

Origin: Encomium and Economic Important of Egungun Festival in Ogbomoso

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Abstract:

Egungun among the Yoruba people as fondly called is a great and without exaggerations an impressive annual festival which impact on the economic activities could not be left out in the Yoruba land. Egungun festival is an historical event that brings together people from far and near to see the prove of evidence of the Yoruba strong religious beliefs and how it has been cleverly evolved to solved their problems and proficiency of the so-called Egungun, and overtime developed the potential substance of a sudden development in economic activities. The study revealed the origin of Egungun, How the festival draws people from far and near to partake in the festival, how it helps in the development of economic activities. The study derived its data from both Oral and and secondary sources. The study concluded that Egungun Festival has its incredible way of helping economic growth and is one of the last iota of culture left on Yoruba body of culture.

Keywords:

Encomium; Egungun Festival; Ogbomoso; Origin

I. Introduction

According to Yorùbá oral traditions, "Eesa Ogbin Ologbojo," the eponymous ancestor of Yorùbá carvers was the first masked performer in the court of the Alaaafin of Oyo. The first costume consisted of several layers of sash, or ooja, borrowed or appropriated from women- hence the tradition of intricate assemblages of colorful fabrics by any Egungun. Alapini, one of the palace officials, is the head in the hierarchy of the Egungun folds. And the events is normally preformed by the male members of the group who have the extreme religious beliefs in the Egungun. Slaves, those who have no special knowledge or experience about Egungun, and those who are not behaving politely in social situations and those who are not part of the established religion are forbidden to take part in the activities. In the same vien, women are only allowed to dance around or in front of the Egungun, their songs and chant are so essential, as it mused the exciting event and success of the festival.

Egungun festival, is one of the series of events organized and that is celebrated annually, in the Western Region, Nigeria most especially among the Yorubas, and some other parts of the country. The festival s been successively passed down to generations. Egungun festival, has overtime helped to develop, mutual relations between the groups in Yoruba land and beyond, inter-tribal marriage, trade and commerce, etc, and has generally bond the people together regardless of their religious beliefs. The events is kick-started with memebbers of the society dance to marketplaces, wearing of artifacts- a symbolic relics that represent the deceased spirit of their ancestors, while the Ifa Oracle decides the spirit to be worshipped for the year.

According to Laura Leddy Turner in one of her article, "what's the purpose of the Masquerades & their meanings" The word "masquerade" has its roots in the French word "mascarade" and the Italian word "maschera." "However, the concept and the practice of masked event of people represented as the ancestors was originated on the West African coast." Similarities exist between the Italian Commedia dell' Arte and the Nigerian Yoruba masked comedy. Masquerade gained its momentum first in Venice, Italy and the practice of masquerade balls quickly spread throughout Europe and England in the 18th century. 'During the same period, African ceremonial masquerades spread to the Caribbean and southeastern United States, where it evolved into carnivals.'

II. Review of Literature

West African Masquerade

According to West African custom, masquerade in the West Africa sense refers to the activities performed by masked characters, it includes the actions, the character in question as portrayed by the performer himself. It is also necessary to understand here that masquerade in the African setting is an outdoor event, performed by men and sometimes certain events are limited to secret cult of the Egungun. Examples worth mentioning is the Ekpe masquerade which has its roots in the Nigerian Cross River State and is used in ceremonies accompanied by cultural drama. The Ofirima masquerade, also originating from the Cross River State, features a lead dancer wearing a headpiece resembling a shark.

Egungun, (egúngún with Yorùbá language tone marks), as earlier discussed and in it's widest frame in Yourba, masquerade-a masked and diabolical costumed figure. More importantly, masquerade in any Yoruba is considered to be a means of ancestor reverence, or the re-incarnation of the deads. 'Eégún is the reduced form (abbreviation through assimilation) of the word Egúngún and has the same meaning'. 'There is a misconception that Egun or Egun (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 Orisha devotees that do not speak Yorùbá language as a vernacular'.

However, the Egungun festival in Yourba land is an exceptional form of masquerade that gives credence to the family's ancestral spirit, and bring to remembrance the life of the gone heroes, particularly those who have left an indelible mark in the sand of time, those who had exhibit some great power, such as warriors, great hunters, kings etc, while they were alive. In essence, Egungun is a visible and credible manifestation of the spirit of departed ancestors whom they believed to have gone to the next world and periodically revisit the human community for, celebration, remembrance, and blessings. This period is usually busy and promising, it is fanatically believed that the heaven is wide open for the descending and ascending of ancestors, to answer all prayers, heart desires. This is strongly believed since the masked being is the reincarnating spirit climbing down from their covert place (heaven) there is a fixed faith that each prayers will attract appropriate answers.

The annual celebration of Egungun in honour of the dead by the Yorubas and in respect for tradition and religion, serve as a means of assuring their ancestors a place among the living. They believe the ancestors have the responsibility to force the living to uphold the ethical standards of the past generations of their clan, town or family. The Egungun are celebrated in festivals, known as Odun Egungun, and in family rituals through the masquerade custom. In the West Africa settings each family has it own ancestral spirit they worship as

masked figure, outrightly different from the local Egungun society, the family elder formally or informally called "Alagba" presides over ancestral rites. The "Alagba" might not necessarily need to get initiated into the society of the Egungun cult before he takes massive action in the family affairs. In matters that deal with the 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 are adorned with adorable costumes as masked figure. Through drumming invocation and dance, the masked figures performers are believed to become possessed by the spirits of the ancestors, as manifested as a single entity. The Egungun is believed to spiritually cleanse the community; through the dramatic acting and miming of the robed priests, they demonstrate both ethical and moral 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 of Egungun give messages, warnings and blessings to the assembled spectators.

In the West African believe, Egungun creation could be grouped by categories; first, the ancestral spirits have the ability to decide on the body of whom they would descend on, just like the Sango worshippers are possessed in the gory of their intoxication, the ancestral spirit likewise descend on its victims. There are records of Egungun in Ogbomoso whereby the ancestral spirit spoke via the mouth of oracle divination whom it's worthy to bear their spirits, likewise the masquerader (Aruku) is designed by the spirit itself, an example was cited in the later part of this paper. Also not all family or society have their religion close to masquerades or masked figures, many were self-invoked and carved by families who have developed a kind of love in having one, it might be because of the joy it puts to the minds of people, or the fact that it masks the person within the costume or the audience or followers that stream behind it. "And lastly, Egungun spring out from a family whereby there has been somebody with some remarkable spiritual powers: maybe the person is fond of sitting on the wind comfortably like "Ajomogbodo" meaning "he, who sits without stool" on of the old Egungun in ogbomoso. A family who has a person with great spiritual command can decide to keep it in the sand of time and show it forth annually in remembrance of the person."

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Egungun Festival In Ogbomoso

Ogbomosho town, Oyo state, southwestern Nigeria. It lies on the Plateau of Yorubaland (elevation 1,200 feet [366 m]) in an area of savanna and farmland and at the intersection of roads from Oyo, Ilorin, Oshogbo, and Ikoyi. Founded in the mid-17th century, it remained a minor outpost of the Yoruba Oyo empire until the beginning of the Muslim Fulani conquests of Oyo in the early 19th century.

Ogbomoso is an historic town with a historic record which speaks aloud its valour in yorubaland. Ogbomoso is a symbol of courage, valour, strength and temerity, it's a name that was fused together as a result of the great courage of the first village town, Ogunlola, he was a great 'Ibariba' hunter, a warrior and a leader who was sent to Oyo as a prisoner, to be judged- he murdered one of his friends, he was kept in the prison when he heard about 'Elemosho', and helped Oyo to conquer Elemosho who had terrorized Oyo for many years, he didn't just conquered 'Elemosho' he beheaded him with a strand of broom and brought to the sight of the whole Oyomesi. He was urged to stay and live in Oyo, but he said "Eje ki a ma soun" meaning "let me go and dominant thence" he was rewarded with the gift of land in

the Savannah, not far from Oyo and Ogunlola was named the ruler of the land, he became the first "Soun" of Ogbomoso land. The fact that Ogunlola conquered and beheaded 'Elemosho', it turns to a slogan, whenever he showed up, calling him 'Eni ti o'gbori Elemosho' meaning 'The one who behead Elemosho' it was from here the name of the town was coined, overtime it changed to Ogbomoso,

Having survived the Fulani's attack, refugees from far and near fueled up the town, and subsequently became one of the largest Yoruba settlements. 'Ogbomosho's 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 Oshogbo, 32 miles (51 km) southeast, the town shifted its allegiance from Oyo to Ibadan.'

Ogbomoso currently is one of Nigeria's largest and fastest growing urban centers. Ogbomoso is heavily inhabited by Yoruba farmers, hunters, traders, artisans, to mention a few. Ogbomoso grows yam, cassava, maize, Guinea corn, and sorghum, these were the major export to the cocoa producing areas of the Yorubaland,"to the south; teak is also exported, and tobacco is cultivated for the cigarette factory at Ibadan, 58 miles (93 km) south-southeast." Cotton is grown and used for weaving "Aso-Oke" the traditional Yoruba cloth, Sanyan is equally made by the Ogbomoso weavers and performed mostly by women. "Although the craft of wood carving has declined, the town is known for its early wood artifacts and for its unique koso drums. Ogbomosho serves as a staging point and market for cattle, and it has a government livestock station. The town also has a shoe and rubber factory. Local trade is primarily in staple crops, palm oil, kola nuts, beans, fruits, and cotton."

In his article, "Ajomogbodo: The Ogbomoso Mystical Egungun That Sits Comfortably Without Needing A Chair" Femi Ogunlana writes: "Egungun festival in Ogbomoso is a tourist attraction especially in the past years before the institutionalization of Christianity and Islam. Tourists did come from all over the world; from Brazil, Canada, U.S.A., Italy, United Kingdom and from several African countries to witness the enterprising show." Ogbomoso during the Egungun festival always increase in its population, due to tourist from far and near who are willing to catch a glimpse of the series of the unfolding events, more importantly this period is usually a buoyant season for entrepreneurs, marketers and public sectors alike, sales are tended to increase or stay at a high level, thus showing financial success during the period in question. The trend however is changing, civilization is having its toll and its importance is vastly dwindling.

The Egunguns' place of rendezvous at Okelerin in those days was always a beehive of activities with lots of gyrations, canings and counter-canings and deadly encounters among rival Egunguns. There were powerful, fear, and respected Egungun Eleru (Nla), they attract a lot of spectators because of their exceptionality, voodoo, ability to make some important things to happen with their special power and other features. Some of which are "Lembeleri", "a powerful Egungun abandoned over 70 years ago because of the unbearable rituals associated with it; Kongba or Oroko that has the unique power to draw a rival Egungun's followers to its trail and can attack rivals with bees stored in its ear lobes; the energetic Lobanika, the king's Egungun that brandishes poisoned sword; Danafojura, whose mystery is bathing in fire while shouting of cold; Awodagbese behind whom if one had a wound would not heal until the third year when it comes out again; Ayilere whose attribute is wallowing in any available muddy water; Arenugbongi with a mouth protruding like birds' beak'.

It is also worth mentioning of Egungun "Ajomogbodo", one of the fiercest Egungun in Ogbomoso, supernaturally capable of sitting comfortably in the air, or space without the aid of a stool or chair, It is generally believed to have strong voodoo power and it comes out on the last two days of the festival usually one-and-a-half week festival. Ajomogbodo is a masquerade that surrounds its spectators with interesting and exciting moments of events, both old and young, Africans at home and in diaspora, Europeans and the Americans alike, who have one time or the other watched the masquerade displayed his magic, tricks and exhibit his skills with amazement. Ajomogbodo is incomparable with its kind, this Egungun gained its prominence in its yearly celebration, this was partly because the custodian of the masquerade were fanatically disciplined and would not forsake the traditions on the alter of either Islam, Christianity or any other religion. Ajomogbodo has defied extinction because every year, it comes out to entertain its numerous lovers.

In its yearly outings, just like the ilk of Egungun is always celebrated with festivities; people dine and wine, sacrifices are offered and many preparations made to usher in the coming out of the dreaded, formidable but amiable Egungun. The masquerader or the custodian (Aruku), son of the immediate past masquerader, (now late) Pa James Balogun, the venue was the family house in Okelerin, very close to Aale compound, the monarch of Okelerin. Mr. Bayo Balogun, a carpenter by profession, was spoken briefly to before going under the mask and he confirmed the awe-inspiring tales about the Egungun, Mr. Bayo Balogun took over the mantle before the demise of his father, it was from there it was revealed that certain secrets were lurking behind and couldn't be revealed to outsiders. Ajomogbodo, he said, is an Egungun conveyed by his forebears from the warfront. "When our forefathers were returning from a war, they just saw an object on the pathway, they retrieved it, brought home the strange object and it is what became Ajomogbodo today," Balogun stated, Egungun Ajomogbodo, he informed, is an Egungun that has become a source of blessing to people, "It blesses people and it comes to pass, many women struck with childlessness have become mothers, it delivers people who come to it from various problems."

Danafojura - The One Who finds pleasure in Bathing with fire. This is one of the ancient and mammoth proportion of Egungun in Ogbomoso, who has the ability to double the population of the town on its day of celebration, people come from far and near to witness the event. To witness how Danafojura freeze himself and his followers cover him with dry leaves and set him on fire to keep him warm, however the unexpected things would happen, he remained unburnt, unharmed and would come out of the burning fire, not even a strand of hair getting burnt, despite the furnace kindling on him. Danafojura is an Egungun from the Alakasu family. According to one of the family members who is also Danafojura's anchor: "...there is a fire at the back yard kindled by the person to whom the heavenly ancestral spirit will possess, this fire no matter how heavy the rain might be it would not gutter out, it must remain smouldering till he comes back in the evening. Also, concerning Danafojura, our father, won't come without a proper eulogy from the women of the house who would invoke on him, the spirit of our forefathers. Currently, there are three old women who execute such responsibility... and as for others, our work is to seek good heart of the ancestors by giving each deity in the shrine its appropriate sprinkle of libations as we plunge our mouths into recondite, speaking utterance, the language in which they understand. To seek for goodness, for peace in the society, to plead them to answer all prayers..."

Danafojura, is one of the exceptional Egungun widely celebrated in Ogbomoso, one of his ardent followers noted that unlike other Egungun, Danafojura is celebrated once in

three years. It is believed that its celebration calendar is different, hence, the dates to be celebrated is designed by its custodian. It was also reported, according to Mr Ezekiel, the present custodian of Danafojura was a choir master in his church when he was said to have been chosen by the oracle who was left with no choice than to accept the oracular offer. In essence, Danafojura is a well built relics of monumental cultural civilization in Ogbomoso, that must not go into oblivion. He has the power to make people unconscious and revive them. He is an ancient and powerful Egun highly feared and respected among his peers, where he is considered as an "ELDER" in the clan. Especially for its ability to double the population of the town on the day of its celebration. And beyond this, Egungun festival as whole has been of immense importance to economic activities in Ogbomoso and its surroundings.

3.2 Economic Important of Egungun in Ogbomoso

The impact of Egungun festival cannot be under estimated in Nigeria, distinctly in ancient ogbomoso town. The impact of Egungun festival in Ogbomosho, caught through all spheres of development, ranging from social, political and economic development. Egungun festival, one of the integral cultural heritage with values and quality belief, that Yorubas embrace with complete enthusiasts, which transcend the society and send the signals of how beautiful, rich, and the silent reminder of how creative the evolvement of a monumental civilization lies in the environment

Economically, Egungun festival has the potential substance for rapid growth of the economy in Ogbomosho and wherever it's being practiced. One of which is Tourism: Tourism according to Oxford Advanced Dictionary "is the business activity connected with providing accommodation, services and entertainment for people who are visiting a place for pleasure." Tourism is by far one of the largest and fastest growing industry in the World, and had equally gained its pace in Nigeria. However, it might be difficult if not totally impossible for the Federal Government of Nigeria, to hearken to the call for tourism, as it might be a call for shift from it's traditional conservative position that relied heavily on agriculture and the crude oil economy.

The Federal government, in an effort to create a new image for the country, some of the cultural sites got approval, such as, Osun grove in Osogbo, Idanre hill and Ikogosi (warm and cold spring) in Ondo State as world heritage sites. The above was a confirmation that truly the Nigeria government is showing interest in the tourism industry. And also indicated the federal government readiness to increase and sustain its internally generated revenue (IGR). To further demonstrate its commitment and sincerity in the tourism industry, a rebranding exercise for the national tourism initiative was launched where tourism was declared a perfect sector with attractive incentives attached to the industry.

In the sane vein, Egungun in Ogbomoso caught Tourists attention. And there have been records of tourists from countries like Cuba, Brazil, United kingdom etc who came towitness the proficiency spirituality and gaiety in the practice of egungun. Many had come in disbelief to witness what they had heard about a particular Egungun in Ogbomosho, It must be noted that some years ago, some white people came to inspect and witness how one of the important and elderly members of the Egungun cult namely, " Ajomogbodo" could sit on air comfortably without a stool or chair. And when they witness it themselves, they believed and undoubtedly embraced belief. Though the tourism impact of the Egungun festival in Ogbomoso has not reached the level of "payment" or revenue gathering. But considerably it has assisted in the wide spread of the good gospel of Egungun as a part of ancient culture in

Ogbomoso, also throughout the world. Even though according to anchors of the practices, it would soon reach the stage.

Secondly, Egungun festival as aforementioned, it is a traditional festival which attracts people from far and near. Aside from Christmas, and "Ileya" as fondly called by Muslims, Egungun festival is an integral annual festival that allowed sons and daughters of Ogbomosho in diaspora to witness the festival. Therefore, a great number of people flood the ancient town of Ogbomoso, both home and abroad to participate in the annual festival. The festival provides an avenue for economic boost for the towns and cities in which it takes place. At such a moment, it is noticed that Egungun festival doubled the population of Ogbomoso and unsurprisingly strange faces flooded the nook and cranny of the town. Particularly it is noted that the town experience a mammoth crowd when elderly and unique Egungun comes out on its assigned day, the reasons were not far-fetched, partly because more events and series of activities were engaged, moreover the coming out of the unique masquerade always marked the end of the festival in a grand style. The perfect sample of this type of Egungun is "Danafojura" and others who celebrate in intervals of two to three years. No doubt masses of fans are keenly in expectation of them and that increases the crowd with scores of numbers. So, it is an indisputable fact that foreigners who came in would have to get food and groceries, some develop interest in local attires, others in local stuffs and other locally made goods. Urbanite tourists from Lagos and Abuja fill hotels, buy local food, and snap countless pictures on their phones. So, sellers set their goods by the roadside at the constant route of the Egungun anchors and fans, either edible or not. Some visitors however, walk down to marketplaces, get whatever it is they needed and enjoy their moment of stay.

IV. Conclusion

The ancient city of Ogbomoso witnessed a high speed of economic growth, it favors both sides, there is utmost balance of interest between the buyers and the sellers. In other words, one can justify its conclusion that the Egungun festival coupled with its numerous activities, could be seen as a strategy to promote market and coordinate numerous tourism activities in Ogbomoso which aims at achieving specific objectives.

Finally, one unique economic importance aspect of Egungun Festival in Ogbomoso is that, it promote and boost the sales and patronage of local commodities. It is a common phenomenon that during the festive season of Egungun, virtually everyone is in their local attire- an indication of showing the richness and beauty of their material culture, exhibit through dressing, hairdo, tattoo etc as many put coral beads on hands and necks. Foreigners are however, much more enticed with what they have seen, thus the spread of the material culture. In some cases, the custodian of the Egungun festival, invoked some supernatural forces into the displayed artifact, mainly to assured protection, god's blessings and sometimes used as a defensive potent charm to ward off evil. Meanwhile, a moment like this is spirit filled and to kindle the fire of interest in the mind of the people, those who have witnessed and experienced the originality of the the voodoo would testify to it and consequently become a craft to reckoned with for both home born and foreigners alike. By doing so, cultural or homemade commodities will be known from far and near cities and countries.

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