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Stylistic Analysis of Egungun Masks In Kishi

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ABSTRACT

The Yoruba people believe in the existence of a supreme being called Olodumare, whom they cannot see but whose presence they acknowledge. Because of this, they feel the necessity of an intermediary between themselves and the Supreme Being. Egungun (masquerade) is believed to be the spirit of the ancestors, and whenever it is celebrated, it is held that the spirits of the departed visit the living. Egungun is therefore referred to as ara-orun, meaning the one from heaven, reflecting the Yoruba belief in the afterlife. The egungun cults serve as custodians of the ancestral spirit, reassuring people of immortality and reducing the fear of death through the dramatic appearance of the ancestral spirit in the terrestrial world. The present study focuses on the stylistic analysis of selected egungun masks in Kishi, a Yoruba town in Oyo State, Nigeria, for which no prior written documentation existed. The study was conducted during the annual egungun festival in Kishi, Irepo Local Government Area, between May and June 2021. Data were gathered through interviews with Chief Adebayo Adewuyi (Baloosa of Kishi), selected egungun custodians, and elders of the town, supplemented by personal observations and field visits to the families of selected masquerades. The study found that egungun festivals in Kishi receive special veneration, with some egungun representing incarnated ancestors, others serving secular entertainment purposes, and some created to avert evil or in response to divine demands. Egungun in Kishi is not worshipped but appeased as an intermediary between devotees and Olodumare. Where present, the headpiece functions as the seat of supernatural power. The festival fosters communal unity across religious lines and has positive social and economic impacts on the Kishi community.

Keywords: Egungun, masquerade, Yoruba, Kishi, stylistic analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Masking and masquerade traditions constitute one of the most pervasive ritual performance forms found across human societies worldwide. Whether in the mortuary rites of Papua New Guinea, the Carnival traditions of the Americas, or the mystery cults of ancient Greece, masked performance has historically served as a medium through which communities communicate with ancestral spirits, deities, and the unseen forces believed to govern human affairs (Pernet, 1992). What unites these geographically and culturally dispersed practices is a shared conviction that the mask facilitates a crossing of the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds, allowing human performers to temporarily embody or summon powers beyond themselves.

In Africa specifically, masking traditions are documented across the northern, southern, eastern, western, and central regions of the continent, leading scholars to regard masquerade as a defining feature of African cultural identity (Famule, 2005). African masking traditions share several characteristics: they typically integrate sculpture, textile art, music, and dance into a single performative event; they are frequently tied to beliefs in ancestral veneration and the maintenance of social order; and they serve as mechanisms for mediating the relationship between the living and the dead (Drewal, 1978). Gelede masks among the Yoruba subgroups of southwestern Nigeria celebrate women's spiritual power, with both males and females participating in the rituals, while masks among other Nigerian ethnic groups perform functions tied to law, governance, and rites of passage (Famule, 2005).

Within West Africa, and particularly among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, this broader African masking tradition takes the specific and elaborate form of egungun. The Yoruba theological system positions Olodumare, the supreme deity, as the ultimate source of all being. Because Olodumare is believed to be unknowable and inaccessible by direct means, the Yoruba created a range of intermediary figures: carved wooden idols, cast metal forms, and costumed masquerades, all intended to carry the supplications of the living to the divine (Idowu, 1962). It is within this theological framework that egungun masquerades acquire their significance, embodying the spirits of departed ancestors and serving as their visible representation in the world of the living.

Egungun masquerades are referred to as ara-orun, meaning the ones who come from heaven, reflecting a deeply held Yoruba belief in the continuity of life after death and the active involvement of the dead in the affairs of the living (Akanke, 2018). The egungun cult functions as a custodian of ancestral memory, and the dramatic reappearance of the masquerade during festivals reassures the community of immortality and lessens the fear of death (Lawal, 1978). The cult is presided over by a chief priest known as the Alapini, who invokes the ancestral spirits through drumming, dancing, and possession. When possession occurs, the dancer's consciousness is momentarily suspended as the spirit of the mask takes over (Lauren, 1968, as cited in Drewal, 1978). Different egungun in Yoruba land perform different duties: some commemorate ancestral spirits, some address communal crises, and others serve secular entertainment functions known as eegun alare (Adebowale, 2020).

Scholarly attention to egungun has addressed both its visual and spiritual dimensions. Aromashodu (2019) documented the visual elaboration of egungun costuming, noting that patchwork patterns, sequins, tassels, and amulets are combined to render the costume both beautiful and spiritually potent. Kalilu (1991), studying egungun in Ogbomoso, argued that carved headpieces are primarily memorial and serve to immortalize lineage identity through family tribal marks. Pemberton (1978), writing on the Igbomina Yoruba, similarly argued that carving reflects the wealth and prestige of the owning lineage.

By contrast, Ojo (1978) found that the sculptural motifs on the superstructure of headpieces directly express the spiritual and secular attributes of the masquerades that bear them. This unresolved scholarly question was explicitly framed by Carroll (1965), who asked whether Yoruba masks are properly understood as fetish objects, ancestor spirits, totemic emblems, or actual seats of supernatural power. Beyond these debates, Aremu (2012) argued that egungun should be understood as a cultural welcome a celebration of the returning dead that also addresses communal concerns such as sickness, poverty, and social cohesion.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Yoruba egungun, geographic coverage has remained concentrated on a relatively small number of well-documented communities. Kishi, a historic town in Irepo Local Government Area of Oyo State, has not previously appeared in the scholarly literature on egungun, despite possessing an active and historically significant masquerade tradition. Kishi presents a distinctive case because of its dual ancestral origin, tracing lineage both to the Oyo Alaafin dynasty and to the Baruba royal family of the old Borgu Republic in present-day Benin Republic a configuration that has shaped a masquerade culture combining mainstream Oyo-Yoruba egungun forms with locally unique masquerades and origin narratives. No written publication has previously documented these masquerades, their material composition, or their stylistic variation, and the urgency of this study is compounded by the advancing age of the custodians and elders who retain this knowledge. The present study therefore aims to document the egungun masks in Kishi, trace the origins of selected masquerades, classify their masks stylistically, and assess the relevance of the egungun festival to the Kishi community.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Study Area

The study was carried out in Kishi, Irepo Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. Kishi is the headquarters of the Irepo Local Government and is located in the northern part of Oyo State, approximately 50 km from Old Oyo and about 250 km from Ibadan, the state capital. The town is an extension of Old Katunga of the Oyo Empire and has coexisted with different ethnic nationalities the Baruba, Yoruba, and Nupe since the thirteenth century. The first inhabitant of the area known as Igbo-Ifa was Kilisi Yeruma, a crown prince of the Old Burgu Republic, who was subsequently joined by two Yoruba settlers. The town was eventually named Kilisi after its founder, which over time was shortened to Kisi, the name it bears today in its original form (Olaniyi, 1982). The dual lineage of Kishi was established through the marriage of King Kilisi Yeruma to Adasobo, a regent from the Oyo Empire, through which Yoruba names and language were adopted throughout the kingdom. This dual ancestral heritage, traceable both to the Oyo Alaafin and to the royal family of the Ibaruba of the old Borgu Republic, gives Kishi people certain cultural peculiarities that distinguish them from other Yoruba groups (Jimoh, 2008). Kishi has deep roots in traditional religion, originally referred to as Igbo-Ifa (Ifa Forest), and traditional festivals celebrated in the town include Egungun, Sango, Ifa, and Iyemaja. Christianity arrived through Joseph Ladipo in 1910, and Islam was introduced through the Oloyoyo family in 1868 (Ahmad & Muhammad, 2011).

2.2. Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design grounded in ethnographic and material culture approaches. Qualitative methods were selected because the subject of inquiry the stylistic, spiritual, and performative dimensions of egungun masquerades is best understood through direct observation, oral testimony, and interpretive description rather than quantitative measurement. The study design combined library-based literature review with intensive primary fieldwork, allowing documentary and contextual data to be generated simultaneously and triangulated for analytical rigour.

The analytical framework draws on the traditions of verbal art analysis and material culture studies, situating the oral testimonies of custodians and elders within a broader scholarly conversation on African masquerade traditions. This design is consistent with approaches used in related studies of African masking traditions (Famule, 2005; Kalilu, 1991).

2.3. Types and Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary data were used in this study. Primary data were generated through fieldwork conducted during the 2021 Egungun festival in Kishi, which takes place annually between May and June. Personal observation was conducted by attending the festival in its entirety and by making follow-up visits to the families of selected Egungun masquerades in the town. These visits supplemented the formal interview data with contextual detail about family lineages, custodial practices, and the domestic settings in which masquerades are kept. Interview data constituted the principal primary source. Structured conversations were held with 20 Egungun priests, 15 devotees, and a number of elderly community members. Key informants included Chief Adewuyi Adebayo, the Baloola of Kishi, who provided authoritative accounts of performance protocol and costume composition, and Ajayi Adewumi Elesu, custodian of Egungun laroye, who provided detailed information on the spiritual significance of headpieces. Secondary data were drawn from published journal articles, books, and online scholarly resources, with a focus on works addressing Yoruba Egungun traditions, African masking practices, and the art history of the Oyo Empire.

2.4. Methodology

Fieldwork data were subjected to stylistic analysis, a method appropriate for the classification of visual art objects based on their formal, material, and iconographic properties. Each masquerade was examined in terms of four parameters: mask type (headpiece or facial mask), materials used, colour symbolism, and physical attributes, including form, embellishments, and implements carried. These observations were cross-referenced with informant testimonies to establish the correspondence between formal features and spiritual or social functions. The oral accounts gathered from priests, custodians, and elders were analysed within the framework of verbal art, treating the spoken accounts of masquerade origin, function, and performance as culturally significant texts that encode historical memory and community values. Classification of the masquerades in Kishi was organised according to three criteria derived from the fieldwork: performance context, mask type, and spiritual function. The findings were then situated within the existing scholarly literature on Yoruba egungun and African masking traditions to enable comparative discussion.

3. RESULTS

The fieldwork conducted in Kishi during the 2021 egungun festival yielded data on thirteen masquerades belonging to several distinct family lineages in the town. These masquerades were found to vary considerably in terms of origin, mask type, costume composition, material symbolism, and spiritual or secular function. The results are presented below, beginning with the classification framework that organises the documented masquerades, followed by an account of egungun costume composition and performance context, and concluding with stylistic descriptions of each of the selected masks.

Table 1. Summary of the Classifications of Egungun in Kishi.

S/N	Name of Masquerade	Spiritual Function / Category	Mask Type
1	Onlo	Exposing witchcraft and ascribing fertility / Sacred (Alagbara)	Headpiece
2	Laroye	Sacred (Alagbara)	Headpiece
3	Danafojura (Ajayi Agbo)	Sacred (Alagbara)	Headpiece
4	Danafojura (Oganla)	Sacred (Alagbara)	Headpiece
5	Ori-ade	Secular (Alarinjo)	Headpiece
6	Siaba	Sacred (Alagbara)	Headpiece
7	Laarope	Sacred (Alagbara)	Headpiece
8	Tebogba	Carrying propitiation / Sacred (Alagbara)	Headpiece
9	Sorobiagbon	Sacred (Alagbara)	Headpiece
10	Olore (Feyisipe)	Sacred (Alagbara)	Facial Mask
11	Olore (Balogun)	Sacred (Alagbara)	Headpiece
12	Alakoro	Secular (Alarinjo)	Facial Mask
13	Donkika	Battle / Sacred (Alagbara)	Headpiece

Based on fieldwork conducted in Kishi, egungun in the town can be classified according to three primary criteria. The first is classification based on performance context, which concerns the masquerade's behaviour when possessed or dancing, its body movements, and the type of drum used during its procession. The second is classification based on the type of mask; this categorization is based solely on the physical appearance and location of the mask or headpiece and has no bearing on spiritual status. The third criterion is classification based on spiritual function, which relates to the supernatural power, the purpose for which the masquerade was created, and the tasks it performs. Table 1 presents a summary of these classifications for the masquerades documented in Kishi.

Regarding costume composition and performance context, clothing is an important aspect of Yoruba culture, and Yoruba belief equates nakedness with infancy, insanity, or social irresponsibility. An egungun costume is composed of multiple layers of cloth lappets made from expensive and prestigious textiles, expressing the wealth and status of the family as well as the power of the ancestor. To beautify the costume and render it spiritually potent, the lappets are decorated with patchwork patterns, braids, sequins, tassels, cowries, and amulets. The amulets house medicinal preparations carrying ase (performative power) that protect the masker at a time of heightened vulnerability. The main protective amulets are typically concealed on the inside of the costume. For some masquerades, metallic objects or mirrors are sewn onto the garment, creating flashes of light that suggest a connection to the spirit world (Aromashodu, 2019).

The performance of egungun would not have existed without its imitative constituents the identity of the family, dance movements, and the interplay of artistic and ceremonial elements. Movements of egungun masquerades reveal an infirmity of gait as they dance forward and backward, hesitating consciously to present their dexterity with modesty, an effect locally described as won njo siba sibo. This display of studied amateurishness becomes a symbol of the cult's association with wisdom, since wisdom is associated with modesty, calculation, and conscious delivery. During the annual festival in Kishi, each lineage is allocated a separate day and location to perform, with some masquerades appearing in the palace quarters and others in landmark areas of the town. After all performances, the ensembles are returned to the grove or shrine until the next festival.

3.1. Eegun Onlo

Onlo masquerade belongs to the family of Ojebola, the alagbaa of Kishi traditional council. It is known for exposing witchcraft and is the masquerade to whom fertility is ascribed. Onlo belongs to the eegun alagbara (powerful masquerade) category and, unlike most masquerades, appears in public only once every three years. Its headpiece is an anthropomorphic wooden carving in black, representing a human head with family tribal marks depicted on its face (Figure 1). It is dressed in a distinct, industrially manufactured black costume with a hand-woven net having different stripes attached directly to the headpiece, enabling the masquerader to see through. Unlike other masquerades, Onlo does not wear gloves; it holds an axe in its right hand and sorghum in its left hand, and wears locally woven fabrics as footwear. The masquerade does not dance and has no accompanying drums. Only those to whom fertility has been granted through Onlo by Olodumare are permitted to sing its praises during performance. Whenever the masquerade enters a compound and smashes the sorghum strand on the ground, the number of seeds that drop is believed to indicate the number of witches present in the household.



Figure 1. Eegun Onlo — Headpiece, Medium: Wood, Photograph: Joseph Opeyemi Adegbenjo.

3.2. Eegun Laroye

Eegun Laroye belongs to the eegun alagbara category and evolved as a substitute for the earlier Bara masquerade, which can no longer be publicly displayed because those who knew how to appease it are no longer living. Laroye therefore portrays the same attributes and performs the same spiritual function as Bara. Its headpiece is covered with cowries and thunderstones (edun ara) patterned across its body, and its costume is made of red and black traditional woven fabrics (Figure 2). The black colour portrays it as an idol capable of rapid transformation, while the red colour characterizes it as a powerful being and signals its association with Sango (god of thunder). Whenever it comes out, it carries its Esu figure in its left hand and a deadly baton in its right. Eegun Laroye performs only once every two years, alternating its performance year with Danafojura of Ajayi Agbo, as both masquerades belong to the same family.



Figure 2. Eegun Laroye — Headpiece, Photograph: Ajayi Adewumi Elesu.

3.3. Eegun Danafojura (Agbo Family)

Eegun Danafojura is one of the ancestral masquerades in Kishi, belonging to the eegun alagbara category and also known as a warrior masquerade. It was founded around the sixteenth century, between the reigns of Alaafin Onigbogi and Alaafin Ofinran. During the Nupe-led war that drove Alaafin Onigbogi into exile, the Nupe set ablaze all buildings in the kingdom, including those of this family. According to tradition, one of the family's children took refuge inside the masquerade costume, which possessed the power to resist burning flames. The masquerade earned the name Danafojura from its affinity for fire. According to the custodian, Danafojura was also used in warfare to counter enemies who deployed swarms of bees in attack, using fire as a counter-weapon to achieve victory.

Its headpiece is covered with a black traditional woven fabric, symbolizing potency and the power of medicinal concoctions (agbo/aro) with which it has been prepared (Figure 3). It also has cowries and gourd scattered across its costume, four human skulls arranged at the four cardinal points on its head, and nine mini bells arranged horizontally across its padded chest.



Figure 3. Eegun Danafojura (Agbo Family) — Headpiece, Photograph: Ajayi Adewumi Elesu.

3.4. Eegun Danafojura (Oganla Family)

The Oganla family's Danafojura was incarnated upon the request of the gods, according to its custodian. The custodian had another masquerade named Soroko, which he appeased annually, but a series of recurring dreams in which the masquerade requested to be housed with him led him to consult the oracle. When his Soroko masquerade subsequently went missing during a performance and was later recovered, the elders and oracle instructed him to incarnate a Danafojura masquerade. This Danafojura shares the same characteristics and affinity for burning flames as its counterpart in the Agbo family but differs in physical features. Unlike the Agbo version, its headpiece has only cowries (opa alarere) patterned around it and a red strip tied at its top (Figure 4). Its ensemble is made of a traditional black woven fabric.



Figure 4. Egun Danafojura (Oganla Family) — Headpiece, Photograph: Dayo J. Ogunsina.

3.5. Egun Ori-Ade

Egun Ori Ade belongs to the Oluwo of Kishi, Oluwo Ajayi. Three Ori Ade masquerades exist, and all belong to the egun alare category—that is, masquerades for secular reasons and entertainment. Unlike the powerful masquerades, their costumes are made with colourful fabrics separated into lappets, designed with Z-shaped fabric sewn around the edges (Figure 5). The headpiece rests on a flat board to which the lappets are attached and is adorned with colourful fabric materials and tinsels fixed to the flat board around its circumference. A horizontal-stripe, hand-woven net at the front enables the masquerader to see through when performing.



Figure 5. Eegun Ori-Ade — Headpiece, Photograph: Joseph Opeyemi Adegbenjo.

3.6. Eegun Siaba

Eegun Siaba is one of the legendary masquerades in Kishi, belonging to the eegun alagbara category. It belongs to the family of Baba Eleta in Molete. Its costume is made of oyster-gray traditional woven fabric, and it carries a buffalo horn in its right hand, said to house a swarm of bees (Figure 6). On its headpiece, a live chameleon crawls atop three skulls a combination of symbolic elements conveying mystical potency. Cowries are scattered across its body. Eegun Siaba has its own dedicated drum used in its procession, accompanied by a call-and-response chant that translates as: Siaba siaba / turned to wolf / black cobra on drinking pot / he has become a spectacle. This drum and chant rhythm is unique to Siaba and distinguishes it from all other masquerades in Kishi.



Figure 6. Egun Siaba — Headpiece, Photograph: Joseph Opeyemi Adegbenjo.

3.7. Egun Laaro

Egun Laaro is one of the masquerades that followed Alaafin Onigbogi from the Old Oyo Empire (Oyo-Ile) to Kishi in 1520 CE. It is an ancestral masquerade in the egun alagbara category, belonging to the family of Petu Maje. Unlike most powerful masquerades, which are predominantly black, Laaro's costume is made of traditional woven fabrics with different shades of green stripes (Figure 7). It does not wear shoes or hand gloves. Below the hand-woven net that enables the masquerader to see, a brown woven fabric pocket called apo is attached to store charms. The headpiece incorporates edun ara (thunderstone), and the costume is further adorned with a tiger skin and the skins of various wild animals. In its right hand, the masquerade holds a wooden axe used to fight and intimidate onlookers.



Figure 7. Egun Laaro — Headpiece, Photograph: Mesach Ojo.

3.8. Egun Tebogba

Tebogba is one of the major ancestral masquerades in Kishi and belongs to the egun alagbara category. Unlike most masquerades, it does not come out annually but only when the need arises. As its name implies, the one capable of carrying propitiation, Tebogba is the masquerade used to carry ebo (propitiation) for the entire community in times of communal crisis or spiritual need. Its headpiece is a pot-like form made of leather (Figure 8). The costume is attached directly to the headpiece and is made of black traditional woven fabric. Cowrie strands are attached vertically around the headpiece. In contrast to the predominantly dark costume, Tebogba wears brightly coloured woven footwear in red, green, and yellow, suggesting a layered symbolism of power and propitious blessing.



Figure 8. Eegun Tebogba — Headpiece, Photograph: Joseph Opeyemi Adegbenjo.

3.9. Eegun Sorobiagbon

Sorobiagbon is a modern-day masquerade in Kishi, incarnated to avert evil upon the request of a divinity. The custodian of this masquerade had been attacked annually by wasps and was instructed by elders, after consultation, to incarnate a masquerade. According to respondents, all masquerades of this type must incorporate black as part of the costume colour, while the blue patchwork serves an aesthetic function. The headpiece features a cutting comb (ilarun) and a mini bell on its front (Figure 9). Cowries known as orisa oko alarere or opa alarere are arranged in strands at the four cardinal points of the headpiece. The masquerader holds a cutlass (apasa) in the right hand and wears factory-woven gloves on both hands to conceal the masker's identity.



Figure 9. Egun Sorobiagbon — Headpiece, Photograph: Joseph Opeyemi Adegbenjo.

3.10. Egun Olore (Feyisipe)

Egun Olore belongs to the Feyisipe family in Kishi and is categorized as a powerful masquerade owing to its magical attributes. Devotees believe that whenever the stripes of its ore (cane) strike anyone, it cleanses and drives out evil spirits. Unlike the headpiece-type masquerades, Olore features a facial mask made of wood and painted in blue and nude tones (Figure 10). This makes it one of only two facial-mask masquerades documented in this study, sharing this characteristic with Alakoro. The masquerade is dressed in blue and white stripe woven fabrics with red cloth tied at the waist. The facial mask format of Olore, rather than a full headpiece, is notable in the context of Kishi masquerades, where it remains an exception among the egun alagbara.



Figure 10. Eegun Olore (Feyisipe) — Facial Mask, Photograph: Joseph Opeyemi Adegbenjo.

3.11. Eegun Alakoro

Alakoro derives its name from the compound ala-akoro, meaning the owner of akoro (coronet) or one who has attained the rank of akoro. Among the Eso guardians of the old Oyo Empire, akoro was a cadre or rank conferred upon distinguished warriors. According to oral tradition from members of the Dariagbon family in Kishi, the Alakoro mask originated from the Old Oyo Empire (Johnson, 1921), and Thompson (1973) independently recorded its presence in Kishi, with the owner families dating the object to just before the fall of Oyo-Ile. The mask was originally used as camouflage: a brave warrior dressed in red regalia with human hair, wearing a mask resembling a woman's face, would be sent among enemies who, believing him to be a woman, would not attack, allowing the warrior to launch a surprise offensive. The function of the mask was also to intimidate and startle enemies during battle. The Alakoro mask is a facial mask a grotesque brass mask with lips closed, suggesting dignity, and a calm oval shape with asymmetrically placed eyes, suggesting the form of a death mask (Figure 11). The masquerader is dressed in red regalia and holds a sword with synthetic human hair attached to the mask. Alakoro does not come out annually and requires no ritual appeasement; it is worn solely to honour the ancestors of the past.



Figure 11. Egun Alakoro — Facial Mask, Photograph: Joseph Opeyemi Adegbenjo.

3.12. Egun Donkika (Duro Ko Ki Ika)

Egun Donkika, also called Duronkika, is one of the powerful warrior masquerades in Kishi. Its name translates as wait and pay homage to the wicked, reflecting its confrontational spiritual function. It is one of the legendary masquerades brought from Oyo-Ile to Kishi in 1520 CE during the reign of Alaafin Onigbogi. The costume is made of traditional black woven fabric with leaves tied around its headpiece (Figure 12). These leaves serve as a means of identification for the masquerade's followers, enabling the masquerade to distinguish its own devotees and thereby avoid attacking them. A black open net enables the masquerader to see through the costume, and cowries are arranged vertically toward the padded patchwork. The masquerader holds a short axe in the right hand, with the left hand hidden under the costume.



Figure 12. Eegun Donkika/Duro Ko Ki Ika — Headpiece, Photograph: Joseph Opeyemi Adegbenjo.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The stylistic analysis of egungun masks in Kishi reveals a rich diversity of mask types, materials, and symbolic systems that reflect the spiritual, historical, and social functions of masquerade in this community. The thirteen masquerades documented in this study can be broadly divided into two mask-type categories: headpiece masks, which constitute the majority, and facial masks, represented by Olore (Feyisipe) and Alakoro. This predominance of headpieces aligns with the view of Ojo (1978) that the headpiece constitutes the seat of supernatural power for masquerades that possess one, a position strongly corroborated by custodians interviewed in Kishi, particularly Ajayi Adewumi Elesu, who stated unequivocally that without the headpiece, there is no masquerade. This stands in direct contrast to the argument advanced by Pemberton (1978) among the Igbomina Yoruba, that carvings merely reflect the wealth and prestige of the owning lineage, highlighting how spiritual meanings attached to material forms differ across Yoruba subgroups.

In terms of materials and colour symbolism, black traditional woven fabric dominates among the eegun alagbara (powerful masquerade) category. The colour black consistently signifies potency and association with medicinal preparations or spiritual concoctions, locally referred to as agbo or aro. Red, as seen in Laroye and Alakoro, signifies power and association with Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder. Colourful fabrics are reserved for secular masquerades such as Ori-Ade, reinforcing the visual distinction between sacred and secular masquerades. This colour coding is consistent with broader observations in Yoruba material culture (Adebowale, 2020; Aromashodu, 2019), and demonstrates that chromatic choices in egungun costuming are not arbitrary but systematically encoded with meaning recognizable to both participants and spectators.

The historical depth of egungun in Kishi is notable. Three of the masquerades analyzed Laaro, Danafojura of the Agbo family, and Donkika were brought from the Old Oyo Empire to Kishi in 1520 CE during the reign of Alaafin Onigbogi. The Alakoro mask has been independently dated by Thompson (1973) to just before the fall of Oyo-Ile. This demonstrates that the egungun tradition in Kishi is deeply rooted in the political and cultural history of the Oyo Empire and reflects the dispersal of Yoruba masquerade culture during periods of military and political upheaval. This finding is consistent with Akande's (2018) observations on the connections between Oyo-Yoruba political history and egúngún culture and adds Kishi to the documented record of sites where this historical dispersal can be traced through surviving masquerade traditions.

One particularly distinctive finding of this study is the diversity of origin narratives among the masquerades documented. While some are ancestral in origin, commemorating the spirits of important lineage figures, others were created in response to divine dreams, oracle instructions, or specific crises, as in the cases of Sorobiagbon and the Oganla family's Danafojura. This parallels the findings of Aremu (2012), who noted that egungun can be created to address problems such as persistent sickness, poverty, or communal setbacks. The variety of origin contexts in Kishi suggests that the egungun tradition is dynamic and responsive to community needs rather than fixed solely by historical inheritance, a point that merits further comparative research across Yoruba communities (Ogundele & Oyelaran, 2021).

The dual presence of facial masks, Olore and Alakoro, alongside headpiece masquerades introduces a comparative stylistic dimension not previously documented for Kishi. The Alakoro brass mask, with its grotesque features, asymmetrical eye placement, and closed lips, presents a formal vocabulary distinct from the fabric-based headpieces typical of the eegun alagbara. Thompson (1973) documented Alakoro masks in Kishi, and the present study extends this earlier record with the first detailed stylistic description of the mask in its current performance context a contribution relevant to the broader study of Yoruba brass-casting traditions and the intersection of metalwork and masquerade performance.

The social role of the egungun festival in Kishi extends beyond spiritual functions. The festival fosters unity among the people of Kishi, irrespective of religious affiliation whether traditional, Christian, or Muslim a pattern consistent with Aremu's (2012) argument that egungun should be understood as a cultural welcome rather than purely a religious celebration. The economic impact of the festival on the local community through increased market activity, inter-community gathering, and cultural tourism also merits attention in future studies focused on the economic dimensions of indigenous cultural heritage.

In conclusion, the egungun tradition in Kishi, as in most African societies, goes beyond the physical mask or costume; it constitutes a complex system of belief, art, history, and social practice. The dramatic annual appearance of the masquerades in their diverse costumes affirms the community's belief in life after death and reduces the fear of death among the living. This study has documented thirteen egungun masquerades in Kishi for the first time in written scholarship, tracing their origins, classifying them stylistically, and analysing their spiritual and social roles. The headpiece was consistently identified as the seat of supernatural power for those masquerades that possess one. Colour symbolism, particularly the dominance of black among the eegun alagbara, was found to carry systematic spiritual meaning. Three masquerades were traced historically to the Old Oyo Empire, while others were found to have been created in response to dreams, oracular instructions, or specific community needs, demonstrating the dynamic and adaptive character of the tradition.

The egungun festival in Kishi serves as a bond of communal unity across religious divides and contributes positively to the community's social and economic life. It is recommended that further documentation efforts be undertaken in other Yoruba communities with undocumented egungun traditions, and that cultural custodians and elders who hold this knowledge be engaged urgently as living archives of an irreplaceable heritage.

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