

## THE ORIGIN OF EGUNGUN: A CRITICAL LITERARY APPRAISAL

Abdul-Rasheed NA'ALLAH  
*University of Alberta*

**ABSTRACT** With evidence presented by Samuel Johnson, S.F. Nadel and Oludare Olajubu on the origin of *Egungun*, the African cultic masquerade in Nigeria, it can be concluded that *Egungun* originated from the Nupe culture, contrary to the popular belief that it took root from Yoruba religion.

Nupe people actually seem to have used *Egungun* to bamboozle and harass other ethnic groups around them. The author advocates, that in place of the present over-romanticization of the *Egungun* tradition, the cult needs scrutiny from oppressive and exploitative perspectives. African artists should explore African history and culture only from progressive and functional paradigms.

**Key Words:** *Egungun*; Cultic masquerade; Nupe; Yoruba; *Dadakuada*; Nigeria.

### INTRODUCTION

Samuel Johnson (1973), a famous Yoruba historian, posited that *Egungun*, the African cultic masquerade in Nigeria, originated from the Nupe country. He said the interaction between the Nupe and Yoruba resulted in the introduction of the cult to the Yoruba nation. S.F. Nadel (1954) another historian, believed otherwise. He said masquerade worshipers in Nupeland were the Nupe-ized Yorubas. In other words, to him, the origin of the cult was rooted in Yoruba religion. Oludare Olajubu, a folklorist and Professor of Yoruba literature, supported Nadel (1970). He argued fervently that Yoruba nation originated, owned and spread the *Egungun* cult in the country. I will examine the various arguments put forward to seek the most authentic.

My interest in tracing the origin of this very important African traditional ritual performance is kindled by my recent discovery that *Dadakuada*, an Ilorin oral art, originated from the *Egungun* poetry, the *Iwi* (Na'Allah, 1988). This is a controversial discovery in an ancient city that, today, is overwhelmingly Islamic; a city where, this day, *Egungun* must not be displayed, and where intoxicants of any kind has been outlawed by Government legislation.<sup>(1)</sup> Thus, as a follow-up to that discovery, an effort is here made to examine the discourse surrounding the origin of *Egungun*, from a socio-functionalist point of view. My work, therefore, situates the *Egungun* myth where it truly belongs, in today's socio-cultural and political realities of African nations.

## HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF NUPE AND YORUBA

The Nupe are said to have migrated to Nigeria about a hundred years before the Uthman Dan Fodio Jihad (Nadel, 1942). They first settled on the hills of Lokoja and later moved to the left of the bank of the new Lokoja (founded by the Niger Company) where they have remained since.

They are called by various names by various people. The Yoruba called them *Tapa* and the Kankanda, *Anupewayi*. Locally, however, the language is called *Nupe* and the people are *Nupeci* or, in the plural, *Nupecizi*. Like in all traditional African lives, the Nupecizi are very religious people. They believe in the all-mighty and all-powerful *Soko*. God, and commune with Him through the intermediary of divinities i.e. *Kuti* (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). As I discuss later in this paper, no historic account presents anything in contrary to the widely-held belief that the Nupecizi, before Islam, were worshipers of traditional masquerade divinities. They are noted, also, for powerful witchcraft. Today, however, ninety-nine percent of them are Muslims. Islam, however, has not been able to completely replace the traditional religious practice. Many Nupecizi still stand by their solid allegiance to their gods and are still actively involved in *Egungun*, *Igunnu* and witchcraft performances. During annual traditional festivals in Lafiagi and Pategi, for example, *Igunnu*, witchcraft and *Egungun* performers continue to engage in public displays at community centers and King's palaces. Notable families identified as custodians of these deities still exist in all Nupe-speaking communities in Nigeria.<sup>(2)</sup>

There are several versions on the history of the Yoruba. A myth has it that the forefather of the Yoruba, Oduduwa, is in fact the creator of the earth (Awolalu, 1975). Another popular tradition is that the Yoruba sprung from Lamrudu, a King of Mecca (Johnson, 1973). This king turned idolator and attempted to transform the mosque of Mecca into "an idol temple." His effort met strong resistance. He was slain and all his children and sympathizers were expelled from Mecca. Some of his children went westward. Oduduwa, one of them, finally settled at Ile-Ife. His children spread and founded villages and towns around Ife. They frequently engaged in both intra and inter ethnic wars and were able to expand their territories. The ancient Oyo kingdom was the peak of the Yoruba communal, cultural and administrative entity, with King Alaafin, whose title meant "Owner of the Palace," as the political head of their nation.

According to Samuel Johnson (1973), *Kori* was the only object of worship among the Yoruba. The head-shells of the palm-nuts were made into beads and were hung from neck to knees. The Yoruba collectively worshipped *Kori* and depended on it for all divinations. Also *Ori* was often adored. It was regarded as the god of fate. It was often represented by 41 cowries strung together in the shape of a crown. Later, heroes were deified and worshiped. Today, the Yoruba have important deities such as the *Ogun*, *Sango*, *Oya*, *Orisa Oko*, and *Buruku*.

## ARGUMENT MADE TO SUPPORT THE NOTION THAT EGUNGUN ORIGINATED FROM NUPELAND

It is difficult to come by any written document explaining the Nupe theory on the origin of *Egungun*. My interviews with three native speakers have revealed that the Nupecizi themselves have a very interesting existing oral tradition that presents the Nupe theory on the origin of masquerades. Informants,<sup>(3)</sup> X, 70, Y, 72, and Z, 35, have all narrated to me that long before the inception of the Nupecizi on earth, the menfolk decided to plan strategies that would ensure security for the people and properties in the community. They wanted their strategies kept secret and therefore decided to meet at night. They kept women and children out of the meeting believing that they could easily leak out their plans. However, each time a particular woman fought with her husband, she made a jest of him referring boldly to his submissions at the menfolk's secret deliberations. The news soon spread among the menfolk and they decided to find out how the woman got her information. The oracle told them that this woman changed into a cat and always attended their meetings. True enough, the cat appeared during the following three meetings, and all their efforts to kill it were abortive. Each time they attempted to capture the cat, it disappeared into thin air. The men changed their meeting schedule to once weekly. The day before the meeting, some men put on masques and covered themselves with dark (sometimes red or pink) clothes. They scared women and children away, some holding canes. Some of the men were tall, and some were short. This developed into what now is a religious tradition of tall and short masqueraders among the Nupecizi.

Although Samuel Johnson did not recount the above tradition, he strongly asserted that the *Egungun* cult started from the Nupe country:

The first Alapini with the other *Egungun* priests, the Elefi, Olohan, Oloba, Aladafa, and the Oloje, emigrated from the Tapa country to Yoruba, joining the remnants returning from their Bariba country (Johnson, 1973: 160).

Alapini was the head in the hierarchy of *Egungun* priests, and together, they came in a 'colonization' expedition and found fertile soil in the Yoruba country. Johnson said it was these priests that instructed the Yoruba in the *Egungun* worship and that the Tapa must be given credit for the introduction of *Egungun* into Yorubaland. The Nupecizi took over the Yoruba country, forcing the Alaafin, the King, to escape to Gbere in the Bariba country (Johnson, 1973). Fig. 1 shows the location of Nupe, Yoruba and the Bariba (also called Baruba) in the 17th century.

In such an invasion, even if the Nupecizi had not intended it, they would still have left their imprints on the sand of Yorubaland. The records of cultural domination of one nation by another are abundant during those years of incessant wars of conquest. One nation, in an expansionist ambition, would manipulate its way militarily and lord it over another. Even within a single ethnic group, speakers of one dialect did take up the sovereignty of the others. In the old Oyo empire, for example, the Kiriji war was one such examples.

And so it is not surprising that the Nupecizi would have seized the opportunity of their occupation of the Yoruba nation to introduce their traditional religious prac-

tices, including the worship of *Egungun*.

### ARGUMENT IN FAVOR OF YORUBA ORIGIN OF EGUNGUN

Many arguments were often put forward to debunk the purported Nupe origin of the *Egungun* cult. S.F. Nadel (1954), for example, disagreed with the claim that the *Egungun* originated from the Nupe country. He argued that the only worshipers of *Egungun* among the Nupecizi were the Nupe-lized Yoruba. Nadel (1942:16) had reached this conclusion after his various encounters with many Nupecizi who informed him, "no —we have none of this, only Yorubas do it...."

Oludare Olajubu, in his writings on *Egungun* orature, supported Nadel's claims (Olajubu, 1970). He believed any opposite opinion was obscure and recounted various Yoruba oral traditions that accounted for the origin of *Egungun* among the Yoruba. The first was that it was traceable to Ile-Ife, and that "all *Awo*, that is all secret knowledge, had a common origin; they were all born at the creation of the world at Ile-Ife" (Olajubu, 1980: 389). Another was a myth about two children (one farmer, the other singer/dancer) of the same parent. The singer/dancer's fine clothes attracted many people. He was embarrassed, pulled a veil over his face and clothes over his head. He thus became the *Egungun*. Another myth said that the Alapini,<sup>4</sup> a most senior chief in Oyo, had three children: Ojewumi, Ojesanmi and Ijerinlo.

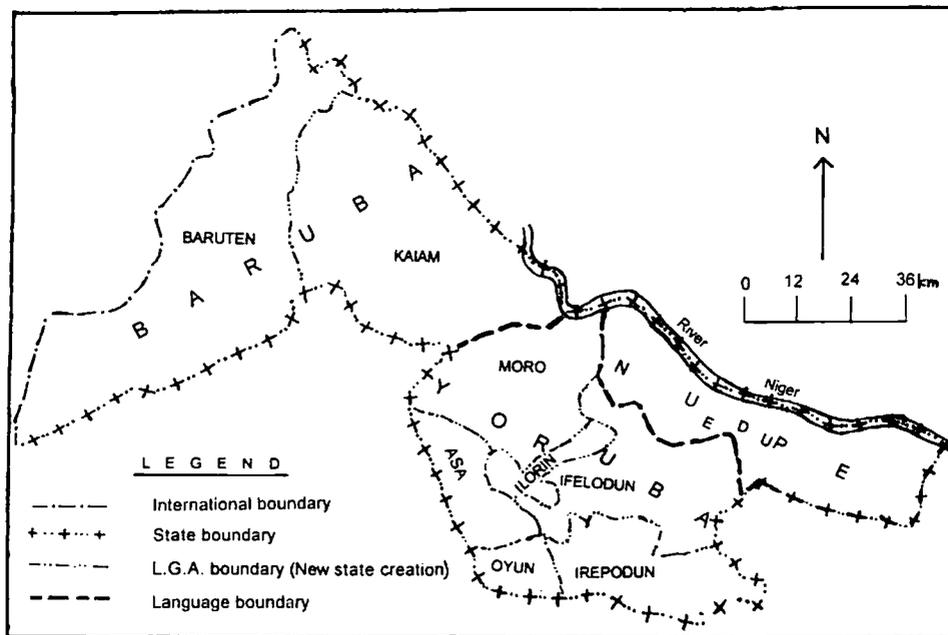


Fig. 1. Map showing the distribution of Yoruba, Nupecizi and Baruba in the 17th century. The map also stands for the present Kwara State of Nigeria as it was created in August 1991.

These children disobeyed him by eating the “Ihobia,” a kind of yam. They became thirsty, went to the stream, one after the other, drank and fell dead. The *Ifa*, Yoruba god of divination, agreed to reincarnate them. On the seventh day, they were back to life but had to veil their faces because they “were terrible to look at.” They entered the town in beautiful costumes and thus became *Egungun*. There were few other myths, similar to the above ones. As Awolalu (1979: 65-66) said, Yoruba worshiped *Egungun* as “ara orun,” the one from heaven, who came to look after his children. He cured them of illness and gave barren women children.

### STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN THE TWO ARGUMENTS

The literature presented above seem unable to sufficiently explain the origin of the *Egungun* cult. Samuel Johnson (1973: 160), for example, has failed to provide any concrete proof other than a purported narration “on the hill Sanda at Kusu,”<sup>65</sup> which presented a claim that *Egungun* was introduced to the Yoruba world by the Nupeizi. However, it is not surprising for an empowered society to impose its culture and tradition on the victim nation. Examples abound in history. It was, therefore, quite possible that the *Egungun* cult was introduced to the Yoruba nation, after such a military domination of the Yoruba by the Nupeizi.

The accounts given to support the Yoruba-origin of the *Egungun* are not sufficient. These accounts lack rigid substance and unity. Every informant (on Yoruba *Egungun* in general) just seems to have oversimplified his story in an effort to say “this mystery must be demystified.” To me, it seems an exaggeration to expect, for example, a sudden appearance of a well-known (common) singer/dancer (however gorgeously dressed) to start a religion, cult and an annual festival as strong as the *Egungun* cult and festival in Yorubaland, just like that!

### EVIDENCE OF EGUNGUN ORIGIN IN DADAKUADA ORAL POETRY

In the *Dadakuada* songs, any member of the audience whose ancestral origin can be traced to the Nupe country is praised as “omo Tapa ti o leegun nle.” meaning “an offspring of Tapa who has no *Egungun* in his house.” This is an irony. It is believed that every Tapa home must, of cultural necessity, have an *Egungun*. However, with the coming of Islam, this tradition gradually died out. And so a good Nupe Muslim home is today without the *Egungun*. Such a Muslim is therefore praised as above — to show the degree of his faith in the new religion. Such verse is evident in the following *Dadakuada* songs:

Ayinla Olowo eniwa,  
 Afinju Oniburedi ore mi,  
 Omo Tapa ti o leegun nle;  
 Omo Tapa, oko mi,  
 Oni buredi tin dun yun gba.<sup>66</sup>

Ayinla Olowo, our man,  
 My friend the famous bread dealer,  
 The offspring of Tapa who has no masquerade in the house,  
 The offspring of Tapa, my husband  
 The sweet bread dealer.

Nijo'hun mo ro ree mi,  
 Alhaji Abudu Omoluabi makudi,  
 Omoluabi, atere kan sanma ti n wu yan  
 Ore mi Abudu omo Tapa ti o leegun nle.<sup>(7)</sup>

That day I saw my friend,  
 Alhaji Abudu a decent rich man  
 A decent slim-touching-the-sky man who we love  
 The child of Tapa who has no masquerade at home

Laila ila Allahu,  
 Eman gbo bi oku ewure  
 Bin ti n fohun bi eniyan  
 Ejire oo  
 Adisa agan  
 Adisa omo Tapa ti o leegun nle.<sup>(8)</sup>

There is no deity worthy of worship except Allah  
 Do hear how dead goat  
 Speaks like a human being!  
 Ejire oo  
 Adisa agan  
 Adisa, the offspring of Tapa who has no *Egungun* in his house.

Such praises are equally popular in Ilorin:

Ilorin Afonja enun dun bi iyo  
 Ilu to bi to yen  
 Ko da won o leegun rara,  
 Esin leegun ilee won,  
 Oko loroo be (Na'Allah, 1988: 8)

Ilorin Afonja, a mouth as sweet as salt  
 A town as big as that  
 Has no *Egungun* at all!  
 Horses are their *Egungun*  
 Sword is their custom

The town Ilorin is so praised because of her new position as an Islamic city among African religious towns of the Nupecizi, Yoruba and Epira. Whereas *Egungun* display is basic to the socio-cultural activities of these towns, it has been outlawed in Ilorin.<sup>(9)</sup>

Ilorin is one of the closest Yoruba towns to the Nupe country. Some Ilorin indi-

gens are of Nupe ancestral origin (Na'Allah, 1985). There are places in Ilorin today called "Koro Tapa (Tapa Streets)" and "Ode Alfa Nda (Alfa Nda Area, with 'Nda,' a Nupe name)." Almost every household in Ilorin today has some Tapa connection. So it is likely that the development of *Egungun* and possibly the subsequent origination of *Dadakuada* poetry has a Nupe influence.

S. F. Nadel's contention that *Egungun* originated in Yoruba country is not entirely reliable. Like most of the imperialist anthropologists, what he did was to speak to selected (Nupe) informants who, I suspect that, because of their new faith, denounced Nupe origin of *Egungun*. We encountered the same problem in our research into the origin of *Dadakuada*. Some *Dadakuada* poets, despite strong and dominant positive evidence, dissociated *Dadakuada* from *Egungun* cult. Yet, when they were asked to explain how notable *Egungun* performers like Abe Numo and Ajibaye became *Dadakuada* poets, they had nothing to say. S. F. Nadel is not an African and may not have the same socio-cultural understanding of African sensibilities like Samuel Johnson and the researchers who have recognized enough evidence to trace the origin of *Egungun* to Nupecizi.

Oludare Olajubu declared in one of his findings (1970:15) that *Agan*, a spirit, carried by *Ijimere* (a part of the *Egungun* cult) "was a native of Ildo somewhere in the Nupe country." How could have such an important part of the *Egungun* originated from Nupe country while *Egungun* itself took root from the Yoruba nation!

#### FURTHER EVIDENCE TRACING EGUNGUN ORIGIN TO THE NUPE RELIGION

The Nupe native theory in Section 3 traced the beginning of *Egungun* to "the inception of the Nupe on earth." According to oral tradition, the cult came about to satisfy the need of that moment, i.e. to scare women and children away. In contrast, Yoruba religion, as we have discussed above, basically rotated around the *Kori*. *Buruku*, another Yoruba divinity popular among the Egba was, according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), brought to the Yoruba nation from the Ewe and Fon people of Sabe in Dahomey. All other Yoruba gods were developed later through the deification of heroes (Johnson, 1973).

The interaction between the Yoruba and the Nupecizi has never been contested by any one. Evidence abounds today that many Nupecizi have been Yoruba-nized. In recent times there have been disagreement among the Yoruba political leaders; they have challenged each other's ancestral right to Yoruba nation and to its leadership.<sup>(10)</sup> The allegation has always been that some Yoruba political leaders descended from the Nupe country. However, we hardly hear of Nupe-lized Yoruba, so even if there are, the population must be quite insignificant. Such massive Yoruba-nization of the Nupecizi shows that many aspects of the Nupe religion have also been Yoruba-nized. And certainly, the *Egungun* is one of them. S. F. Nadel (1942:16) talks of Nupe colonies in Yorubaland. He discovers a large percentage of the Nupecizi that have been, in his words, "completely Yoruba-nized today in language, customs and every habit."

The word *Egungun* has every morphological and phonological characteristics of a

Yoruba word or name. However, name alone cannot account for the true identity of such an important deity as *Egungun*. Even the *Igunnu* whose origin has never been contested (as belonging to any other tradition outside the Nupe culture) is popularly known with the Yoruba name, *Igunnu*. Still yet, it has the Nupe name of *Ndako gboya*. I believe the Yoruba's earlier accessibility to Western education, its world and propaganda, enabled the Yoruba names for these deities to spread ahead of the Nupe names. The degree of the acceptability of the *Egungun* ritual among the Yoruba whose population definitely outweighs the Nupe's in the country, also accounts for the popularity of the Yoruba names.

There are presently many contentions on the language of the *Egungun* among writers on Yoruba literature and religion. Ulli Beier (Olajubu, 1970: 8-14) for example, asserted that the *Egungun* language is a "ventriloquist trick" on the people. Oludare Olajubu (1970) disagreed with this view. He maintained that *Egungun* spoke in imitation of a brown monkey, *Ijimere*, and in true representation of "a dead one that is returning to the world." I believe such contention is a result of the inability of the scholars to understand the *Egungun*. It must be emphasized here that this is not so with the *Egungun* in the Nupe culture. I strongly posit that the first *Egungun* in the Yoruba country were pure Nupecizi and hence spoke Nupe, which the Yoruba population could not understand. The few members of the cult who spoke Yoruba therefore translated their messages. As a carry-over of this tradition, therefore, a monkey-like language is adopted by the Yoruba *Egungun* and a member of the cult translates the messages to the audience. Thus, the original language *Egungun* actually spoke must have been Nupe.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear in the history of Nupecizi that *Egungun* worship has been a very strong religion of the Nupe people. It is also unambiguous that both *Egungun* and *Igunnu* cults have been with the Nupecizi even before their interaction with the Yoruba. It was introduced to the Yoruba nation through the various close contacts that existed between the two cultures at ancient times.

This present work is definitely easily premised under cultural anthropological purview. I hasten to say however that I do not, by it, intend to be seen as a revivalist of what Chidi Amuta (1989:22) described as "calabash-and-rafia traditionalia." Rather, my present effort is directed, among other things, at further proving that many past Eurocentric works on African culture and orature are largely unreliable. Chidi Amuta (1989:22) said:

Singers and performers, writers and film makers alike in modern-day Africa have been united in their endless recourse to artistic convention, symbols and motifs from the past.

The past should not be regarded as the sole repository of tradition. I do not, therefore, romanticize in the museum of ancestral memory. Rather, my present study re-evaluates history and locates the so-called 'celebration for harmonic life' to where it properly belongs. My discovery is that *Egungun* had been an element used for

oppression and regression. The Nupecizi, whom I have confirmed to be originators of *Egungun* tradition, developed it to put fear in women and children. It was later used to witch-hunt and bamboozle their neighbors to submission. Olu Obafemi (1986), a contemporary African playwright, adopts a similar metaphor "for all forms of exploitation which obstruct social growth in traditional Africa" in his play *Night of a Mystical Beast*. In the myth of *Agurumo* (the mystical Beast), which is about the incessant Nupe raids of Kirri land around mid-nineteenth century, the Nupecizi always came in masks to kidnap children, women and helpless peasants and to raid their belongings. What happened in Kirri-Bunu must have happened in Oyo. Rather than romanticizing with this tradition of *Egungun* performance, our modern African artists must, like Olu Obafemi, reconstruct African values from a progressive perspective. Femi Osofisan (1982) has articulated this cause in his exploration of Moremi of Ife legend in his play *Morountodun*. Instead of a bourgeois heroin, his own Moremi, Titubi, commits class suicide and identifies with the struggle of the down-trodden. African artists should well exploit African history in the same vein.

## NOTES

- (1) The edict is titled "The Ilorin township prohibition against manufacture, sale, etc., of liquor in certain areas, Edict, 1988." It came into effect 1st of January, 1989.
- (2) In the whole of Africa, especially south of the Sahara, a strong obedience is still borne to the African gods and the traditional beliefs, despite the proclamation of Islam and Christianity by many Africans.
- (3) Personal interview with Alhaji Muhammad Ndagi Patigi, 9 January 1992. Personal interview with Malam Muhammad Liman Rogun, 11 January 1992. Personal interview with Binta Ibrahim, 15 January 1992.
- (4) We should note that we earlier encountered one Alapini as the head of the *Egungun* priests. The recurrence of this name here suggests its close association to the myth of *Egungun* in both Nupe and Yoruba communities. The first Alapini was said to have migrated from Tapa to Yoruba community (See Johnson, 1973: 160).
- (5) Sanda is the name of the particular hill Johnson refers to here. *Kusu* or *Kuso* means forest in Nupe.
- (6) Omoekee Amao, Field Performance, Ile Alhaji Raimi Iyanda, Omoda, June, 1978.
- (7) Jaibade Alao, Field Performance, Popoigbona, January, 1987.
- (8) Odolaye Aremu, "Shehu Shagari Geri Ijoba." Ariyo Sound A SSLP 058A, 1979.
- (9) This was outlawed by the pronouncement of the former Emir (King) of Ilorin, Alhaji Zulkarnaini Gambari Mohammad, in the 70s. Oludare Olajubu who brought in *Egungun* during his inaugural lecture at the University of Ilorin, on 10 December, 1987, referred to this and said his action was not a defiance to the Emir and Ilorin people's order but was purely "an exercise of academic freedom."
- (10) There were a number of uproars after the death of Chief Obafemi Awolowo as to who was to take over from him as the political leader of the Yoruba. Lateef Jakande, for example, who many including Dr. Tai Solarin and some Yoruba social and cultural groups suggested should succeed Awolowo was publicly and privately accused of being from a Nupe ancestry. A popular Yoruba *Ewi* poet, Lanrewaju Adepoju, boldly addresses this issue in his record "Iku Awolowo" LALPS 136, sides A&B, 1987. Jakande later embarked on a historical journey to Omuaran, a Yoruba town, where,

according to him, his household lineage praise poetry indicates is his true home. See Sunday Concord, May 17, 1987, pp.1, 20; Sunday Herald, May 17, 1987, pp.1&9; The Herald, May 23, 1988, pp.1&3, etc.

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Author's Name and Address: Abdul-Rasheed NA'ALLAH, *Comparative Studies in Literature, Film and Religion*, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada T6G 2E6.