

Egungun Tradition in Trado-Modern Society in South-Western Nigeria

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Abstract Series of Authors have expressed their notions on Egungun tradition where it is still being practiced. The present situation calls for a review and re-assessment of the turn-around of its efficacy as it involves other believers (Christians and Muslims). Generally, people of the world are religious in nature, because of this simple fact, the creator-God, referred to as Olodumare among the Yoruba, is usually called upon in both the emergencies of life, day-to-day blessings, invocations, and salutations. People attach themselves to one deity or the other for their survival in this hostile world. Mbiti (1969) states that Africans are notoriously religious and that the whole organization of the society is maintained by the spiritual forces that pervades it. In support of this submission Parrinder (1954) also is of the opinion that the whole of existence is a religious phenomenon.

Key words: Egungun, tradition, religions, spiritual, ancestors, festivals, trado-modern, society.

1. Introduction

Black Africans to include most of the black people in Diaspora, believe that there is the hierarchy of spirit forces. There is God, the creator of heaven and earth, called by different names in different parts of the world. The spirits and other deities amongst which is the Egungun masquerade are seen to be his mouthpiece on earth. The general picture in the Black societies the world over is that regular communal prayers to God directly is very rare. He is approached through his intermediaries, the deities, spirits and divinities, (egungun inclusive) to intercede for the good of the living.

In trado-modern society, even with the effect of adulteration of belief system, it is believed that the whole universe is not static or dead but dynamic and powerful. There is a strong belief in high God and who all powers flow even with the advent of Christianity and Muslim in place. Most people still believe that the ancestral spirits live in the sky, on earth, and in trees, rocks, and in the bodies of water (Parrinder opt. cit.). God is their creator and "people often think about them in human terms" or treat them as though they had human characteristics such as the ability to think, speak, having intelligence and possess power, which they can use at will.

Aside from this category, there is a special category of spirits in the living-dead, the ancestors better referred to as Egungun masquerades, representing people who died and represented physically in costumed figures. They are referred to as the living-dead different from ghosts. Egungun can talk, give commands, express feelings and can be touched. Ghosts are invisible spirits who cannot do or perform the above listed. Egungun live in the family and considered to still be part of the family. They are believed to be living |close to their homes where they lived when they were human beings. They show interest in their surviving families and in return the families remember them in form of festivals, and people feel more at home with them in both memory and emotion.

2. Religion and Egungun

In Yoruba cosmology, man is believed to be at the center of the whole universe and created by the Supreme Being, God. Therefore religion permeates every facets of life, and it is believed that religion is the strongest element that exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned (Mbiti, Ibid). Religion is therefore always with the people most especially among the rural communities "because their life is closely tied to the land and to the traditional culture" (Mbiti Ibid). In Trado-Modern societies, people still believe in the active existence of the spirits of the dead ancestors – Egungun. They pay homage inform of festival that stands as the magnetic force that draws us nearer to the Creator – God through worship.

In the distant past, Egungun worship embraced a larger population of the traditional society because it was than used as an attribute of religious beliefs. The worshippers cherished its tradition and equally believed in expressing the romantic passion they had in their day-to-day existence here on earth. For this reason, they had full regard for the spiritual, mythical and physical realities of life (Aremu, 1991). In order to comprehend the unending circle of religious belief they had, there was the need for them to gain an insight into the importance of egungun worship. In the present trado-modern society most still believe that egungun is the giver of power to create spiritual and mythical illusions during socio-religious worship – the egungun festival. They still have the belief that egungun is capable of giving to them an endless energy and unconquerable might and power over all detractors who may wish to tamper with their utmost trust in egungun tradition.

As it was in the past, special regard is usually given to egungun whenever they appear because they are incarnated figures with power from the spirit world. As other deities are in the society, so is egungun among the adherents. They worship him, offer sacrifice and rituals and all other religious observance performed. Among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria most especially in Ibadan, Ile-Ife, Modakeke, Oyo, Ogbomoso, Shaki and other Yoruba towns and cities, they still pay homage to the ancestral figures inform of festivals, and all taboos are vehemently adhered to.

It is important to note that the former interest and intensity of purpose of the past have reduced among the adherents. What we have now as egungun festival and worship is an image of what we were used to in the past years (Personal Communication). Things are not as what we used to have, she further added. At Okejan area of Ile-Ife, a male adherent also submitted that the past traditional heritage surrounding egungun worship has been variously embellished thus the reduction in its efficacy (Personal Communication). This notwithstanding, special religious regard is still being given to its worship during annual festivals.

In fact its worship should not be seen as going against our modern religious beliefs, since masquerade is a representation of our "dead father", its annual appearance should not be seen as a religious celebration alone, but as a welcome, whereby the left behinds would then create joyous atmosphere to receive him casually with fun fare before he departs to the world of the spirits. Since he is higher in rank and can incarnate power from the spirit world, problems such as persistent sickness, poverty, barrenness in women, poor harvest and general backwardness of the entire community are taken care of when he appears and if properly and adequately appeased with rituals. What is important to realize is that the spirit world, ranging from God to nature spirits and the ancestors, can to some degree be manipulated since the traditional societies are concerned with the maintenance of the spiritual well-being and stability of the individuals and the group in the society. Egungun festival is therefore the main avenue during which "our father, baba wa; or my father, baba mi, could be approached with various requests that relate to the sustainability of the society or individuals.

The most important reason for this festival is to stimulate the spiritual father to be happy and in return, give blessings and all the good things of life as it was believed in the past by the traditionalists and adherents. Respect is accorded egungun partly because man can never fully understand the ways of the

ancestral spirits, and also because their mythical strength is based on laws of the cosmic order, which is very difficult for human to comprehend.

In the trado-modern societies, egungun festivals provide a joyous occasion when families and relations re-unite to give thanks to God and their ancestors. Friends and relations come from far and near to renew old covenants and acquaintance and make merry.

3. The Costumes

Whenever egungun costume is mentioned, the picture that comes to the fore is the spirit that sojourns in the costume worn. The costume and the spirit inside the costume make the masquerade. Aside of this, according to Kilani Ojekunle of Ile Jagun in Ikire (a town in Osun State) masquerade should be looked at as a mirror with which the ancestral spirit could be imagined, most especially the elder masquerades with their fearful look.

During the annual egungun festival, there is always a visual representation of a variety of costumes and masks. Some costumes are tent-like, with the inclusion of tray-like embankment used as a carrier of charms, animal bones and skulls of monkeys, snakes etc. (Aremu, 1991). The usage of these medicinal and ritual emblems is fast fading out giving way to visual aesthetics. In like vein, the former traditional hand woven cloths called Kijipa among the Yoruba are now being replaced with colourful velveteen, *aran* and *Ankara* cloths, which are often ornamented with beads, mirrors and other contemporary emblems.

In Yoruba area, the origin of egungun costume most especially those under the category of elder masquerade, *eegun agba*, which consists of big and tight fitting cloth at the ankle-line to which a pair of cloth shoes is shown is linked with myths and legends. According to the historical hand out and oral history of the Yoruba, egungun costume was first used to bring an abandoned corpse from the bush into the town under the pretext that it was the spirit of the dead that had returned. While another claimed that the first egungun were the heavenly beings *Saiyegun*, *so aye gun*, sent by *Olodumare* to help stabilize the earth at a period it threatened to collapse. Again, some people even believe that the Yoruba borrowed the egungun tradition from Nupe, their northern neighbours who had once used the mask on the costume to terrorize them. Yet another oral handout even suggests that there lived an old man who was loved by everybody eventually died, his people decided that in order to make his name immortal, his popular wrapper, *Aso Ibora*, made of *Kijipa*, a traditional hand woven fabric, be used as an egungun costume devoid of spirituality.

The former status of most of the costumes worn during the annual or occasional festivals or worships has reduced to visual aesthetic value, the efficacy of the costumes has greatly reduced to mere entertainment structure. Modern or contemporary emblems have assumed larger preoccupation of the festivity. In most egungun costumes, the co-called religious or ritual attachments such as cowries, *owo eyo*; parrots tail, *iko ode*; black medicinal soap, *ose ogun dudu*; skulls of wild animals, such as snakes, monkeys etc have disappeared to give way to mere visual anticipation (Aremu 1995). The reason for this drag-foot change lies in modernity that has taken full control of the traditional situations.

4. Egungun and the Society

In every society, the laws of nature are regarded as being controlled by God directly or through his servants of which Egungun is one, because he has been elevated to a higher level of existence through death. There is a moral order given by God, so that people might live happily and in harmony with one another. This moral order, customs and institutions have risen in all societies to safeguard the life of the individual and the community. Any breach of such morals is an offence against the departed members of the family and against God.

The cream of the Yoruba culture is masquerading. This is a blunt fact that may not be contested or belaboured (Aremu, 1995). Egungun tradition is a complex institution in Yoruba land and in other areas east

of the Niger. It is annually celebrated to give great honour to the ancestral spirits. Egungun festival is very paramount in the hearts of every traditionalist and it is believed to be able to touch every sector of the society. It is the belief of every traditional Yoruba man that the whole society is maintained by the spiritual forces and that the invisible world presses hard upon the visible, and that the mystical power of the ancestors can be potentially used for curative, protective, productive, and preventive purposes.

Among the Igala people of Nigeria, for example, Egu Orumamu, the most important of the masks or spirits is worshipped so as to increase their farm yield. It is also used for social control and sees to the well being of the society. Criminal cases are brought before it for adjudication. Thus it gives to the community and the society at large a broad sense of security because Egungun is the epitome of security, moral and social order. To this end, they have full regard for the spiritual, mythical as well as physical realities of life. So in order to enjoy this circle of life, there is the need to put their trust in what is greater than life itself. To them, what is greater than life is capable of giving to them an endless energy and unconquerable might and power over all detractors in life, Egungun happens to be one of those things to be trusted. Egungun helps to keep moral order in the society, this is because they believe that moral order helps them to work out and know among themselves what is good and evil, right and wrong, truthful and false. Each society is able to formulate its values because there is moral order in the universe, partly supervised by the ancestral spirit, Egungun and other deities. To them and to other believers of Egungun tradition, the ways of the ancestors cannot be explained, and he cannot be fully known. Thus he is "unknown", unexplainable and fathomless. Taboos which strengthen the keeping of moral and religious order are adhered to very strictly. Breaking a taboo entails punishment in the form of social ostracism, misfortune and even death. If people do not punish the offender in the society, then the invisible would. This view arises from the belief in the religious order of the universe, in which God and other invisible beings, of which Egungun is one, are thought to be actively engaged in the world of men.

Murder is for the Igala people the most serious crime as it is amongst the Yoruba people. This is equally so amongst many ethnic groups in Black African countries. Egungun will demand that the family or village of the murderer seek out and give up the criminal, else the entire village or family compound would be quarantined and cut off from the rest of the society; and no one is allowed to enter or leave the compound until the murderer is apprehended. This act is not an ideal gesture, for it implies economic disaster; farms cannot be tended, water from the communal village source cannot be collected and there can be no hunting activities. In short, all subsistence and communal activities come to a halt, and the group is actively cut off from the rest of the society until it has identified and surrendered the criminal. This practice was equally embarked upon in other areas where egungun was cherished in the past years. Egungun used to serve the communities in a large number of contexts, it served as basic survival, several judicial functions and peace making. Thus it gave to the societies and communities where practiced, a broad sense of security in life. Religion and laws are the most powerful legal sanctions to the traditionalists, coming directly from God and masquerade, being one of the agents of the creator God. As it is commonly believed that justice is one of the main pillars of morality; it is therefore the desire for justice and truth which moves one man to ask his accused person to swear by the spirit of the ancestor, this rubberstamps the trust in the spirit. This ancestral spirit enhances a great sense of justice since he is believed to be just, honest and truthful. Whatever he says during his annual visits to his people is considered final. But sometimes this could be manipulated or changed to suit a purpose in life, if well appeased. All the powers got from the deities including the ancestors are very important to the sustenance of the living beings. In return, these powers help man in his incessant fight against diseases, drought or even witchcraft. Such uses ensure a secured, healthful, and fruitful life for the individuals or groups in the society. Thus African societies generally, tend to use this spiritual power openly and publicly for the general well being of the individuals. Egungun is an ancestral spirit in which descendants harness spiritual power to purify and cleanse the society and its inhabitants of malevolent forces (Personal communication). This ancestral figure is seen as the source of answers to all problems of the worshippers.

In the society where egungun tradition is embraced, it is seen as the mouth piece of that society and with this notion; the scope, purpose and religious implications have broadened among the people. In like vein, the pronouncements of the ancestral spirits are decrees which are obeyed implicitly.

Egungun festival, which is one of the most important and essential aspects of egungun worship, functions more on a communal rather than on individual basis. For example, its beliefs are held in a high esteem by the society or community; therefore it does not matter much whether or not the individual accepts all these beliefs attributed to its worship. In most cases, the festival is celebrated mainly by a group of the family, relatives or the whole society in an area or by those engaged in a common belief. During this period, the life of the society or community is renewed because egungun worship is an essential part of the way of life. Its influence covers all of life even if an individual is converted to another religion such as Islam or Christianity, this should not mean abandoning the culture and belief system altogether. This is what is happening in trado-modern societies in Yoruba land. African religion generally, affirms life, and celebrates life. People in the society do not sit down meditating upon life, they ritualize life, they drum life, they shout life, they ceremonize life, they festivize for the individual and for the well being of the community (Mbiti, 1959), through the various deities of which egungun is primary. People know that they are alive and they always want to celebrate the joy of living. Where there is no real conflict between Egungun tradition and other religions, the convert retains much of his or her cultural and religious background as long as he or she remains within the traditional set-up of life. This annual festival involves wearing masks and costumes, dancing, feasting, making offerings and sacrifices, praying, blessing people and general jubilation. During annual festivals the life of the society is renewed; and people are entertained, and their tensions find an outlet. These festivals "bring together the people as a group, thus strengthening their unity and cohesion". Religious and social values are equally repeated and renewed during these festive periods; and there is always a communication with the spirit world, and there is also a link between human beings and the spirits and yet the two world are kept at a healthy distance from each other – dovetailing and yet neither interfering in each other (Mbiti, opt. cit.). Man seizes such occasions to solicit blessings from God through the ancestral spirits – the Egungun Masquerades. He therefore tries to be in harmony with the ancestral spirits. It is pertinent to equally add that man is not the master in the universe, he is only at the center, the friend, the beneficiary, the user, and has to obey the laws of natural, moral and mystical order. Therefore, man looks for the usefulness of the universe; this means both what the world can do for man and how man can use the world for his own good.

5. Conclusion

Lastly, much of what we see and discuss about Egungun Masquerades today relates to a way of life that has been significantly affected in the past centuries by changes in our beliefs and aspirations as well as the economic and political change (Delange, 1974). A few of these changes attempted a frontal attack on the religious beliefs of the people. Nonetheless, they had the subtle but demonstrable effect of undermining the old values of the past that supported egungun worship as well as other traditional and religious activities in Yoruba land. What we used to have in the past concerning Egungun masquerade has actually changed form. New era has brought about changes in the outlook, worship and belief system in trado-modern society in Yoruba land. Could this be referred to as a step forward or a reduction in traditional religious beliefs.

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