo-Ile due to allegation that he committed murder and was awaiting trial when he heard of notorious Elemoso terrorizing Oyo-Ile, and he requested to fight the Elemoso which was granted by the Alaafin, after much persuasion.²³⁴ Elemoso was a very strong and brave warrior who fought with sword and arrows. Ogunlola was shown Elemoso's camp, but it took him some days to study Elemoso's tactics and eventually Ogunlola crept into Elemoso's camp and shot him down with an arrow. He beheaded him and took his head to Alaafin who was very happy. The Alaafin granted Ogunlola freedom and even persuaded him to stay in Oyo Ile but Ogunlola refused, he said "*Ejeki a ma se ohun*" meaning "Let me stay faraway in my land". This is where the title 'Soun', the traditional ruler of Ogbomoso, was coined from. Ogunlola returned to his village and was made the paramount leader with the title of

²³³ N. D. Oyerinde, (1958). *Iwe Itan Ogbomoso* (The History of Ogbomoso). Jos, pp. 72-74

²³⁴ N. D. Oyerinde, (1958). *Iwe Itan Ogbomoso* (The History of Ogbomoso). Jos, pp. 72-74

Soun. He became first Soun of Ogbomoso. The settlement was subsequently called “*Eyi ti Ogbori Elemoso*” meaning “the one who carried Elemoso’s head”. This was shortened to *Ogbori Elemoso* and later, Ogbomoso which it is called till today. This was how Ogbomoso got its name from Ogunlola’s bravery. Ogbomoso, because of her strategic location, later rose from its mere village status to a strong town due to the role it subsequently played in the history of Yorubaland. Its people were also renowned warriors. During the Fulani wars of the 19th century, many towns and villages (about 147) were deserted while their people took refuge in Ogbomoso. The influx of people further enhanced the size and strength of the town.²³⁵

Having survived the Fulani’s attack, refugees from far and near migrated to the town and subsequently became one of the largest settlements. Ogbomoso traditional rulers retained control over the refugee population which though the new majority was not given political power following Ibadan’s victory in 1840 over the Fulani at Osogbo, 32 miles (51km) south east, the town shifted its allegiance from Oyo to Ibadan.²³⁶

The Egungun festival in Ogbomoso is a vibrant celebration honoring ancestor’s cultural heritage. The participants of the festival wear colourful masks costumes to embody spirits of the ancestors, dancing and drumming to invoke their presence. It is a time for reverence, tradition and community bonding. The Egungun festival in Ogbomoso is deeply rooted in Yoruba culture and spirituality. It typically takes place annually drawing locals and visitors alike to partake in the festivities. The street comes alive with

²³⁵ N. D. Oyerinde, (1958). *Iwe Itan Ogbomoso* (The History of Ogbomoso). Jos, pp. 72-74

²³⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica online Ogbomoso retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ogbomoso> on 12/03/2024

performances, processions and rituals as people pay homage to their ancestors and received their blessings for the future. It's a time of connection between the living and the departed, fostering a sense of continuity and unity within the community.²³⁷

The Egungun festival is not just a spectacle, it is a sacred occasion where spiritual leaders play significant roles in guiding the rituals and ensuring their authenticity. Each aspect of the festival from the intricate costumes to the rhythmic drumming, carries symbolic significance reflecting the rich tapestry of Yoruba cosmology and beliefs. Through songs, dance and storytelling, participants honor the legacy of their ancestors and reaffirm their cultural identity, strengthening the bonds that unite them as a community.²³⁸

The timing of the Egungun festival in Ogbomoso is influenced by factors such as agricultural activities, historical events and spiritual considerations. However, it generally occurs between the months of July and August every year. Though, at times specific date may be determined by local religious leaders or traditional authorities based on divination, human observations, or other cultural practices.²³⁹

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, masquerade is conceptualized as the social gathering of persons wearing masks and often fantastic costumes. Egungun is beyond wearing of masks because there are some spiritual values attached to it. Egungun can simply be referred to the spirit or representation of the spirit by the progenitors who had joined the cult of

²³⁷ P. S. O. Aremu, (2012). Egungun Tradition in Trado-Modern Society in Southwestern Nigeria. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* Vol. 3, pp. 283-288

²³⁸ Merriam-Webster Dictionary

²³⁹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

pantheons paying august visitation to his scions which is usually every year.

Festivals, whether cultural, religious, social or political are generally and specifically marked to the people. T.S. Makinde simply expressed it as a thing or a performance or show which amuses or interests people such as tourists to entertainment.²⁴⁰ People travel from their destinations to other areas to acquire some of the ways of life of others and acquiring these ways is to be entertained. Egungun festival is witnessed by large number of people from far and near. According to the report from the Nigerian Tourism and Development Board employment in tourism is expected to grow at 2.6% per annum, over 8% of all jobs worldwide will depend upon travel and tourism and it will lead to the creation of over 5.5 million jobs per year over the next decade in the tradition of the people of Ogbomoso and like other communities live in Africa.²⁴¹ Festivals and religion activities as opined by Opoku that Egungun festival, like other festival in Ogbomoso, is also marked to entertain the people. J. A. Adedeji explains that traditional festivals are organised and celebrated in their original contexts which is not so with the modern festival that hold sway to officially approved venues and dates by organizers.²⁴² According to P. S. O. Aremu, Egungun festival happens to be a salient part of the taxonomy of Africa oral literature. Egungun can be said to be cultural heritage of the people around the world, for it will be interesting to know that there is Egungun in part of Europe, United States of America and Latin American.

²⁴⁰ T. S. Makinde, (2000). "Problems of Policy Implementation in Developing Nations", *Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol.11, p. 63

²⁴¹ Nigeria Tourism and Development Board (2011). *Cultural Policy for Nigerian*. Lagos: Federal Government Printer

²⁴² J.A. Adedeji, (1969). 'The Alarinjo Theater; The study of a Yoruba theatrical'. Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Ibadan.

Egungun festival is characterized by renewal of relationships and solidarity. Disputes, quarrels, misunderstanding, family and community problems are settled during Egungun festival. B. Campbell asserts that Egungun festival promotes relationship between tourists, spectators and members of the host community.²⁴³ It encourages world peace, as a result of people from different countries gather for recreational purposes and interacting with each other.²⁴⁴

Indeed, festivals are among the essential liturgical components of all religions. In the cosmological system of Yoruba of southwestern part of Nigeria, festivity is an integral aspect of religious practices.²⁴⁵ 'Egungun' is often used to describe all masked figures found among the Yoruba of Nigeria. To B. E. Idowu Egungun is a means of demonstrating in concrete terms, that the Yoruba believed that those who had departed this world continue to exist elsewhere, and are actively in touch with their people who are still living. Hence, they are called *Ara-Orun*. 'the Citizens of Heaven'.²⁴⁶ Towards the mid-1990s, Egungun (masquerade) traditional festival occupied an important position among the Yoruba to the extent that a significant number of them participated actively in it. According to Aremu, Banjo and Olanipekun Egungun is held in high esteem by its devotees who believed that their mythical strength is based on the laws of cosmic order which is very difficult for human to comprehend.²⁴⁷ They equally opined that it is the belief of every traditional Yoruba man that

²⁴³ B. Campbell, (2015). 'Egun Ogun': War Masquerades in Ibadan in the era of modernization". *Africa Arts* 48(1): 42-43

²⁴⁴ S. O. Babayemi, (1980). *Egungun among the Oyo Yoruba*. Ibadan: Board Publication Limited, p. 44.

²⁴⁵ B. E. Idowu, (1996). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (3rd edition) London: Longman Publisher

²⁴⁶ O. Awolalu and A. Dopamu, (1979). *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonjo Press and Book Industries.

²⁴⁷ P.S.O. Aremu, B. Banjo and R. Olanipekun, (2012). "Egungun Tradition in Trado-Modern Society in South western Nigeria", *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.3, pp. 283-288

human society is maintained by spiritual forces and mystical power of the ancestors which can be potentially used for curative, protective, productive and preventive purposes. Campbell and Babayemi assert that Egungun not only bless, protect and lead their communities in war times, but also occasionally do warn and punish their earthly relatives. Apart from these Egungun collectively protect their communities against evil spirits, epidemic, famine, barrenness, persistent sickness, poverty, witchcraft and evil doers.²⁴⁸

Some of the notable leading Egungun masquerades in ogbomoso include “Ajomogbodo”, the Ogbomoso mystical Egungun that sits comfortably without using a chair”. Femi Ogunlana in his article writes that Egungun (masquerade) festival in Ogbomoso is a tourist attraction especially in the past years before the institutionalization of Christianity and Islam.²⁴⁹ Tourists usually come from all over the world, from Brazil, Canada, USA, Italy, the United Kingdom and from several African countries to witness the enterprising show. It is also worth mentioning that Egungun “Ajomogbodo” as one of the fiercest Egungun (masquerade) in Ogbomoso is supernaturally capable of sitting comfortably in the air, or space without the stool or chair. It is generally believed to have strong voodoo power and it comes out on the last two days of the usually one and a half week festival.²⁵⁰

Danafojura is another great masquerade, who finds pleasure in bathing with fire. This is another ancient Egungun (masquerade) in the city which

²⁴⁸ S.O. Babayemi (1980) *Egungun among Oyo Yoruba*. Ibadan: Board Publication Limited

²⁴⁹ A. Olaleye, and R. Solanke ,(2020). “Cultural Tourism and Community Development: The Case of Egungun Festival Ogbomoso, Nigeria”, *Iloro Journal of Women in Technical Education and Employment*, Vol. 1, issue 2, 2020, pp. 201-232

²⁵⁰ P. S. O. Aremu (2012) “Egungun Tradition in Trado-Modern Society in South western Nigeria”, *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.3, pp. 283-288

has the ability to double the population of the town on its day of celebration. Followers of the festival cover him with dry leaves and sat him on fire to keep him warm, but will remain unburnt, unhurt and unharmed and come out of the burning fire not even a strand of his hair getting burnt, despite the furnace. *Danafojura* is an Egungun from Alakasu family. *Danafojura* is one of the exceptional Egungun widely celebrated in Ogbomoso. It is celebrated once in three years.²⁵¹

Apart from the Egungun named above there are various genres of Egungun in Ogbomoso, specifically they are *Egungun Eleru* (the masquerade that carries load on head), *Egungun Alago* (masquerade of bell), *Egungun Orebe*, *Egungun Egbe* (societies masquerade), *Egungun Ode* (hunters masquerade). Others *Egungun in Ogbomoso also include Egungun Lenbe*, *Egungun Oroko*, *Egungun Awodagbese*, *Egungun Kongba*, *Egungun Omo Titun* (new born child masquerade), *Egungun Olukotun* (the trailblazer), *Egungun Mate*, *Egungun Ari Igba Asotesun* of Yaku Compound, *Egungun Kindin* (masquerade that vibrate on ground), to mention just a few. *Okelerin*, which is their rendezvous, is the center of exhibition where all categories of *Egungun* converge annually, gleefulness ostensibly registered in the people's faces, while some will be grim faced, wanting the dogs of war to let loose.

²⁵¹ Interview with Pa Oluokun James (72 years) at Alakata compound, Isale Afon, Ogbomoso, Oyo State, conducted by the author on December 12, 2023.

Images of some selected *Egungun* (Masquerade) in Ogbomoso



The Importance of *Egungun* Festival in Ogbomoso

The *Egungun* festival holds significant cultural, spiritual and social importance in Ogbomoso. Some key aspects of its significance are as follows:

Honoring Ancestors: The festival serves as a means to honor and pay respect to ancestors who are believed to continue to influence the lives of their descendants. It reinforces the bond between the living and the ancestors, ensuring the continuity of families and communal ties.

Preservation of Traditions: The Egungun festival is a vital component of Yoruba cultural heritage. It helps to preserve traditional customs, rituals and artistic expression passing them down from one generation to another through participation in the festival by younger members of the community and learn about their cultural identity and history.

Spiritual Connection: The festival is deeply rooted in Yoruba spirituality, which participation invoking the presence of ancestral spirits through rituals, songs and dances. It is believed that these spirits provide guidance, protection and blessings to the community, fostering a sense of spiritual connection and well-being. This festival re-awakens the spirits of deities forgotten and neglected in the community.

Community Cohesion: The Egungun festival strengthens community bonds by bringing people together in shared celebration and reference. It provides an opportunity for social interaction, cooperation and solidarity, reinforcing the sense of belonging and unity among community members both older and younger generations in Ogbomoso

Tourism and Cultural Exchange: The festival attracts visitors from within Nigeria and around the world, contributing to cultural exchange and tourism in Ogbomoso. It showcases the richness and diversity of Yoruba culture, promoting understanding and appreciation among different cultural groups.

Economic Impact: The Egungun festival also has economic significance for Ogbomoso and its immediate communities. It stimulates local

businesses, such as vendors selling food, clothing and souvenirs as well as artisans creating traditional masks, costumes and musical instruments. Additionally, the influx of visitors during the festival period boost tourism related services including accommodation, transportation and entertainments arena.

Healing and Reconciliation: In some cases traditional festival serves as a platform for resolving disputes, promoting forgiveness and fostering reconciliation within the community. Through shared participation in rituals and communal activities, individuals may find opportunities to settle grievances, mend relationships and restore harmony, contributing to social cohesion and peace building efforts.

Cultural Identity and Pride: The Egungun festival in Ogbomoso instills a sense of cultural pride and identity among participants, community dwellers, reinforcing the value of traditional practices and beliefs.

Educational Impacts and Global Recognition: The Egungun festival provides educational opportunities for both locals and visitors to learn about Yoruba culture, history and spirituality. Through guided tours, workshops, lectures and demonstrations, individuals gain insight into the significance of various festival elements, such as costume designs, symbolic gestures and musical rhythms, deepening their understanding and appreciation of Yoruba traditions. The Egungun festival in Ogbomoso has gained recognition on a global scale attracting scholars, researchers and cultural enthusiasts interested in studying and documenting its significance within the broader context of African cultural heritage. By sharing knowledge and experiences related to the festival, Ogbomoso contributes to the global dialogue on the importance of preserving and celebrating indigenous cultural traditions. Overall, the Egungun festival in Ogbomoso

plays multifaceted roles in the preservation, celebration and promotion of Yoruba cultural heritage, spirituality and community harmony.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Egungun festival in Ogbomoso holds immense significance on multiple levels serving as a vibrant celebration of Yoruba culture, spirituality and community. It's a cornerstone of identity, spirituality and community cohesion. Its importance extends beyond mere celebration; it's a testament to the resilience of cultural heritage in the face of modernity. Ogbomoso reaffirms its commitment to preserving its ancestral traditions while embracing the opportunities and challenges of the contemporary world. It's a source of pride for residents, a beacon of cultural diversity for visitors and a symbol of cultural continuity for future generations. Through its rituals, ceremonies and festivities, the festival honors ancestors, preserves traditions and fosters social cohesion and unity. It plays a pivotal role in promoting cultural identity, pride and resilience among community members while also attracting visitors and scholars interested in learning African cultural heritage. Moreover, the festival contributes to economic development, environmental awareness and intergenerational transmission of knowledge, showcasing the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in Ogbomoso cultural landscape. This is the heartbeat of Ogbomoso cultural soul, pulsating with the myths of tradition, spirituality and community spirit and embodies the rich tapestry of Yoruba traditions and serves as a beacon of cultural vitality, solidarity and celebration in Ogbomoso and beyond.