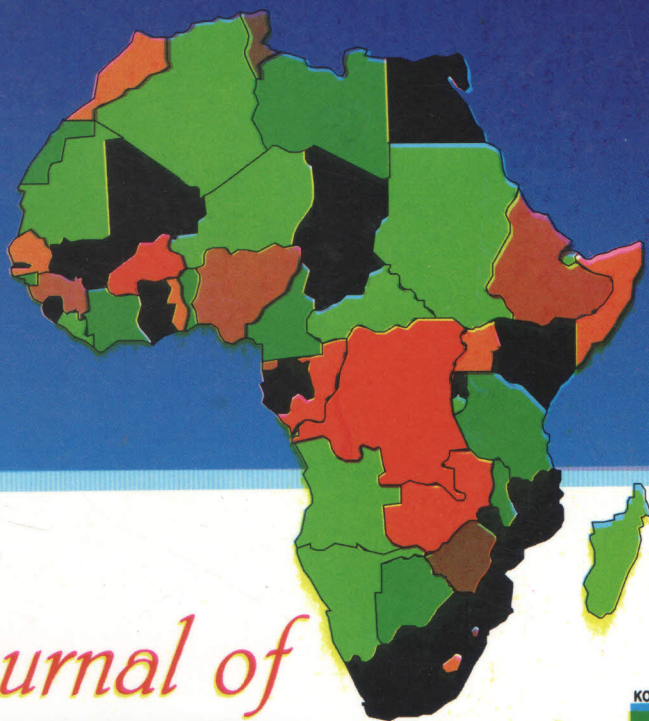




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TRADITIONAL RELIGION AMONG THE OWE PEOPLE: A HISTORICAL AND THEATRICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ABOH EGUNGUN MASQUERADE FESTIVALS SINCE 1900.

Shuaib, S. O. PhD, Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin,
Lewu, M. A. Y. Department of History and International Studies, University of Ilorin and Adedayo, F.B Department of Social Studies, Kogi State Polytechnic, Lokoja

Abstract

From time immemorial, Africans have celebrated various traditional festivals as part of their religious activities. That is why Chinua Achebe¹ noted that culture as a way of life plays a prominent role in the cultural and religious life of Africans. Owe (Kabba) people are no exception. In the light of this fact, this paper seeks to shed light on the Aboh Egungun, masquerade festival celebrated annually by some Owe(Kabba) people of Kogi State in North-eastern Nigeria since 1900. Using both primary and secondary sources, the study takes a cursory historical and theatrical look at the various processes of the Aboh festival including the different Egungun masquerades, their colourful costumes, dance steps, dramatic expressions and general aesthetic qualities. It discovered that the Aboh Egungun festival serves as a unifying factor among the owe people as all and sundry troupe out to Ala, the open field where performances are usually held. In addition, despite the religious connotation, spectators are entertained and enlightened. The study concludes that despite the influence of Western education and foreign religions, the festival remains an important cultural festival even in the 21st century because of its significant contributions to the socio-cultural and religious development of Owe society. As it is celebrated every December, it is hoped that with some modifications, its tourism potential could be enormous.

Introduction

Owe people are found in Kabba and about twenty nine surrounding villages located on latitude 0705⁰N and longitude 605⁰E, below the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers.² Their immediate neighbours include the Bunu on the Northeast, Igbirra on the Northwest, Ogidi in Ijumu on the Southeast and Okro-Gedde on the Northwest.³ The Owe claim origin from Ile-Ife and are a subgroup of the Yoruba but they inhabit Northeast Yorubaland. Though the British colonial masters classified them in the north for administrative convenience they have historical, cultural and linguistic affinities with the Yoruba in South-western Nigeria.⁴

Owe people practise the three major religions, Christianity, African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Islam, the first being the most popular while the last is the least practised. Despite the prevalence of Christianity, the Owe still engage in some aspects of traditional religion through the annual *Eborah*, (the arch Owe divinity) and *Aboh*, (*egungun*, masquerade) festivals among others.⁵

These festivals are indigenous cultural institutions that have developed distinctive features and techniques over the centuries in these communities. They have become the platforms with which the people spontaneously respond to their religious inclinations and beliefs by coordinating virtually all the art forms in their society. As such, they are conceived as instruments of socialization, community participation and togetherness. In view of this, the focus of this study is on *Aboh* egungun festival that is believed to be the spirit of the dead ancestors who come from heaven annually to visit the Owe community, especially his children and grandchildren.

Aboh Festival

There are several Owe traditions about the origin of the *Aboh* festival. One says that it originated from the *Omo'do* clan whose forebears came to Owe land without any of their gods and one day was visited by a masquerade. The couple's hospitality impressed the visitor so much that he revealed his identity as a citizen of heaven and showed them the secret of egungun which has remained with them ever since.⁶ Another tradition traced the origin to a masquerade, *Iyel'ugbo* and two people who came to Kabba with her and subsequently gave birth to other masquerades totalling about two hundred and one (201)⁷ The last one was traced the origin of the *Aboh* festival to the reigning monarch when the *Idamori* arrived Kabba. He was said to have given them the egungun festival since they were not going to be allowed to partake in the worship of the *Oro Eborah*, the supreme Owe deity.⁸ Borrowing from Awolalu and Dopamu's idea that immigrants introduce their cultures to new settlements thus necessitating the celebration of festivals,⁹ one would tend to believe the *Iyel'ugbo* version. The *Idamori* clan probably brought the egungun festival from where they migrated to Oweland. However, one common thread that runs through the three versions is the exclusiveness of the festival to the *Idamori* clan among the Owe.

The *Aboh* is a two-day annual festival celebrated in December exclusively by the *Idamori* or *Omo'do* (these words are used interchangeably in this paper) clan among the Owe which other clans and strangers can only watch but do not participate in. During the *Aboh*, the *Omo'do* worship the egungun god believed to symbolise all their dead ancestors who return from time to time to share meals which had been offered in their shrines with family members to symbolise continuity.¹⁰ The ancestors are regarded as heads of the families left behind which they are believed to continue to affect positively or negatively; one could call them some sort of 'guardian angel' of family affairs. Every member of the *Omo'do* clan comes home from far and near to worship the masquerades and seeks the protection/blessings of their ancestors believed to possess the ability to punish any moral offences committed. Failure to celebrate the festival is believed to bring misfortune to the adherents.¹¹ Certain preparations were made for the successful celebration of this festival.

The Preparations for Aboh Festival

Due to the intricate nature of the festival, the preparation of Aboh festival in the

discourse is categorised into two stages. While the first stage discusses the planning, organisation, and coordination of the artistic and visual aesthetics of the festival with the motive of showcasing spectacular performances and entertaining the spectators, the second phase is more concerned with the religious and spiritual essence of the festival. In this regard, the discussion on the festival's preparation will start with the socialization preparatory stage in this order:

Socialization Preparatory Stage

In the socialization preparatory stage of the festival, great attention is paid to the mundane and secular requirements of the festival as evidenced in music, dance, food, make-up and other visual theatrical embellishment perceived in hand properties such as cane, hand fans, and so on in order to entertain the participants and ascertain the successful realization of the festival. In view of this, colourful costume designs symbolically amplified in masque dramaturge are highly favoured and given a pride of place among other visual appurtenances of the festival, so much so, that the new attires are made or former ones remodelled for the *egungun*.¹² This creative incentive is however conjectured to represent and communicate the rich indigenous culture of the Owe people to the audience through an aesthetically pleasing performance. In view of this, gentle and friendly masquerades are beautifully and colourfully dressed while the hostile ones which whip the spectators at the slightest provocation like other *egungun* of their type are fiercely dressed in not too colourful attires.¹³

Interestingly, the accounts of Aboh masque dramaturge within the Aboh festival may not be complete without mentioning that during the preparatory period of the festival most of the carved masks crafted for the egungun are usually bought from professional carvers of different lineage craft guild within the community, except in some few cases when the carver built his own costumes by himself. By this arrangement, however, most of the masks are believed to vividly relate and reflect masquerades ancestral lineage to the audience. This is because their artistic dramaturgy is normally inspired and rooted in each lineage historical antecedents.¹⁴

Apart from the egungun masque costume acquisition process already articulated, other significant preparatory measures incorporated into the production style of the festival are found in the organization of dances, songs, properties, make-up and sound effect of the festival. To this effect, varied masquerade dance rehearsals are planned and organised to harness, and showcase different dance steps, movements and acrobatic displays peculiar to the chorographic patterns of various *egungun* lineage during the festival¹⁵. Not only that, important musical instruments ensemble such as drums and flutes coupled with the theme songs of the festival are also harvested, arranged and rehearsed beforehand to harmonise their lyrics and the multiplicity of their rhythms in ensuring a hitch free musical experience during the festival¹⁶. Similarly, essential hand properties found in canes, hand-fans, staff and stools are also created, bought, or revamped from existing stock in preparation for this grand occasion, although, generally, no make-up material is usually applied on the egungun

themselves due to the complex design of their costumes which covers all their bodies¹⁷. Yet, the manifestations of makeup art are still reflective in cam-wood and local-chalk materials rubbed on the bodies of some of their main female adherents during the festival. This informs why necessary arrangements are made for the procurement these materials before the festival.

Spiritual Preparatory Stage

As an annual religious thanksgiving festival meant to celebrate the egungun for blessings received the previous year, spiritual propitiation of the ancestral spirits is very sacrosanct to the overall success of the festival. Hence, on the eve of the festival, the egungun priests offered some ritual sacrifices of chicken or goat at the egungun shrine to ensure the success of the festival. Purification sacrifice called *Ofin* or "cleansing" is usually carried out to appease and seek the approval of the *Abure* god who coordinates the ancestral spirits. Items needed include palm wine, fish and locust beans. In a process called *Da emu Abure*, which connotes pour the *Abure's* wine, To assist this process, a big dried smoked cat fish, *ekacpa abori*, is prepared with plenty of locust beans, *iru*, to sharpen the mouth of *Abure* known for her sharp tongue for insulting those who crossed her path during the spiritual cleansing.¹⁸ Subsequently, the *Oyere* takes place. This is an event that entails drumming, singing and dancing round the town by both men and women to announce that the festival would be celebrated in five days.¹⁹ This is because the manifestation of ritual goes beyond its unique socio-religious function to embrace performative arts, where presentational arts such as music, dance, poetry, chant, story-telling, role playing, acrobatic, costuming, make-up and spectacle and so on are harnessed in a dynamic manner for religious, didactic, entertainment, and aesthetic purposes²⁰, in order to interpret the spiritual in the physical and fulfil the expectation of the society. In view of this, one of the songs that herald the beginning of the festival is highlighted thus:

Odunjoooree

Oyere, odunjoooyere

Slowly, the celebration has come

Oyere, it has come.²¹

The above songs are proverbial and symbolic songs meant to prepare a level playing ground for the smooth take-off of the festival because they usher in some important spiritual events that take place on the day of the festival.

Events during Aboh Day

The commencement of the Aboh festival is usually announced with some spiritual activities. In the morning of the festival, for example, the custodians of the masquerades' shrine usually carry the egungun stools from the *Otu Eleso's* house, the traditional head of the *Omo'do* clan and chief priest of the *egungun* to the *Ile Egun*, the *egungun* grove in dramatic mimetic movements usually indicative of the sacredness of their mission. The stools are also returned to the *Otu Elesho's* house in the same mimetic movements after which he offers thanksgiving sacrifice and appeal to his people for peace and harmony in

Oweland.²² Thereafter, in the evening of the festival, *ArihunAboh*, and all the *Omodo* keep virgil singing and dancing until the arrival of the *Inu-Oko*, the masquerade that had gone to the forest months earlier.²³ The egungun appear for the first time at dusk and dance to beats of drums specially adapted for the festival. All pledges made in the previous year are redeemed and *Inu-oko* foretells the future to whoever gives him money first. The idiom in this dance is to neutralise the accumulated evil of the past and prepare the community spiritually for the new-year which starts at the dawn of the following day.



Fig.1: Inu Oko Masquerade

The Theatrics in Aboh Performance

Apart from the ritualistic dramatic enactment that usually take place in the morning of the festival, many theatrical activities are also witnessed in the masquerade performances of Aboh day with respect to dance, costume, setting, songs, music and properties etc²⁴. This is because right from the dawn of the festival, the masquerades who are the main performers of the occasion dance round the town in their various colourful attires embedded in masque dramaturgical ideals showering blessings on the people of the community. But, in the evening which is usually the climax of the festival, it is customary for them to come to the *Ala*, (a large open field) designated for staging their usual annual dance performances and acrobatic displays²⁵ to showcase the dexterity and beauty of their dances and also communicate their ancestral lineage and characterisation to the audience. This show is usually well attended by all and sundry who are always well entertained.²⁶ To add glamour and spectacle to the occasion, some masquerades from other parts of Owe land and Ebirraland, especially Ajima and Anigboro from *IkowOpa*, (across the Opa stream) respectively often visited to

perform at the *Ala* with masquerades resident in Kabba town.²⁷ Interestingly, in each of the egungun performances there is always a single central character who is the pivot of the performance. This masquerade is the one who represents the community or the lineage where they come from and the burden is on him to give explicit artistic expression to the message being conveyed or the idea being celebrated because a mere look at him must transmit virtually all the ideas he stands for to the audience.²⁸

To this end, the masquerades take turns to perform according to the different categories; some like *Ajima*, *Ayinmode*, *Mejele* and *EgunGboro* are very tall. Others that are of medium height include the *Monure*, a gentle, beautifully dressed dancer and favourite of many due to her personal aesthetic appeal and graceful dance steps which she conveys through the use of decorated hand fans to the spectators. The *Alase* on the other hand though looks frightening, but dances well with the dexterity and energy that accompany his accuracy at fortelling the future to the audience. The *Inu-oko* does not dance much but is noted for being the errand boy to *Iyelu'gbo* during the festive season.²⁹ The *Omodo* believe that months before the festival, the *Inu-Oko* leaves the shrine for the forest (supposedly to bring messages for *Iyel'ugbo*) where he remains until the eve of the festival. It is also believed that whoever meets him while on an errand would die because it was said that a dog who met him on such errands died. Thereafter, it was forbidden to meet him on the way before delivering his message to *Iyel'ugbo*, on the eve of the festival.³⁰



Fig. 2: Egun Gboro Masquerade



Fig. 3: Monure Masquerade



Fig. 4: Alase Masquerade

The Supporting Performers

Though the masquerades take centre stage during the *Aboh* festival through their beautiful performances, other supportive players include *Iyel'ugbo* who does not come out but makes her presence felt through intermittent screams from the grove. She is reputed to be so large that no attire can cover her nakedness. The following *oriki*, cognomen reflects this assertion:

Iyel'ugboobara,
A b'omulala lulu,

Ok'omuluraojokulariro.
Iyel'ugbo I jodasoonakadura
*Oko'le pale meta, ole yot'arin re.*³¹

Translation:

Massive Iyel'ugbo,
 With breasts full of milk,
 She released her breasts and the rain started suddenly,
 Her body is covered half way,
 She built a three storey-building and thieves removed the middle floor.
 The followings are the *oriki* panegyrics of some of the mentioned *egungun*:

Monure:

Uyigbogbo'ra,
Abebelowomejeji,
*Abi'josekuseku.*³²

Translation:

She is very beautiful,
 Uses decorated hand fans on both hands to dance,
 She is a good dancer.

Inu-Oko:

Inuroko atatantiti,
A duma dumade'su,
Ojokoleonimodun,
*Oyeb'ofon re jo, yabatemijo.*³³

Translation

Inu-oko that stands like a rock against evil,
 He sees today and sees years to come,
 Goitre fits his neck and not mine.

The foregoing songs are reminiscent of the fortune telling prowess of *Inu-oko*. However, apart from the *egungun*, the highest ranking female participant in the *Aboh* festival is the *Oyhe* regarded as the wife of the *egungun* that cooks for them. The food is wrapped in the *Iyangobi* leave not sold in the market but found in certain strategic places. She must be an elderly widow because she cannot be married and also be the *egunguns'* wife. She is assisted by *Akakoko*, the second in command among the women who on the eve of the festival leads the women to the shrine where they sing and dance.³⁴ Other women that participate actively include the *Imole* who sing and dance round the town in commemoration of the highlighted festival. Also, other male supporting performers at the occasion who play one significant role or the other include; *Ekute*; the message intermediary between the *egungun* and his descendants, *Otu*; the leader of *omo'do* clan who relays the *egunguns'* message to members of his clan, as well as, *Aluba*; who is the drummer responsible for the beating of *Agbe* drum; a sacred drum made of clay usually played during the performances of the masquerades and lastly, *Afonun*; the flutist who blows the flute for the *egungun* dance performances during the festival.

After the performance, in the evening, the *Aboh* *egungun* return to the grove

known as *Ile Egun*, the *Ile Egun*, grove, is another important spatial space situated in town for *egungun* activities. The building is old and is designed in complete traditional circular motif divided into three sections with only one door. The first section, *Alemo Palasi*, is the area where the women sit and wait for the appearance of the *egungun*, it is an abomination for women to cross this area. The second area, the *Ogba Okura* is where *Ile-Iye* the fearless youths stay and discuss matters that relate to the *egungun*. The third section is the where only the elders who are initiates can reach.³⁵

The Positive Impact of *Aboh* Festival on Oweland

1. It fosters unity among the people with a common identity especially, the *Omodo*.
2. People who watch the performances are thoroughly entertained.
3. It promotes culture and perpetuates the tradition.
4. It promotes trade among the people.
5. It provides link with the ancestors by promoting and entrenching the interconnections between the mundane and the spiritual
6. It uses the *egungun* cult to provide present and past information as well as foretelling the future.

The Negative Impact of *Aboh* Festival

1. It is regarded as fetish by the Christians and Muslims
2. The *Alase* and *Anigboro* masquerades are violent and beat people at the slightest provocation. This may lead to bodily harm and litigation.

Prospect of the *Aboh* Festival

With the growth of Christianity, the number of adherents keeps dwindling and if the trend is not reversed, the celebration of the *Aboh* festival may die out sooner than expected because the young generation of *Omodo* do not show enough interest to sustain the culture. Already, the intra-communal clashes among the clans have resulted in a government edict which has restricted the movements of the *egungun* to the *Ala* as well as the *Eborah* to the foot of the hills. However, with stability in the Owe society, *Aboh* festival could be expanded and upgraded for profitable tourism in Kogi State.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the origin and procedural process of the *Aboh* *egungun* festival among the Owe people of Kogi State, Nigeria and discovered that this festival is celebrated annually by one of the fourteen clans to commune with their departed ancestors. Though all members of the community watch and enjoy the dances and acrobatic displays of the various masquerades, participation is exclusive to the *Omodo* clan. The role of the various masquerades and the theatrical aesthetics imbued in them were also discussed and it was discovered that they bring peace and blessings to their devotees and the community at large. The paper concludes that the *Aboh* festival apart from satisfying the spiritual need

of the *Omodo* clan also serves political and social functions among the Owe and with government intervention its economic potentials through tourism could be harnessed for the development of Kogi state and Nigeria as a whole.

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