
The Place of Egungun (Masquerade) In The Growth of Isan Ekiti Community, Ekiti State, Nigeria ,1979-1999

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ABSTRACT: *Egungun is a secret society among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, though, bears different names among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. People of historic town Isan Ekiti were not left out in the celebration of the Egungun festival. This paper attempts to examine the place of Egungun (Masquerade) in the growth of Isan Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria, how it has influenced their life socially, economically and religiously. It uses simple historical methodology involving the use of oral interviews and secondary sources. The paper revealed the rich cultural values of the people in that community, the impacts Egungun (Masquerade) had on their marital life and intra-group relations among different quarters in the community within the period of study. It concluded that Egungun did not just been celebrated in Isan Ekiti community for the fun of it, but an avenue for the reconstruction of their historical past as well as instrument of unity and peaceful co-existence among the people in that community.*

KEYWORDS: Egungun, Isan Ekiti, cultural values, festival, Ekiti, impacts, intra-group relations.

INTRODUCTION

The Egungun festival is part of the religious practices of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, but not only peculiar to them as other part of the country calls it different name like Ekpo in Efik, Mnowu in Igbo and so. It refers to all types of masquerades or masked, costumed figures. The Egungun (*egúngún* with Yorùbá language tone marks) in the broadest sense is any Yoruba masquerade or masked, costumed figure. More specifically, it is a Yoruba masquerade for ancestors' reverence, or the ancestors themselves as a collective force. *Eégún* is the reduced form (abbreviation through assimilation) of the word *egúngún* and has the same meaning. [Rowlands, E.C. (1973-01-01). "Yoruba (Teach Yourself Books", chapter 7, page 39] There is a misconception that Egun or Eegun (*eégún* with Yorùbá tone marks) is the singular form, or that it represents the ancestors while *egúngún* is the masquerade or the plural form. This misconception is common in the Americas by

Orisa devotees that do not speak Yoruba language as a vernacular. "Egungun is a visible manifestation of the spirits of departed ancestors who periodically revisit the human community for remembrance, celebration, and blessings.

Egungun Festival is celebrated annually and has been passed successively down to generations. "The ensuing festival goes on for several days and strengthens the bonds that unite families and communities with departed ancestors. It is believed to help develop trade and commerce and generally bond the people of Yorubaland together regardless of their religious beliefs. Members of the society dance to marketplaces.

According to traditional Yoruba belief, all power in the universe emanates from a supreme being, Olodumare, Olodumare, known as the owner of everlasting abundance, among other praise names, holds all power and is the giver of all life. Olodumare is the mystical remote source of all things and is not identified by gender. All that exists, including supernatural divine realities, are part of Olodumare.

The Egungun is a secret society among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. A hereditary chief called Ihare epa (Egungun priests and initiates) held the society, which celebrates the most important in July. Members of the society come to the market place and perform dances for the Onisan of Isan Kingdom as well as palace of the monarch wearing masks that represent the spirits of the deceased ancestors.

The Origin of Egungun (Masquerade) Festival in Isan Ekiti

Celebration of Egungun (Masquerade) festival in Isan Ekiti was far older than the creation of Ekiti State, even before the attainment of Nigeria independent in 1960. Egungun festival celebration in Isan Ekiti has been in existence since the migration of the people from Ile-Ife around 16AD when the town was founded. The Egungun were called different names among the quarters in the town as follows; Adisa quarter called it Arunbo, Igbomoji and Oke-Isan quarters called it Omoleku, Ilusajumu quarter called it Alawo Ekun, Ilale and Irefin quarters jointly owned Ekurin, which is the most widely celebrated that traversed the length and breadth of Isan Ekiti. Ilale quarter called another one Agburu and Irefin quarter called their second one Epa Ale (Night masquerade) also known as "Alagbale" which was the mother and most mysterious part of them all. According to Madam Olasebikan Ibronke from Adisa quarter Isan Ekiti, she said, Arunbo masquerade of Adisa quarter which is been celebrated annually originated from "Egede" which is a festival that was only peculiar to a particular set of family lineage called Eran under Adisa quarter. It is usually being celebrated every first week of July which marks the era of new yam festival in the town. The Arunbo festival was brought by the Eran clan from Ile-Ife in order to herald the celebration of new yam festival. The origin of Omoleku masquerade celebration in Oke-Isan and Igbomoji quarters cannot be ascertained as there are no available record of its origination. However, according to Mr Salami Akanni from Oke-Isan quarter Isan Ekiti, Omoleku masquerade started as a result of the

gathering together of elders during moonlight to deliberate on which way to celebrate new yam festival and how to create avenue for merry making for people in the quarter to catch fun. They came up with the idea of the masquerade and it was unanimously agreed on, to be celebrated on annual basis. Another version of the origin of Omoleku masquerade according to Mr Akanle Ayo of Iwoye quarter in Oke-Isan narrated that, it was an idea their ancestors brought from Ile-Ife by the four quarters (Oke-Isan, Abudo, Igbomoji and Iwoye). These four quarters are the ones celebrating the Omoleku masquerade till date. Ekunrin masquerade of Ireferinmeta (Ilale, Egena, Alewa and Iroyi) which is the most widely celebrated masquerade in the community took different dimensions of origin. According to Mr. Adigun Olomi Ajanaku of Ibore compound Ilale quarter Isan Ekiti, Ibore lineage of Ilale migrated from Oke igbole (Igbole hill) which is almost ten kilometer from the present settlement, while Egena clan of same Ilale quarter migrated from Oko Egena (Egena forest) after Ore. Inisa clan of same Ilale quarter came from Obbo Aiyegunle side in the present day Kwara State, while Isaoye clan migrated "Igbo Obanifon" i.e. Obanifon forest and Ijemo clan of same Ilale quarter came from "Igbo-ata" i.e. Ata forest and Odo-Ama. All the aforementioned clans converged at "Igbole", migrated down to present place named Ilale quarter in Isan Ekiti. They formed alliance with Alewa and Iroyi to start the most widely celebrated masquerade in the historic town of Isan Ekiti. Epa -Ale (Night masquerade) or Alagbale been celebrated in Ireferin quarter has a whole lot of intrigues and spiritual connotations. This Epa -Ale (Night masquerade) or Alagbale was said to be originated from the coming together of all elders in Ireferin quarter to herald the celebration of Ekunrin masquerade the next day. The masquerade must not be celebrated under moonlight as the shadow of it must not be seen by the spectators.

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND OF ISAN EKITI

According to Samuel Johnson in his book titled, *The History of the Yoruba*, every Yoruba town or village, Ile - Ife is the origin. Hence, the founding of Isan Ekiti is not different from the phenomena behind the founding of most Yoruba towns and villages, since Yoruba people in general, are believed to be migrants. (Johnson, S 1921). Isan Ekiti is a fairly large town in Oye local government area of Ekiti state with a population of about forty five thousand people, Isan was founded by a handful of hunters whose names are now forgotten. These founders under their leader called Gberubioya migrated from Ile – Ife, the cradle of most Yoruba towns and villages. They settled in various groups at Igboagbo which is about two miles away from Isan Ekiti present location. Each group had a head, subordinate to the head chief – Gberubioya.

The tribal war of the 14th century forced these separate group to come together under the Onisan of Isan the united groups was then called Isan. Each of the group that came together to become Isan Ekiti retained its original name which now becomes the names of the quarters-Ireferin meta (which was then one group that comprised Alewa, Iroyi, Ilale and Egenena), Ilale Isan group comprised

of (Ogilolo, Adisa and Ilusajumu agan), Iro group comprised of (Igbomoji , Okeisan , Ilafon , Abudo and Iwoye).(Ogundele, J. A 2011).

The people are dark in skin, with a peculiar dialect different from that of the neighbouring towns. Its bounded in the south by Iludun, in the east bounded by Ilemeso, in the west by Ipere and Ifaki Ekiti, and in the north by Ayede Ekiti. There are number of small hills called Isaoye, Asao, Egena, Adari, Ikola and Itaoke that surrounded Isan while there were small rivers and brooks between the hills called Igbago, Ayetoro, Afunni, Aosi, Oteruru, Asoyi, Adewe, Abu, Asinsin, Gbedibo, Omiogun, Afo, Omikoro, IsunIwoye, Omiobalegen, Omiaba, Adungbongbon, Omiasekun, Agidigbo, Aringbon, among others. All these features are there till today. The people worshipped these hills and rivers. The hill god was headed by Adari titled “Oke Leyin Isan” i.e the hill behind Isan which was the highest. They offered sacrifices such as black cow, black male pig, bean cake (Akara) pap (Eko) and pigeon to Adari when there was shortage of rain or severe drought. Sacrifices were also made to Osun River especially during their festival for the fruit of the womb. There are two types of vegetation’s-the tree savannah and the deciduous. In the tree savannah area are the clay fields while the deciduous is used for cultivation. The crops include cocoa, Plantain, Kola and food Crops; Yams, Cocoyam, Maize, Okra, Vegetable, Beans and Cassava.

Also, there are two main seasons – the dry and wet seasons. The dry season is during the month of October to march with a middle period of harmattan from December to February. The wet season is from April to September during when food crops are grown.

Social Influence of Egungun (Masquerade) on the people of Isan Ekiti

The celebration of Egungun (Masquerade) in Isan Ekiti had a tremendous influence on the people of the community in different ways. For instance, Epa Ale (Masquerade being celebrated during night time) or Alagbale by Irefin quarter was unique and attracted a lot of people from far and near from various communities such as Ayede Ekiti, Ilafon Ekiti, Itaji Ekiti, Oye Ekiti, Obbo-Ayegunle and Obbo-Ile both in Kwara State, Ado Ekiti, Akure in Ondo State, Abuja, Ibadan in Oyo State, Osogbo, Ile-Ife in Osun State, Lagos State among others. During the celebration, a lot of activities were always in place ranges from cooking of special soup called “obe ihare epa” meaning soup of Egungun priests and initiates those selected to be in charge of the masquerade from Irefin quarter of Isan Ekiti. The soup is an okra soup but they use palm oil all-through the cooking processes without adding water. Plenty of locust beans “Iru” is required for the cooking and new yam must not be taken to the quarter during the celebration as it was a taboo. The old yam would then be pounded for the consumption of everybody that come around during the celebration in the afternoon time. Apart from the merry-making involved, it served as an avenue to dine an wine with their ancestors, according to their belief. Strangers or visitors were not prohibited during this period as it was full of merry making and funfair. Everybody would then sit on the mat and enjoyed the meal. Thereafter,” Ihare Epa” Egungun priests and initiates would then go inside the bush called “Igbo kerike” where singing of the song of the masquerade festival must commence, then

to the quarter village square where people must have gathered to sing along. Drums made of animal skin and Isan Ekiti clay pot which were of six different types must be on ground with people to handle them, normally males from either Ilale or Irefin quarters to protect the secrecy of the mysterious and intriguing part of the masquerade celebration. The first song which must emanate from Ihare Epa was sung this way.

Kereeeee eeke
Iwa kere eyin kere
Eeke .

It means front doesn't please it and back doesn't please the masquerade. This continues from around 8pm in the night till around 11pm or thereabout. The masquerade must not be celebrated under moonlight as it was a serious taboo. Every clan involved in Irefin quarter must dance twice with the exception of the head of the masquerade called "Epa Baba" that only come once and the last for that matter. The clan involved are; Ekiripa, Ogburo, Isaba, Isolo, Edegun, Okemba, and Idofin. The celebration of this night masquerade attracted young ladies to marry from the quarter as only male legitimate children from there can participate in carrying the masquerade. It's a form of pride and dignity to the family of whoever involve in carrying the masquerade to dance in the quarter village square called "Arigidi". The last and the biggest masquerade called "Epa Baba" from Idofin clan of Irefin quarter must dance along with the traditional head of the quarter "Eleefin" who doubled as the second in command to the Onisan of Isan Ekiti, the paramount ruler of Isan kingdom. The Eleefin is among the six kingmakers in the community and the original owner of Isan market, which was why it was named "Agidigba Eleefin". The Epa Baba must pray and spray a white clothing material toward the concluding part of the ceremony as a symbol of peace, unity and togetherness among the people of the entire community of Isan Ekiti. At this point, everybody must run to depart to their various residence as only the "Ihare- Epa" i.e. Egungun priests and initiates would remain to take the masquerade round the various shrines in the quarter to pray against evil occurrence in the community at large and participants of Ekunrin masquerade the next day. Ekunrin on the other hand were masquerades almost similar to Night masquerade but being celebrated by Alewa, Iroyi, Egena and Ilale which were many in proportions depending on the number of male children, able-bodied men and elders available in the quarters involved during this period.

Egungun masquerades are male-dominated within the performance aspect and only males are allowed to connect with the spirits in Egungun by transforming into the masked figure. Women are prevalent in singing, dancing and watching. Elders say that separation is necessary because of the dangers of women power. During the celebration of Ekunrin masquerade which is also known as "Ademore". women and young ladies put on new attire, usually Ankara and vest with the inscription "Ademore" in which the masquerade would be drawn on it, they wore this to dance around the town specially to accompany the masquerade to the market square and thereafter the

King's palace. In no small measure, the celebration of this festival has attracted a lot of girls to marry to male's counterpart from these quarters. It has tremendously brought about intra-group relations amongst the community even as far as Obbo-Ayegunle, Isapa, Obbo-Ile and Araromi Opin all in the present day Kwara State. According to Alabi Babatunde, one of the Egungun initiates, the Americans came to Isan Ekiti in 1989 during the celebration of the festival and it added a lot of glamour to the whole festival. It took the festival to international reckoning which had attracted many Europeans to grace the festival in the subsequent years. Another important aspect of Ekunrin masquerade was in the area of song by the participants. Song was usually sung to reveal the social vices in the community and the perpetrators would be the subject of the song. Perpetrators of any ugly occurrence would be reprimanded through songs. It also used to express the government measure towards the economic situation in the country. It demonstrates both ethical and moral behaviours of the people, exposing the strengths and weaknesses of the community with the hope of encouraging behaviour more benefiting of their descendants.

EKUNRIN MASQUERADE OF ALEWA, IROYI, EGENA AND ILALE QUARTERS ISAN EKITI.



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□ **Economic influence of Egungun (Masquerade) on the People of Isan Ekiti.**

The economic influence of Egungun (Masquerade) on the people of Isan Ekiti can be showcased in diverse manners. Palm oil which was one of the ingredients for cooking the special soup called “Obe Ihare-Epa”(Priest and masquerade initiates soup) during the Epa-Ale (Night masquerade) as well as Ekunrin celebration usually had high demand in which palm oil sellers do sell and make a lot of gains during this festive period. Having mentioned that water was not allowed to be added during this soup preparation but only palm oil. The neighboring towns and villages do have their bit of gains in palm oil selling during this period of Egungun celebration in Isan Ekiti. Equally, the demand for okro was usually on high side because, it was major ingredient for the preparation of this special soup of the priests and Egungun initiates. They went as far as Eruku and Egbe in the present day Kogi State for the purchase of the okro. Over time, this annual festival had also encouraged intra-group relations between Isan Ekiti itinerant traders who traded in okro with the people from Eruku and Egbe. Another major ingredient used for the preparation of this special soup was locust bean. Though, locust bean is produced from Isan Ekiti in large quantity for both consumptions as well as commercial purpose. It must be emphasized that no matter the quantity produced in the community, it usually not enough during the celebration of the Egungun festival as locust beans seller from Igogo Ekiti do come to sell and in return bought a big clay pot for the preparation of the locust bean for another time. The headgear used by the masquerade were not produced in the town and this increased the sales during the celebration. The headgears were of different colours and each masquerade (Ekunrin) must put it in order to enhance the firmness of the cap-like mask on their heads. The festival provides an economic boost for Isan Ekiti people. Urbanite tourist from Lagos, Abeokuta, Akure, Ado Ekiti, Ikole Ekiti, Abuja even from outside the country bought local food from the local food vendors, thereby enhanced their economic viability. Hoteliers in Ado Ekiti and its environs also do have a taste of economic gains during this Egungun festival in Isan Ekiti due to increase in number of lodgers from the country and influx of foreigners from different countries of the world. It has led to increase in productivity for the hotel owners.

Religious influence of Egungun (Masquerade) on the People of Isan Ekiti.

The religious influence of Ekunrin (masquerade) in Isan Ekiti was tremendous as the introduction of Christianity and Islam could not even prevent the people of the community from celebrating the festival. During the celebration of Egungun festival in the community, all religious activities were concentrated on the festival especially in the affected quarters The annual ceremonies in honour of the dead serve as a means of assuring their ancestors a place among the living. They believe the ancestors have the responsibility to compel the living to uphold the ethical standards of the past generations of their clan, town or family. In family situations, a family elder known either formally or informally as "Alagba" presides over ancestral rites. He may or may not be initiated into the local Egungun society. In matters that deal with whole communities, Egungun priests and initiates who are trained in ancestral communication, ancestral elevation and funerary rites are assigned to invoke and bring out the ancestors. They wear elaborate costumes as masquerades. Through

drumming and dance, the Egungun robed performers are believed to become possessed by the spirits of the ancestors, as manifested as a single entity. The Egungun spiritually cleans the community; through the dramatic acting and miming of the robed priests, they demonstrate both ethical and amoral behavior that have occurred since their last visit. In this way, they expose the strengths and weaknesses of the community to encourage behavior more befitting of their descendants. When this performance is completed, the performers as Egungun give messages, warnings and blessings to the assembled spectators. It is believed that whoever that had taken part in “Epa -Ale” (Night masquerade) or Ekunrin, a black male dog must be slaughtered after his demise as a symbol of unity with their dead ancestors. Failure to slaughter the dog, the spirit of the dead in physical human form would be appearing and pursuing people on their way to farm. The Ekiti religio-cultural spirituality and sense of community also manifest in their beliefs, thought patterns, perceptions, religions and socialization and behaviors. With many people of Isan Ekiti identified as either Christians or Muslims, a strong part of them still connect to the beliefs and practices of the indigenous religion to which they affiliated through family history or by name. In other words, names like Eegunjobi, Ojelabi, Ojerinde among others, reflects from the family of Elegun (masqueraders).

CONCLUSION

From the research carried out, it has been discovered that the people of Isan Ekiti have a strong religio-cultural heritage which maps out not only their identity but also their worldview. This evidently showcased in the celebration of Egungun (Masquerade) in the community which had played immeasurable role towards the growth and development of the town. The relevance of Egungun (Masquerade) of different types among the different quarters in Isan Ekiti community ranges from “Alawo Ekun of Ilusajumu quarter, Arunbo of Adisa quarter, Omoleku of Igbomoji and Oke-Isan quarters, Agburu of Ilale quarter, Epa Ale of Irefin quarter to Ekunrin of Alewa, Iroyi, Egena and Ilale quarters have been elaborately discussed with emphasis on Epa Ale (Night Masquerade) and Ekunrin due to its tremendous role toward the growth of Isan Ekiti and the manner at which it has sustained the reconstruction of historical past of the community. It is a festival that is celebrated amongst the people of the community, which is celebrated annually and has been passed successively down to generations. "The ensuing festival goes on for several days and strengthens the bonds that unite families and communities with departed ancestors." It is believed to help develop trade and commerce and generally bond the people of the community together regardless of their religious beliefs. Members of the society dance to marketplaces, wearing their masks to represent the deceased spirits of their ancestors. The study revealed the rich cultural values of the people of Isan Ekiti, the contact which the celebration of Egungun festival has enhanced over the years and source of attraction by female counterpart to marry from the quarters in which the festival is been celebrated thereby encouraged intra-group relations amongst the various quarters in the community. It also established that, it was not just been celebrated for the fun of it, but with spiritual connotations, re-union with their

ancestors and instrument of unity and peaceful co-existence among the people of the community and neighboring communities. The celebration of Egungun festival had attracted economic gains to the community as sales increased due to influx of people during this period which this study has also revealed.

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