

## Essays

# Èdè Àyàn: The Language of Àyàn in Yorùbá Art and Ritual of Egúngún

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*Kò sẹ́nì m'èdè Àyàn  
Bí ẹ́nì mú kòhògò ẹ̀ lówọ̀*

No one understands the language of Àyàn  
Better than the drummer who holds the gong in his hand  
*Yorùbá maxim*

From the Yorùbá oral historical, mythological, and ontological, abstract lines of reasoning, Àyàn is believed to be the first Yorùbá drum maker and drummer, who, after his death, was deified as the god of Drumming (Òrìṣà Àyàn, or simply Àyàn). Hence, when an experienced Yorùbá drummer plays his drum masterfully, the elders with the drum speech discernable ears (òmòràṅ) that hear the drumming, even from afar commend, “may Àyàn, the god of drumming prosper/ protect you!” (*Àyàn ó gbè ọ!*)

As among other Yorùbá deities (òrìṣà) that live in the spiritual realm in certain but uncommon natural environments (forests, trees, rivers, streams, and mountains, among others), Òrìṣà Àyàn is thought to reside in wood (Vil-lepastour 2015, 3). For this reason, Òrìṣà Àyàn is emblemized by the wood with which the body of the drum (ilù) is carved. Similarly, this deity is eulogized as “the spirit who speaks out from inside his wooded abode” (Òrìṣà gbé’nú igi fohùn), in reference to the log of wood with which the drums (ilù) are carved. It is said that Òrìṣà Àyàn particularly prefers that ilù be carved with *Cordia millenii* (igi òmò), a belief that gave birth to the Yorùbá saying, “out of the entire wood species of the forests is the preferred *Cordia millenii*, with which *gbèdu* drum is carved” (*Igi gbogbo ní ùbẹ ní’gbó, k’átó f’igi òmò gbé gbèdu*). Because of his position as the patron deity of drumming, which

by extension is used to accompanying sacred rites in honor of virtually all the Yorùbá òrìṣà, Òrìṣà Àyàn is thought to be their mouthpiece, as they all speak through the drums that he emblemizes. Another emblem of Òrìṣà Àyàn that is even worshipped is a shallow hemispherical drum with a single fixed head, which is worn on the chest with a strap around the neck and beaten with leather straps held in each hand (*gúdúgúdú*) (Bascom 1952, 4). The *gúdúgúdú* symbol of Òrìṣà Àyàn also goes by the praise name (*oriki*) “*gúdúgúdú* with its distinctive uneven and undulated back shape” (*Gúdúgúdú, ab’èyìn jákan-jàkan*). The component parts that formed this uneven and surged-back shape [of *gúdúgúdú*] include *kúseré* and *apìràn*. *Kúseré* is a circular metal object affixed onto the drum’s wooded base, and *apìràn* is an array of wooden pegs that hold the *kúseré* securely onto the base of the instrument.

At the exoteric and practical level, Àyàn also refers to any Yorùbá traditional and professional drummer, who plays the drum (*ilù*), often with the use of a gong (*kòṅgò*). The Yorùbá professional drummers share the name *àyàn* with Òrìṣà Àyàn since they are the human agents who play the drums (*ilù*), emblem of Òrìṣà Àyàn, and through which the deity speaks. The Yorùbá incantation “the day that the drummer drums with his gong/drumstick is the very moment that the Àyàn god of drumming speaks out that which is in his mouth” (*Òḍjò tí kòṅgò Àyàn bá f’ojú ba ilù ni Òrìṣà Àyàn ñpọ t’enu rẹ sí’lẹ*) best illustrates the interconnection of the drummers (*àyàn*) with god of drumming, Òrìṣà Àyàn. As succinctly corroborated by Amanda Villepastour, “the drummer in action becomes Àyàn.”

Another Yorùbá term for a drummer (*àyàn*) is *onílù*.<sup>1</sup> With their drumming (or drum music) that mimic the human speech, the Àyàn or *Onílù* verbalize words/speeches (*òrò*) that is or are intelligible to the ears of their patrons, often the dance performers (*oníjò*). For that reason, *ilù*, to the Yorùbá, is an instrument that acts as a speech surrogate (i.e., substitute). That the Yorùbá refer to *ilù* as “the talking drum” underscores this assertion. In fact, they strongly believed that if handled by a skillful drummer (*àyàn/onílù*), *ilù*, just like humans, can speak words or communicate effectively to those who understand the language of the drum. The Yorùbá phrase “a lifeless goat that speaks just like a human” (*òkú-ewúré tí fọ’hùn bí èniyàn*), a euphemism for the goatskin fixed single- or double-headed hourglass drums that mimic human speech when drummed, is a testimony to *ilù* as a true “talking drum.” Another Yorùbá saying that illustrates that *ilù* is an instrument of language substitution is “that the *gangan* drum could speak in a human nasal tone of

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1 *Onílù* is formed from two Yorùbá words *oní* and *ilù* (literally, “owner of the drum” or “one who plays the drum”), a euphemism for the drummer. Thus, anybody that plays drum is an *onílù*. But those Yorùbá traditional professional *onílù*, like the *dùndún* and *bàtá* drummers, are specifically referred to as *àyàn*.

voice is not without the help of the drummer's own tip of the fingernails" (*àtí ràn'mú gángan kò s'èyìn èékáná*).

In Yorùbá traditional festivals, ritual performances, and religious practices in general, the role of àyàn—whose drumming or drum music imitate and code the natural language (Yorùbá), cannot be overemphasized. The Yorùbá aphorism “without drum music, there is no way to celebrate” (*lái sí'lù, tání jé s'eré òkúrùgbè!*) is a testimony to the indispensable role of ilù in the context of traditional Yorùbá visual and performance arts. A clear example is the Yorùbá art and ritual of Egúngún, the theme of this study. Paradoxically, many Yorùbá art scholars often make very little or no effort to explore the relevance of ilù in their studies on Yorùbá visual culture, such as Egúngún. This has continued to make it become virtually impossible for a deeper understanding of Yorùbá art in particular and African art as a whole. Ironically, the same scholars prefer to invest their energy, searching outside of the art's cultural origin to fulfil their primary goal of “appreciating” the African art, rather than searching within African culture, language and values, the very driving forces that gave rise to this art, and thus a catalyst to understanding it.<sup>2</sup> It is on that note that I believe the question that scholars of African art should begin to ask themselves is: when will African art scholarship—unlike Western art studies that often demand intellectual rigor and professional thoroughness—rise above its present art “appreciating” status vis-à-vis African art? In my opinion, as this present study is aimed at confirming, the understanding of African art critically requires that scholars be fluent or at least confident in the reading, writing, and speaking of the language of the people whose art they study.

Also heightening the problem of the lack of “understanding” of Yorùbá art is the very unique nature of it (as with other African art), in which an isolated work of art in context is a rarity. Thus, the present study examines the very indispensable roles of Àyàn drummers in the performance context of the annual Egúngún festival (*òdún Egúngún*) in a Yorùbá community in Òkèìgbó in Nigeria's Ondo State. As a native speaker with access to Yorùbá philosophy, values and history, and who is fully aware of the fundamental importance of language in African art studies, I aim in this study to examine the mutual relationship existing between the Àyàn and Egúngún from the vantage point of the Yorùbá language, the medium through which the said Yorùbá philosophy, values and history are stored and expressed. It delves into the very root of Egúngún within the Yorùbá cultural context, where traditions and history are preserved and recorded not in the western-type of writing, but rather in the Yorùbá language, ritual performance and ceremonies. It is hoped that this study will facilitate a deeper understanding of Egúngún along with the

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2 Personal communication with Professor Rowland Abíodún on April 2, 2017.

àyàn within the art and ritual performance context of the *Qdún Egúngún*. The study illustrates the interconnection of the *àyàn* and *Egúngún* by first providing an overview of Yorùbá drums and their ritual contexts. This is followed by a close study of the Yorùbá ontological concept of *Egúngún*, one of the most valued patrons of *Àyàn* (the drummers), as an important form of Yorùbá religious beliefs and practices. Using the *Ẹgbẹ̀ Ọ̀jẹ̀* (Cult of *Egúngún*) of the ancient Yorùbá town of *Òkèìgbó* as a case study, the study concludes with an in-depth analysis of the role of *Àyàn* (Drummers) in Yorùbá art and ritual of *Egúngún*.

### **An Overview of Yorùbá Drums and their Ritual Contexts**

Of all the Yorùbá traditional musical instruments, *Ìlù* (with single or double hourglass leather heads) are esteemed as the principal and most commonly used. The reason being that the *ìlù* can be drummed with or without any other additional instruments to emitting or producing a given and distinctive piece of sacred or entertainment melody or rhythm. Appropriate examples include the *àgbá* and *àgèrẹ̀* (also *àgèrẹ̀-ògún*), the sacred drum rhythms of the cult of *Ògbóni*--whose members worship *Ile* that is personified by the Earth goddess, and *Ògún*, their on and war patron deity. What is the meaning of *ìlù* and why is it so important particularly in the Yorùbá traditional religion's context? The Yorùbá word *ìlù* is formed from two morphemes /ì+lù/, which is the short form of "the thing which is beaten?" (*ohun tí a n lù*). However, the term *ìlù* applies strictly to the log drums that have single- or double-hourglass goatskin/leather heads. Hence, there are several other Yorùbá musical instruments that are played but which do not bear the name *ìlù*. Examples include trumpets (*fèrẹ̀/kàkàkí*), several types of gongs (*agogo*), and gourd/calabash rattles (*şẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀*) that are rather called by their individual names, not *ìlù*. Depending on the types, *ìlù* are typically played by the *àyàn* or *onìlù* with sticks/gongs/drumsticks (*igi/ kò̀ǹgò*), the palm or fist (*àtẹ̀lẹ̀wó/ ọ̀wó*), and twisted leather thongs (*ọ̀sán*).

*Ìlù* can be placed into two main categories. In the first category are some distinct types of Yorùbá drums that are associated with the worship of *òrìşà*, as they are used specifically in religious or ritual contexts. Hence, the term "drums for the deities" (*ìlù òrìşà*) is generally used to describe these drums' category. They are played by the drummers to produce or emit some distinctive individual *òrìşà*'s drumbeat (or drum music). Examples include the *ìgbìn*, *ìpèsè*, *àgèrẹ̀*, *àgbá*, *èkù* (also *àgbé*), and *bàtá*. Belonging to the second category are the drums that are used both for secular and religious music. These types of drums are played exclusively by professional drummers called *àyàn*. *Dùndún* drums are one such type. The following contains a discussion of these types of drums.



## Ìgbìn

Comprising of a set of four drums, *ìgbìn* “are upright open-ended log drums with single leather heads fastened and tuned by wooden pegs” (Bascom 1953, 3). They are sacred to Ọbàtálá, the arch, superior òriṣà. That Ọbàtálá is also called the great/superior deity (Ọriṣà-Ñílá) leaves no doubt as to why he is regarded as “second in command to the Supreme Being” (*Igbákejì-Olódùmarè*). Another name that portrays Ọbàtálá as the most senior deity in the Yorùbá pantheon is “the chief/leader of all the òriṣà” (*Ọbàtáriṣà*). As his name implies, Ọbàtálá is the ruler/god that is associated with white, which is a testimony to his pure/virtuous nature, persona, and attributes. For that reason, the devotees (especially the priests and priestesses) of Ọbàtálá are distinguished by their use of the white cloths and opaque white beads. They also paint their uncovered body parts (especially the head, face, and hands) with white pigment (made from ground kaolinite). The four-drum set of *ìgbìn* comprises of *iyá-ìgbìn* (or *iyá-ńílá*), the largest in the set, along with the second largest is *iyá-gan* (or *jagba*), as well as the third and the fourth smallest, *keke* and *aféré*, respectively. While the first two (*iyá-ìgbìn/ iyá-ńílá* and *iyá-gan/ jagba*) are often played with a single stick and the palm or fist, the two smaller ones (*keke* and *aféré*) are usually played with two sticks known as *ikeke-ilù*. Each of the four drums is usually thick and squat and has three legs that are roughly carved out of the bottom of the drum on which they stand on the ground. That makes the *ìgbìn* drum set an *àgbé'lè-lù*, as each *ìgbìn* drum is drummed/played while secured on the ground with its three legs. The carvers of *ìgbìn* often carved relief figures and other bas relief decorations on the sides. The *ìgbìn* drum ensemble is played at the annual Ọbàtálá festival.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: *Iyá Igbìn*

3 For further reading on *ìgbìn*, see Olu Daramola ati A. Jeje, *Àwọn Àṣà àti Ọriṣà Ilẹ̀ Yorùbá* (1967, 173–174); William Bascom, *Drums of the Yoruba of Nigeria* (1953, 3).

## Ìpèsè

Ìpèsè (also ìpèsì) is the drum ensemble of the *ifá* priests (*babaláwo*), which they play during the *ifá* festival (*Qdún-Ifá*). The drums are also used at the burial rites of any of their members. The *ìpèsè* drum ensemble comprises of three drums, namely, *ìpèsè*, the largest in the set, which can be up to six feet tall. *Aféré*, next to *ìpèsè* in size, is about three feet tall but is wider than *ìpèsè*, and finally *àrà̀n*, the smallest in the set. Other musical instrument in the set used with the three drums is the iron gong/bell (*agogo*). Just like *ìgbìn* drums, *ìpèsè* are upright open-ended log drums with single leather heads fastened and tuned by wooden pegs. *Ìpèsè*, the largest drum in the *ìpèsè* ensemble, is played with a single unshaped stick and the palm, while the two smaller drums (*aféré* and *àrà̀n*) are played with two unshaped sticks.

## Àgèrè

Also known as *àgèrè-ògún*, the *àgèrè* drum ensemble is used by the hunter's guild (*egbé-òdẹ̀*) during important events, which include the hunter's dirge (*irèmòjé*), which is sung/chanted at a second burial ceremony *ìsípà* (also *ìsípà-òdẹ̀*), traditionally performed for any deceased hunter or hunters (*òdẹ̀* or *òlòdẹ̀*). *Àgèrè* can also be played at other times, especially to honor Ògún, the Yorùbá iron and war patron deity (Drewal 1997, 219). Relevant examples of such occasions include the annual festival of the hunter's guild (*Àjòdún Egbé-Òdẹ̀*) and the Ògún festival (*Qdún Ògún*), when the *àgèrè* drum ensemble is played and all the members of the hunter's guild display their dancing steps. The *àgèrè* dance style itself is also called *àgèrè* or *itasẹ̀-àgèrè*. The *àgèrè* (or *àgèrè-Ògún*) ensemble comprises of three drums, namely, *àgèrè* (the largest), *fééré* (next in size to *àgèrè*), and *aféré* (the smallest in the set). Like *ìpèsè* and *ìgbìn*, each of the three *àgèrè* drums has a hollowed wooden body. The only difference is that *àgèrè* drums have two equally-sized hourglass goatskin/leather heads (contrast to *ìgbìn* and *ìpèsè* with single-hourglass leather heads). Because they are double-headed drums of an enormous size, each *àgèrè* drum is placed horizontally on the ground where it is being played.

## Àgbá

*Àgbá* is the drum ensemble used in the cult of Ògbóni, a secret society that wielded strong political, judicial, and religious powers among the Yorùbá in the precolonial era, but now functions as a social and religious group. Called "Ògbóni society/group" (*Egbé Ògbóni*, or simply Ògbóni), the members worship Ilẹ̀, the Earth, which is personified by the Earth Goddess who is variously called "the Great Mother of the Earth" (*Ìyá-Ayé*, *Àbẹ̀ní Àdẹ̀*, *Èdan Òlóló*, *Pooyè*, and *Lánní Qlomo*, among others) (Famule 2003, 9). Like the *ìgbìn* and

*ipèsè*, each of the three-drum ensemble of *àgbá* is upright open-ended log drum with single goatskin/leather head. But unlike the *ìgbìn* and/or *ipèsè* that are usually of moderate size, *àgbá* drums are generally large and heavy. This is the reason for which they are sometimes called a “large barrel” (*àgbá-kerebété*). J.R.O Ojo has also suggested that the term *àgbá* could be “a reference to the loud, cannon-like sound produced by some of the drums” (Ojo 1973, 50). I’m inclined to agree with Ojo’s suggestion based on the following *Oríki Ògbóni* (the praise chant of the Ògbóni secrete society) that obviously validates his assertion: “children of Ògbóni, owner of the cannon-like drum that produced a roaring sound like that of a falling tree, just like the Àràn that is common in Ìjèsà/Ilèsà” (*Ògbóni Modùlorè, Ọmọ Alágbàá dún gbò bí igi; Àgbá dún-mi-dún; Àràn tí’Jèsà wá lù*).

*Àgbá* drums usually have carvings with bas relief figures on the sides, which often include images of human face(s) with large eyes. The large eyes are a reference to the outsized eyes of *Èdan* (also *Èdan Ògbóni*), a pair of a male and female bronze figures joined at the top by an iron chain. *Èdan* is one of the two principal emblems of Ògbóni. The other being *Onilé*, the “owner of the house/land”, another pair of free-standing male and female bronze figures, but without the chain (Famule 2003, 26–29). The *Onilé* figures are always placed together on a special altar inside the Ògbóni lodge (*ilédi*) and treated as



Figure 2: *Àgbá* drum ensemble

one unit and referred to as Ìyá-Ayé, a euphemism for the Ògbóni Earth goddess. More importantly, both the *Eḍan* and *Onilé* bronze figures are depicted with a very large pair of eyes that often appear on the sides of the *àgbá* drums. These large eyes are a reference to the “all-seeing” and spiritually powerful eyes of Ìyá-Ayé. That the large eyes of the *Eḍan* and *Onilé* bronze figures that are also carved on the sides of the *àgbá* drums are an allusion to Ògbóni as a powerful goddess who uses her spiritual power to identify with accuracy people with antisocial behaviors and is always very hard on them, as evidenced in her praise song (*oríki*):

*Lánní Ọlọmọ*  
*Ìyá mi Àbẹ̀nì tí f'orí èké bù'kèlẹ̀*  
*Àbẹ̀nì, Poóyẹ̀ tí ń mú'jẹ̀ ọ̀dàlẹ̀*  
*Kanna-kánná abojú lágbárí*  
*Abí'mọ̀ sí'lẹ̀ Obinrin*  
*Ó p'ọ̀dàlẹ̀ péè-péè*  
*Òrọ̀ buniwò s'ojú konko mọ'ni<sup>4</sup>*

*Lánní Ọlọmọ*  
 My mother Àbẹ̀nì, who eats her food-morsels with the liar's severed head  
 Àbẹ̀nì is also Poóyẹ̀, who drinks the blood of perfidious person(s)  
 She is the very one whose large eyes cover the entire forehead  
 A born hard and fearless woman  
 She kills and utterly exterminates the treachery  
 The audacious Goddess that stares and stares menacingly at you.<sup>5</sup>

### Èkù (Àgbé)

Èkù are the drums of *ẹpa*, a masking ritual festival found predominantly in eastern and northeastern parts of Yorùbáland, among the Ìjèsà, Èkìtì, Ìgbómìnà, and Okun Yorùbá, respectively (Famule 2017, 397). The *èkù* ensemble comprises of three drums. The largest is the “mother of *èkù*” (*Ìyá-èkù*), the lead drum that produces a deep and overpowering pitch. *Ìyá-èkù* is a round pot-shaped clay drum with stretched goatskin hour glass head (Famule 2005, 171–172). Marsha Vander Heyden had observed this kind of clay drum also being played at the *elẹ́ fón* (*ẹpa*) festival at Ìlórò-Èkìtì in 1970 (Heyden 1977, 19). Heyden indicated that the same type of clay drum, reported by Kenneth

4 This *Oríki Ògbóni* (a secret cult whose members worship Ile, which is personified by the Earth Goddess) was adapted from Àsàbíòjẹ̀ Afénápa (And Her Traditional Ifá/Òrìṣà Bata Musical Band), “Ogboni”, In the Album “Isese Lagba” (Tradition and Culture Is the Best). Duration: 54:42 minutes (the “Ogboni” track is 7:01 minutes). October 11, 2007.

5 Translation by the author.

Crosthwaite Murray, who called it *àgbé*, was also played at the *èpa* festival at Òmù Àrán in 1931 (Heyden 1977, 19). The other two drums in *èkù* drum ensemble are *omele-abo* and *omele-ako*, both upright open-ended hollow log drums with a single leather head.



Figure 3: Èkù drum ensemble

### Bàtá

*Bàtá* drums are used only for religious music, especially in the cult of Šàngó, the god associated with thunder and lightning. It is said that when Šàngó was alive, he was believed to be a great magician who used the *bàtá* drum music as an important vehicle for his effective magic performance and acrobatic display. Thus, the Šàngó priests (*oníšàngó*), who serve as the principal patrons of *bàtá* today, usually include displays of magic and acrobatic dance in their ritual performances. *Bàtá* drums are also used in the cult of Egúngún, especially in the magic and acrobatic dance performances by magic display/entertainer Egúngún (*eégún onídán/aláré*). For these reasons, Akin Euba has suggested that “*bàtá* is the preferred instrument in situations where magic is performed, and this can only be because its sounds are effective in magic making” (Euba 2011, 518).

*Bàtá* ensembles comprises of five to six drums, namely, “mother of the drum” (*iyáàlù*), a “female subordinate drum” (*omele-abo*), a “male subordinate drum” (*omele-ako*), a “subordinate drum” (*kudì*), and “a pair of two subordinate drums” (*omele-méji*), or “three subordinate drums tied together to function as a talking drum” (*omele-méta*). Each *bàtá* drum has a hollowed wooden body with two unequal sized heads (one smaller than the other) covered with a stretched and fasten goatskin leather.



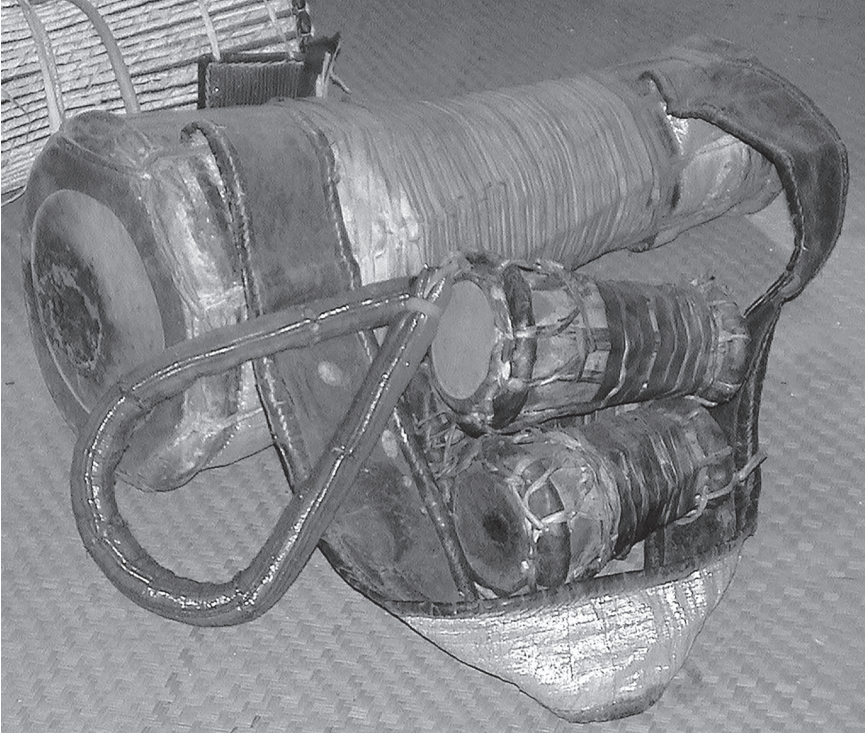
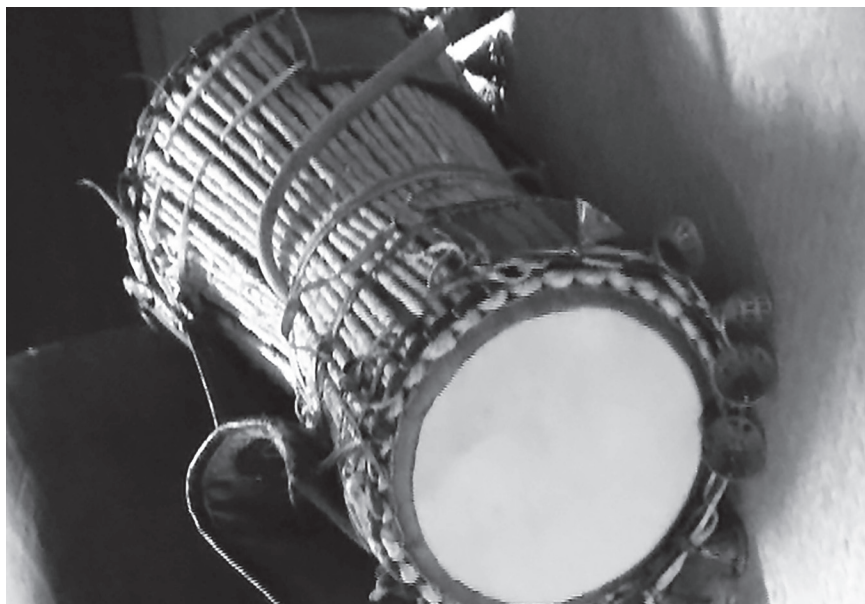


Figure 4: Ìyáàlù and Omele-méjì Bàtá

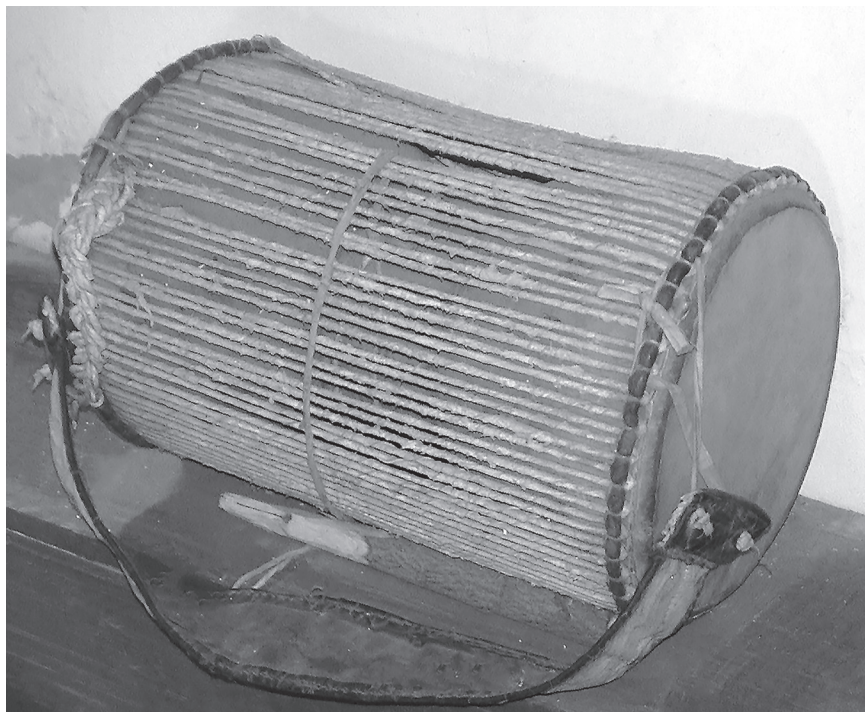
### Dùndún

*Dùndún* drums are used both for secular and religious music. The *dùndún* ensemble comprises of five drums, namely, *ìyáàlù*, *keríkẹ̀rì*, *gáńgán*, *kàńàńgó*, and *gúdúgúdú*. Except for *gúdúgúdú*, which has only one hourglass head, each of the four drums in the *dùndún* five-drum ensemble has a hollowed wooden body with two equal sized hourglass heads covered with stretched and fasten goatskin leathers. The *ìyáàlù* is so referred to as such because is the largest in the set. The *ojúgbẹ̀* Small brass bells (*ojúgbẹ̀*), cast using the *cire perdue* method, are attached around the two hourglass heads of *ìyáàlù*. The second largest drum in the *dùndún* ensemble is *keríkẹ̀rì*, literally, “enjoyable/satisfying”, an allusion to it as adding sweetness to *dùndún* drum music. The second smallest is *gáńgán*, while *kàńàńgó* is the smallest of the four drums.

*Gúdúgúdú*, the fifth drum in the *dùndún* ensemble, is distinct from the previously mentioned four drums in the set not only because is the only one that has a single head, but also because it is characterized by *ìda* and *kúseré*. *Ìda* is a dark or black dried sap that is glued onto the center of the goat-skin-covered hourglass head of *gúdúgúdú*. The *ida* component serves two



*Figure 5: Ìyáàlù Dùndún*



*Figure 6: Kẹríkẹrí Dùndún*



important functions. The first pertains to its spiritual connection to Ògún and one of the *òriṣà* pantheons that the god of the drums (Òriṣà Àyàn) serves as their spokesperson. It is believed that the tree sap/latex (*oje-igi*) that comes out of a log of wood when it is either felled or carved with iron tools (the symbol of Ogun), is a form of ritual offering (ètùtù) to Ògún. Thus, one of the praise chants (*oríki*) of Ògún is the following: “the Ògún deity that is being worshipped by wood carvers is fond of drinking the tree sap” (*Ògún gbèná-gbèná oje igi ló n mu*). The second and last function of *ida*, which is glued onto the center of the goatskin-covered hourglass head of *gúdúgúdú*, is acoustic—it allows the drum to produce two different musical tones when played, depending on where exactly the head of the drum is struck. *Kúseré*, the second distinctive and indispensable component by which *gúdúgúdú* is characterized, is a circular iron bar affixed beneath the base of the drum. *Kúseré* also alludes to Ògún, as it is said that without iron tools like adzes, chisels, or knives (the symbol of Ògún), the carvers of the drum’s wooden body (*igi-ilù*), or any wood carvings for that matter, cannot perform their functions. Thus, the Yorùbá saying “any deities who disparage Ògún would roast their yam and find no knife to peel it” (*Òriṣà t’ó bá ní t’Ògún kòsí, yóó sun’su kò ní r’òbẹ wo*), an allusion to Ògún as indispensable to all the rest of the Yorùbá *òriṣà*. And from the practical point of view, the *kúseré* component of *gúdúgúdú* “also helps to hold in place a series of wooden peg that are placed between it and the base of the hollowed wood body, helping to facilitate greater resonance” (Omojola 2010, 34).

In order to provide the reader with the necessary background knowledge to understand the specific and more in-depth role of *àyàn* in the performance context of the Egúngún festival (*Odún Egúngún*), the theme of this study, I will now provide a discourse on the Yorùbá concept of Egúngún.

### **Egúngún: A Physical manifestation of the Yorùbá ancestor spirits**

*Egúngún* is thought of as a physical manifestation of the ancestor spirit(s). For that reason, every senior *egúngún* (*Egúngún Àgbà*) is addressed as “father/ancestor” (*bàbá*). This belief is rooted in the Yorùbá concept of *iwà*, which has been succinctly described by Rowland Abiodun as “the essential nature of a person or thing.” (Abiodun 2014, 245). In this study, I broaden the concept of *iwà* to covering the essence of human existence and including the ancestors, along with other spirit beings/deities. That makes *iwà* not defined solely in terms of physical life of an individual on Earth, but extends to the afterlife. The reason for this is that the Yorùbá strongly believe that the dead (*òkú*), via their spirits, still exist after death. That also means that the human essence—or core values—can still influence the living even after death. Consequently,



Figure 7: Ọṣọpà Egúngún Àgbà

the Yorùbá recognize two *iwà* realities, namely, a good *iwà* (*iwà-rere*) and a bad *iwà* (*iwà-lásán*). The former is a human existence with a positive essence/core values, and the latter is a human existence without any positive essence or impact while alive. The Yorùbá term for a human continued existence and essence even after death is *ẹhin-iwà*, in which the dead continue to make “their presence [and essence] known to the living, whose well-being depends upon their relationship to the living dead” (Pemberton 1989, 175). Thus, at the demise of their parents, a common petition of the children would be “Our deceased parent, do not forget us as you rest peacefully in heaven; please continue to look back and watch over us” (*Òkú ọlọmọ má sùn lórun; jòwọ bojú w’ẹhin kíó wá wòwá o*).

The relationship existing between the Yorùbá concepts of *ẹhin-iwà* (as discussed above) and *egúngún*, the major theme for this study, cannot be overstressed. Because *ẹhin-iwà* provides a new status of “ancestor spirit,” who is now enlisted in the realm of the *òrìṣà*, when an accomplished old person (i.e. one having *iwà-rere*) dies, his or her bereaved children eulogize him or her, saying “Our parent had transitioned to an *òrìṣà* divinity, now to be worshipped on our knees” (*Bàbá/ Ìyá wa ti d’Òrìṣà àkúnlẹ̀ bọ*), a euphemism for

a befitting worship. Hence, it is this concept of *ẹ̀hìn-iwà* on which the Yoruba religious practice of ancestor veneration is based (Ọdún Egúngún being the most popular of these).

Morphologically, the Yorubá term *egúngún* is a compound word formed by the combination of the morphemes /e+gún+gún/, literally, “that which facilitates or bring about stability, unity, peace, and joy,” among others. Thus, in Yorubá communities where the cult of *egúngún* is prevalent, the devotees perform *Ọdún Egúngún* annually, with one major expectation in mind—bringing about their wellbeing and promoting the community’s harmony and stability. *Egúngún* devotees found this belief in the *Odù Ifá*, Ọwòrìn-Aséyìn (also Ọwòrìn-Şé),<sup>6</sup> which describes *egúngún* as *sayégún*,<sup>7</sup> an allusion to *egúngún* as the ancestor spirits who bring about societal stability and people’s wellbeing. The *Odù Ọwòrìn-Aséyìn* recalls that at a certain time when the Earth (*ayé*) was threatened with collapse, Ifá (also Ọrúnmilà) prescribed that a propitiatory ritual sacrifice (*ẹ̀bo/ètùtù*) be offered to the Supreme Being, Olódumàrè, whose abode is the spiritual world (Àjùlé-òrun), so that he might stabilize *ayé*. Soon after the prescribed *ẹ̀bo/ètùtù* was brought to Olódumàrè, he sent down the heavenly spirit beings known as *sayégún*, the first *egúngún*, to help stabilize *ayé*. The *sayégún/egúngún* barely got to the world of the living (*ilé-ayé*), where they had their initial stopover in a forest that would later be called the forest-grove of *egúngún* (*igbó-igbàlẹ̀*), when rain started to fall. It was the orchestra of *àyàn* who with their drumming finally brought the *egúngún* home from their initial *igbó-igbàlẹ̀* stopover. From that day on, many *egúngún*, especially the *egúngún-àgbà*, have continued to use *igbó-igbàlẹ̀* as the grove from where they appear to the public during the *Ọdún Egúngún*. It was also since that time that the pacts between the *egúngún* and *àyàn* (who led them home with their drum music) together with *babaláwo*, who prescribed the *ẹ̀bo/ètùtù*, become effective. That pacts decree that, “it is forbidden for any *egúngún* to flog

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6 *Odù Ifá* is an Ifá literary corpus passed down to the Yorubá by Ọrúnmilà and known as Ifá, the Yorubá god of wisdom and divination. The Yorubá history of the creation describes Ifá (also interchangeably called Èlà) as “a witness to creation and human destiny” (*Èlẹ̀ríf-ipín*), an affirmation that the Ọrìṣà wa there to witness the creation of humankind and whereby every human chose his/her own destiny. Professor Rowland Abiódún has called Ifá literary corpus “the intellectual power-house” of the Yorubá people in his audacious and ground-breaking book, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* (2014). I will here add that *Odù Ifá* literary corpus is Yorubá’s recognized and accepted sacred book of knowledge on Yorubá culture and history recorded in Yorubá oral form, and which is retrievable only by those who fully understand Yorubá language (speaking, writing, and reading) beyond an entry level.

7 *Sayégún* is derived from the morphemes /so+ayé+gún/, meaning “put/secure + the Earth/world of the living + in stable, perfect, or good shape.” It is believed that the Yorubá term *egúngún* was coined from *sayégún*.

the drummers or the *ifá* diviners/priests” (*Egúngún kò gbòdò na Àyàn; bèèni wọn kò gbòdò na Babaláwo*).

Another *Odù Ifá* source that confirms *egúngún* as heavenly spirits (*Ará-Òrun*), who descended from their heavenly abode to stabilize *ilé-ayé*, is found in *Ogbè-Ròsùn* (also *Ogbè Ìròsùn*):

*Apári awo Ègbá*  
*Ósòsò ní’run àgbòn awo Èsà*  
*Abasósó orí rààri-raari awo Òde-Ìjèbú*  
*A dá fún Òlòlò-lòhùn tí ẹ ọkọ ọbuntun...*  
*Níjọ tí àwọn Irúnmọlẹ àti àwọn Egúngún*  
*Ñti ọrun bọ wá sí ayé.<sup>8</sup>*

One with a baldhead, the secret of Ègbá (Abéòkúta)  
 The one with a plentiful beard, the secret of Èsà  
 One with a large tuft of hair on the head, the secret of Òde-Ìjèbú  
 It casts *Odù Ifá* for the Stutter/Stammer, husband of Ọbuntun  
 On the day the 400 high ranking divinities together with *Egúngún*  
 Are coming from heaven onto the earth.

However, the term *egúngún* is strictly used in two contexts. The first exemplifies those that are not perceived as “Ancestor.” Thus, this type of *Egúngún*, which Ulli Beier has referred to as the “unserious masquerades,” (Beier 1964, 191–2), is beyond the scope of this study. The *egúngún* in this category are interchangeably called “the masked player/entertainer” (*egúngún aláré*), “the masked performer of tricks/magic” (*egúngún onídán*); “we dance with the wood” (*egúngún agbégijó*), or “the itinerant masked dancer” (*egúngún alárinjọ*). *Egúngún alárinjọ* accurately describes this first type of *egúngún*, since they characteristically travel from one Yorùbá community or region to the next, performing dances, tricks, and magic at all times of the year, and living predominantly on the incomes of their performances.

The second type of *egúngún*, the focus of this study, exemplifies those that are recognized as “real” *egúngún*, alluding to a physical manifestation of the “Ancestor spirits.” They are found among the Ọyó-Yorùbá and their descendants who migrated southwards to other Yorùbá towns like Ìgànná, Aáwẹ, Ìsẹyìn, Èdẹ, Ìbàdàn, and Òkèìgbó. Because of their Ọyó-Yorùbá origin, they are occasionally called *Egúngún-Ọyó*. Unlike the first type (*egúngún aláré*/

8 The *Odù Ifá* (*Ogbè-Ròsùn*) was adapted from Bascom, “*Ogbè-Ròsùn*.” In *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (1969, 208).

*onídán/agbéjijó/alárinjó*), the Egúngún-Ọ̀yó type incorporates those that specifically connect with Ancestor veneration. Hence, they are also called “the inhabitants of Heaven” (*Ará-òrun*), or “the Ancestors” (*Bàbá*). This type of *egúngún* emblemizes the spirit of the dead (aged) man, who is believed to have transformed into an ancestor in *ẹ̀hin-ìwà*.

Through *egúngún*, the ancestor spirit manifests under a specially created shroud-costume assemblage called *ẹ̀kú/agò* that is worn to cover the head and the whole body of the *arẹ̀kú*, the human agent that donned the *ẹ̀kú/agò*. There are different forms of *ẹ̀kú/agò*, each depending on its component materials. Some are made entirely of traditionally hand-woven *kíjìpá* cloths and tightly crocheted netting (*àwòṅ*) sewn around to the face, which veils the face of the *arẹ̀kú*. The *Eégún Aláḡò* type from Òkèìgbó exemplifies this form of *ẹ̀kú/agò*. Some are made of layers of clothes of different colors (especially red, yellow, and blue colors) and potentially with such attachments as animal skulls and

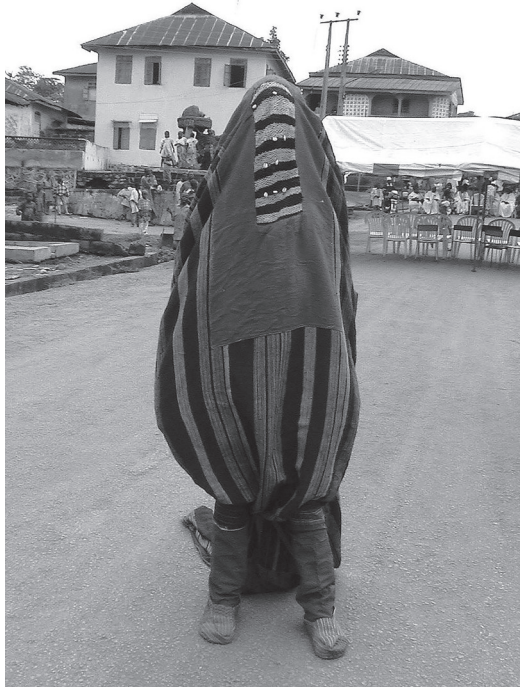


Figure 8: *Eégún Aláḡò*

horns and leather pouches of medicine-charms.

Some others are made of a variety of wild animals' pelts, potentially with *ẹ̀re* carved headpieces. An ideal example is the *Aláwopálà*.





Figure 9: Ìtìàrán



Figure 10: Aláwopàlà

The primary purpose of *èkú/agò* is to totally obliterate the identity of the human agent that dons it, in order to conceal the power that gave form to the “Ancestor spirit” through the wearer of the *èkú* (*arèkú*), the energizer of the *èkú /agò*. Hence, from the esoteric or mystic level, the real meaning of *egúngún* is “powers concealed.” That is, the voluminous *èkú/agò* of *egúngún*, the manifested “Ancestor spirit,” has concealed the unknowable, that which is knowable only to the members of the *egúngún* cult (*mọ́ríwo/òjè*). This arcane implication is persuasive in the following *èṣà* or *iwì egúngún*: “*egúngún* is not that which can be seen; the ancestral spirit is unknowable in the forest-grove of *egúngún*” (*Egúngún kò s’ eni àárí; Òṣà ò s’ eni àámò ní’gbàlè*).<sup>9</sup> And even among the *mọ́ríwo/òjè*, who have access to *ìgbó-ìgbàlè*—where *egúngún* usually dress up before emerging to the public, and thus, know the “powers concealed” in *egúngún*—they are forbidden to reveal the secrets about the “powers concealed.” That the *mọ́ríwo* are bound to adhering strictly to this pact is contained in their cult’s slogan, reminding them of the impending deadly consequence(s), should they divulge the cult secrets to any non-initiates: “the lips of the knowledgeable ones or cult’s initiated members must

9 *Èṣà/iwì egúngún* are praise songs or chants of *egúngún*. The same is also known as “head praising” (*oríki*), when it applies to an individual Yorùbá family or lineage’s praise names or songs.

always remain gagged” (*wíwo lẹnu awo ní wo*), a euphemism and reminder that all the *mọ́ríwo* must forever guard all the cult’s secrets from all who are not initiated into the cult.

As earlier explained that the Yorùbá thought about “ancestor spirits” is deeply rooted in their concept of *iwà* with *ẹ̀hin-iwà*, that concept also informed their religious practice of ancestor veneration/worship, the most popular being the *Ọ̀dún Egúngún*. Hence, the Yorùbá believe that their deceased ancestors never die; rather, they relocate to another world, which is the spiritual realm of spirit beings (*òrun*), from where their spirits can be invoked and appear in the form of *egúngún*. Upon the invocation of the spirits of the dead (often by way of the *Ọ̀dún Egúngún*), the ancestor(s) of the family-lineage of



Figure 11: *Eyẹ Abidiàlẹ̀* (Also see Figure 7)



*egúngún* manifest physically in the appearance of *egúngún* that is addressed as *Bàbá/Bàbá Àgbà*, an allusion to the Ancestor or Ancestor spirit.

### Performance Context of *Qdún Egúngún*

The author has analyzed the *Odù Ọ̀wòrìn-Asé yìn* (also Ọ̀wòrìn-Şé), which reveals that the first *egúngún*, known as *sayégún*, were the spirit beings that Olódùmarè sent from their heavenly abode to come and bring soothe to the chaotic *ilé-ayé*; and which also tells that the *àyàn* were the ones who led the first *egúngún* home from *igbó-igbàlè* with the drumming. However, it is important to also stress that since then, the unending role of the *àyàn* in the cult of *egúngún* has been unabated. Hence, the following is a narrative that points to the further indispensable role of *àyàn* in the performance context of *Qdún Egúngún*, which were based on the author's own eyewitness accounts for over the last two and half decades that he has been researching on the *Qdún Egúngún* in Òkèìgbó.<sup>10</sup>

Òkèìgbó is a historic town located in Ilè-Olújí/Òkèìgbó Local Government, in the Oñdó State of Nigeria. It is a major town (from which Ifètèdó sister-town was formed in 1931) along the ancient cities of Ilè-Ifè and Oñdó. Of all the major traditional festivals that are celebrated at Òkèìgbó, which

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10 That I have been researching the *Qdún Egúngún* in Òkèìgbó and elsewhere in Yorùbáland hitch-free for over two and half decades is not because I am smart. And neither is it simply because I come from the Igbórí family lineage Egúngún. The Yorùbá say “Èniyàn ló ùbè lẹ́yìn Orò ni Orò fi ùké” (Bullroarer, the emblem of Ọ̀rìşà Orò - a nocturnal deity that is acclaimed for neutralizing the witches power - is emitting the sacred voice of Orò only because there are people behind the deity that spin/ swirl the emblem). It is on that note that I would mention the following Ọ̀jẹ̀/ Mọ̀riwo (Egúngún devotees and cult members), who have been so kind to let me have the unlimited access to their families' Ilérún, Awésàń /Ojúbọ̀ Egúngún, and Igbó-igbàlè. This wonderful people have also continued to provide me all the “insider perspectives” on the rites of Egúngún. They include High Chief Olu Babajide (the Alápinńí Ọ̀jẹ̀ of Òkèìgbó), Chief Adesope Igbalade (Eldest son of Baba Igbalade, the late Aláàgbàà of Òkèìgbó), Chief Àwíşẹ̀ Adèrẹ̀mí Fágbadé (Current Aláàgbàà of Òkèìgbó), Chief Ọ̀gúnníyí Ọ̀gúnkánmí (Current Eésòrun Ọ̀jẹ̀ of Òkèìgbó), Chief Adedinni (the former Aláàgbàà of Òkèìgbó), Chief Asòjẹ̀ (the late Aláàgbàà of Òkèìgbó), Baba Israel Oloyede, aka Folly (the Àwòrò-Arẹ̀kú of Egúngún Abídogun), Baba Oyeyemi Adetunji Ajarogungbo (the custodian of his family Egúngún Aróbatẹ̀, Ìpẹ̀, and Ìkótó), Chief Gbemibade Akinromade (the Ọ̀baláşẹ̀/Baalẹ̀ Onilù-Àyàn of Òkèìgbó and Ifètèdó), Mr. Sunday Ọ̀jẹ̀diran (Son of Baba Ọ̀jẹ̀diran, the late Aláàgbàà of Òkèìgbó), Bàbá Ọ̀lọ̀pàádé (Head of the Badà Èşùbí Egúngún lineage-family), and Mr. Olaosebikan Ọ̀lọ̀pàádé (Member of the Badà Èşùbí Egúngún lineage-family). Others include the current three female Ọ̀jẹ̀ Chieftaincy title holders of the Iyalájé Ọ̀jẹ̀ of Òkèìgbó, Iyá-Mọ̀dẹ̀ Ọ̀jẹ̀ of Òkèìgbó, and the most senior female Ọ̀jẹ̀ Chieftaincy title Iyá-Àgan of Òkèìgbó. There are many more people/ informants that are too numerous to list here, but whose contributions to this study are immeasurable. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

include *Ọ̀dún Ọ̀gún* (also *Ọ̀lọ́jọ́*), *Orò*, *Àlúkú*, among others, *Ọ̀dún Egúngún*, in which the role of *Àyàn* cannot be overemphasized, is the most popular and always best attended.

Like other Yorùbá communities where this form of Ancestor veneration is prevalent, the cult of *egúngún Ọ̀kẹ̀ìgbó* is known as *ọ̀jẹ̀* (or *ẹ̀gbé ọ̀jẹ̀*). And the cult members are referred to as “those with the secret knowledge of the *egúngún* cult/*ọ̀jẹ̀* (*mọ̀ríwo*). They are all in charge of and the partakers of *Ọ̀dún Egúngún*, which is celebrated every year in that community. The title holders among the *ọ̀jẹ̀* include the chief priest of *egúngún* (*alààgbàà*). He is also eulogized as “the father of *mọ̀ríwó*” (*Baba Mọ̀ríwó*), an allusion to *alààgbàà* being the spiritual head of the *mọ̀ríwó*. The current *alààgbàà* of the *egúngún* cult in *Ọ̀kẹ̀ìgbó* is Chief *Àwìṣẹ̀ Adẹ̀rẹ̀mí Fágbadé*. Next in rank to



Figure 12a: *Etiyeri*



Figure 12b: *Etiyeri* close view



Figure 13: *Aláwoṗalá*



Figure 14: *Aróba*



*Figure 15: Owólewà*



*Figure 16: Adáradóhùn*



*Figure 17 a-b: Badà front and back views*

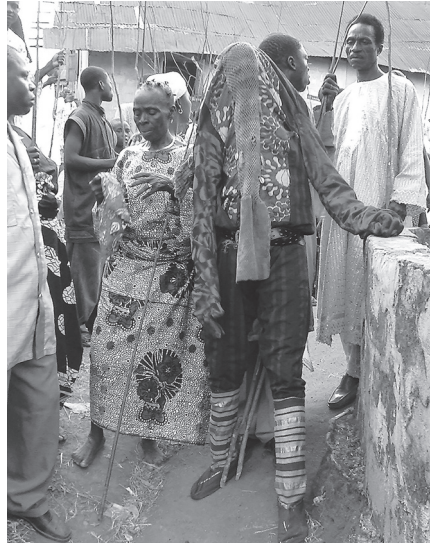




*Figure 18a-b: Kúólé front and back views*



*Figure 19: Eégún Òkèàgbẹ̀*



*Figure 20: Awó*



Figure 21: Mòlérí

the *aláàgbàà* is *eésòrun òjè*, which is held by Chief Ògúnníyì Ògúnkànmí. As well, there are three female òjè chieftaincy titles, which include, in descending order of rank, *iyá-àgan*, *iyá-mòdè*, and *iyá-lájé*.

There are various types of *egúngún* in Òkèigbó, which can be loosely identified or distinguished using two variables. The first variable is identification by the *èkú/agò* type of *egúngún*. Hence, this identification variable is based principally on the physical appearance and formal-style attributes of an individual *egúngún*. Falling within this first variable are *egúngún* with the carved mask/figure headdresses (*egúngún-elére*), or *egúngún* with a load on their head (*egungun-elèrù*), a euphemism for the carved mask/figure(s) and other assemblages of objects that adorn the headdresses of certain *egúngún*. Those “load” assemblages often include deer antlers (*iwo-àgbònrín*), sacred animal skulls (*agbàrí-èranko abàmi*), small gourds filled with magical or medicinal substances (*àdó/irèrè*), leather pouches of medicines (*gbínrín-oògùn*), and carved masks/figures (*ère*), among others. *Egúngún Etíyerí*, *Aláwopálà*, and *Aróbatè* are typical examples of the *egúngún elèrù/elére* type. Also identified or distinguished by their *èkú/agò* shroud-costume type are the *egúngún* with

headdress made of an animal tail or hide and skin (*egúngún-oníròrò*). Relevant examples are *egúngún Owólewà* and *Adáradóhùn*. Some other *egúngún* that are identified by their costume types are *egúngún* with large and royally designed shroud-costumes, part of which often trail behind the *egúngún* (*egúngún-alágò gbáruru*). The examples are *egúngún badà* and *kúólé*. Others located within this costume type variable are *egúngún* with a tray or cap-like design pattern headdress (*eégún-alátẹ̀*), *egúngún* with a tight-fitting shroud (*egúngún-èdó*), and *egúngún* without any particular headdress design/shape (*egúngún-òkolombo*)

The second and last variable used to determine a given *egúngún* Òkèìgbó type is identification by the function, character, and/or performance traits of an individual *egúngún*. Thus, there are warrior *egúngún* (*egúngún-ológun*), ex-



Figure 22: *Aróbatẹ̀*



Figure 23: *Akíngbadẹ̀*

amples of such being *Aróbatẹ̀*, and *Akíngbadẹ̀*, that are distinguished by the weaponries or missiles (swords, axes/ mattocks, machetes, clubs, etc.), which they brandish in their hands. Others are the “children provider” (*egúngún-olòmọ̀*), “provider/maker of herbal medicines and concoctions (administered to children free of charge to prevent various diseases)” (*alágbo-òfẹ̀*), and *Eyéfodò*, the powerful magician and controller of amulets and charms. All the three *egúngún* are an apparent example of *egúngún-olòògùn*, the controller/maker/provider of amulets, charms, or medicinal concoctions. There are also the àtòrì whip-flogger *egúngún* (*egúngún-ẹ̀lẹ̀gba/olórẹ̀*), distinguished by





Figure 24: *Ọlómọ*



Figure 25: *Alágbo-òfẹ́*



Figure 26: *Ẹyẹ́ fodò*



their unchecked aggressive and chaotic character, as they whip and terrorize the whole crowd of spectators. Examples of such belligerent *egúngún* are Awó, Ọbọ, the Scorpion (Àkèèkèè), Bólódeòkú, and the “hooligan/ragmuffin” (Jàndùkú), among others.

In the olden days when nearly all the streets of Ọkèìgbó were surrounded by thick forests, the preparation rite for the appearance of most *egúngún* (especially those distinguished by their large shroud costumes) in which the èkú/agò are donned by the *arèkú* occurred inside the *ìgbó-ìgbàlẹ̀*. It was from the *ìgbó-ìgbàlẹ̀* that the *egúngún* emerged to the waiting crowd of adherents and spectators outside of the forest-grove. Today, only one *egúngún*, by the name of Aláwọpàlà, still uses the *ìgbó-ìgbàlẹ̀* as his site of his appearance, when all the rest now appear from their individual families’ “houses in heaven” (*ilérún*). Hence, the following *oríkí* speaks to, and reminds us how the most celebrated *egúngún* (like those from the Èsà Ọgbín— a leading *egúngún* lineage) characteristically appeared from *ìgbó-ìgbàlẹ̀*:

*Pààkà di méfà ní'gbàlẹ̀*  
*Èkú di méfà mo lò wọn gbó*  
*È wá w'asọ Egúngún bó se lu kámi lára bí ajere*  
*Èyin'kùnlé Ọlógbìń ní'gbàlẹ̀*  
*Mo ní kílóse t'òbìnrin ò m'awo?*  
*Ará Ọgbojò, wọn kìí f'ókó kan'lẹ̀ ní'gbàlẹ̀*  
*Èyí t'óbá f'ókó kan'lẹ̀ ní'gbàlẹ̀*  
*Óti sá bàbá è l'ókó*  
*Èmi òní f'ókó kan bàbáà mi*  
*Èsà Ọgbín, ará òde Ọgbólúkẹ̀*  
*Tì'gboro sẹ̀, tì'gbàlẹ̀ sẹ̀*  
*Eégún t'óbá tì'gboro sẹ̀ laşọ rẹ̀ nj'òpò omọ lánғанran*  
*Èyí t'óbá tì'gbàlẹ̀ sẹ̀, a jẹ̀ kíkí aşọ Èsà Ọgbín*  
*Omọ Molúfón-Adé, mo jẹ̀'be bí ení jẹ̀'su*

There are now six *egúngún* in our family forest-grove of *egúngún*  
 Therein we have six shroud-costumes of *egúngún* and I used all until they  
 worn out

Come and look at how the *egúngún* shroud-costume has become tattered  
 on my body

The forest-grove of *egúngún* is right there at the backyard of Ọlógbìń

I asked why then are females not allowed therein (at the forest-grove of  
*egúngún*)?

The natives of Ọgbojò don't plow the forest-grove of *egúngún* with the hoe

Whosever among them tilled the forest-grove of *egúngún* with the hoe  
 That one has stroke his father with the hoe  
 I for one will not strike my own father with the hoe  
 My father Èsà Ògbín, resident at the compound of Ògbólúké  
 Emerging/ appearing from the house or the forest-grove of *egúngún*  
 Any *egúngún* who emerged from the house is the one with a tight-fitting  
 shroud  
 The one who emerged from the forest-grove of *egúngún* always have the vo-  
 luminous shroud-costumes, which typify the *egúngún* Èsà Ògbín  
 Child of Molúfón-Adé, who eats the yam porridge as if it were yam

The Òkèìgbó community's *Odún Egúngún* is an annual ritual festival that is permanently scheduled to commence on July 25<sup>th</sup> and last for seven days. The exception is the Kúólé Qlójèè Egungun lineage, whose family members commence their own *Odún Egúngún* a day prior (on July 24<sup>th</sup> each year). This is because the Kúólé Qlójèè are direct descendants of Èsà Ògbín Ológbòjò, popularly known as Baba Egúngún (the overall founding father of Egúngún-Òyó, from which the *egúngún* cult of Òkèìgbó descended). Thus, the Kúólé Qlójèè lineage members are given the honor of starting their own *Odún Egúngún* a day before the general commencement date.

Principally to facilitate their smooth performances, the ritual performance context of *odún egúngún* in Òkèìgbó is segmented into four phases, namely, Ikúnlè Egúngún; Ìta Egúngún; Ìje Egúngún, and Ìgbàjà Egúngún, discussed as follows in that order. The discussion is followed by eyewitness accounts of an episode of the *egúngún* performance context, which was precipitated for the most part by the nature of the language of drum that was being drummed for the given *egúngún*.

### **Ìkúnlè Egúngún**

The First day of the *odún egúngún* is called Ìkúnlè Egúngún (literally, the kneeling rite for Egúngún). It is so called because all the *egúngún* devotees must be on their knees in front of their individual family's high altar of *egúngún* (*ojúbo egúngún*) as they invoke their ancestor spirits and petition them to banish death from their family, promote their wellbeing, and bring about the community's peace, harmony, and stability. The symbol of *egúngún* that is displayed on every *egúngún* lineage-family's *ojúbo egúngún* are whips (*àtòrì*), carved in a spiral design called *isán*. This is the reason *ojúbo egúngún* is also known as "the abode of spirally designed *àtòrì/isán*, symbol of *egúngún*" (*awésàń*). Thus, both *ojúbo egúngún* and *awésàń* are used interchangeably. From the esoteric level, the *isán* is called "Death's whip"

(òpá-ikú), a short form of “the whip that we (devotees of *egúngún*) use to drive death away from the *egúngún*-lineage family compound” (*òpá tí aḡí lé ikú ní lé Òjẹ*).

The following is the author’s eyewitness account of the performance context of Ìkúnlẹ̀ *egúngún* by the *egúngún* devotees from the *egúngún*-lineage family of Badà Èṣúbí (whose praise name is “the garment of amulets/charms (*àrán-oògùn*)). On Monday July 19, 2004 (five days prior to the Ìkúnlẹ̀ *Egúngún*), a pigeon (*eḡelẹ̀*) was ritually sacrificed to Oya, the goddess of the river, by means of it being slaughtered and its blood being sprinkled on the high altar of Oya (*ojúbo Oya*). Next, early in the morning of Ìkúnlẹ̀ *Egúngún* (on Sunday July 25, 2004), an offering of wraps of puréed and cooked corn starch (*ẹ̀kọ*) and pureed and steamed beans (*móínmóín*) and kola nut (*obi-àbàtà*) is presented in front of the *isán* (or *òpá-ikú*) located at the family’s *ojúbo egúngún/awésàń*. A votive sacrifice of a rooster was made by slaugh-



Figure 27: *Ewésàń-Ojúbo Egúngún*



Figure 28: *Ojúbo Oya*

tering and sprinkling its blood on the *isán/òpá-ikú*. Describing the *awésàń* (*ojúbo egúngún*), Bàbá Ọlópàádé, the head of the Badà Èṣúbí *egúngún*-lineage family, has explained that, “*awésàń* is the altar place/spot where the spirit of the family ancestor that is personified by *egúngún* is receiving the invocation of offerings presented to him by his children” (*Awésàń ní ibi tí Bàbá tí ñgba ibọ*). After the presentation of offerings, all the devotees prayed to the family’s *egúngún* ancestor spirit(s) and then concluded their prayers with the following petition-song:

*Báni lé'kú lọ l'árùn lọ*  
*Báni lé'kú lọ l'árùn lọ o*  
*Báni l'ójòjò k'ó wọ̀gbó lọ*

Help us drive out death and disease  
 Help us drive death and disease away  
 Help us banish sickness into the forests for good

After this song was sung, all the devotees emerged from the *awésàń* (*ojúbo egúngún*) into the front of the family hall (*àkòdì badà*), where they were received by the deafening drumbeats that were drummed by the orchestra of *àyàn* who played their *dùndún* drums to entertain the members of the *Badà Èsúbí egúngún*-lineage family. All interested family members then danced in turn to the drumming as they closed the *Ìkúnlẹ̀ egúngún*, which centered principally on the invocation (with ritual offerings) of the family's ancestor spirit(s), whose physicality is understood as *egúngún*. Generally speaking, it is after the completion of *Ìkúnlẹ̀ egúngún* part of the annual *Qdún Egúngún* that the public outings or appearances of the community *egúngún*, which last for seven days, would occur.

### Ìta Egúngún

*Ìta* is the Yorùbá term for the “third day”. As it applies to the context of the *Qdún Egúngún*, *Ìta Egúngún* translates to all the ritual activities that are performed on the third day following the *ikúnlẹ̀ egúngún*, the commencement of the *odún egúngún*, itself already examined. While *ikúnlẹ̀ egúngún* is specifically for the invocation of the ancestor spirit(s) of the individual *egúngún*-lineage family, whose physical manifestation is celebrated as *egúngún*, *ìta egúngún*, on the other hand, is principally for the gathering of the individual *egúngún* lineage-family members to have fun and party. Therefore, *ìta egúngún* caters to the spirit of togetherness of the family, when all members of the *egúngún*-lineage family, along with their invited friends and well-wishers, throw a big party in celebration and remembrance of their family ancestors.

Using the *Badà Èsúbí egúngún*-lineage family's *ìta egúngún* performance context as a case study, the following is the author's eyewitness account of *Ìta Egúngún* that this family celebrated on Tuesday July 27, 2004. At about 7 a.m., the family began its *ìta egúngún* celebration, when all the family members converged at the *Bada* compound (*Ìta Badà*), where the family hall (*àkòdì*) is located. The *àkòdì* itself comprises a large hall (used for family meetings/gatherings) and many hidden rooms dedicated to the family *egúngún* and



other *òriṣà*- related affairs/matters. First among the hidden rooms is the family *awésàń/ojúbo egúngún*, which has been described and analyzed under



Figure 29: *Ilérun*

*Ìkúnlẹ̀ Egúngún*. (See Figure 27). Another room that is much larger in size than the *awésàń/ojúbo egúngún* inside the *àkòdì* is the “house in Heaven” (*ilérun* or *ilé-Òrun*). From the functionalism approach, *ilérun* is a sacred room

that has the function similar to that of a Christian sacristy (where the church's vestments and sacred vessels, among others are stored). Hence, the *ilérún* inside the *àkòdì badà* is where all the family's *èkú/agò* are stored and donned by the *arèkú* during the annual *Qdún Egúngún*. Other *egúngún* paraphernalia that are kept inside the *ilérún* in general may include those that are peculiar to, and used by, an individual *egúngún àgbá*, for instance, the leather belt of medicine-charm (*igbàdí*), leather underwear of amulet (*ibànté-oògùn*), leather pouches of charm (*àgádágodó*), sword (*idà*), and axe/mattock (*àáké*), among others.

After all the *Badà Èṣúbí* family members have converged at the *ita/àkòdì badà*, the young men of the house slaughtered a big goat (*ewúré tíó t'ewúré*) that they had bought the previous day and prepared the meat. Then, the females/wives of the house (*obinrin-ilé*) cooked the meat, along with an array of assorted foods that included okra and meat soups (*òbè-ilá àti òbè-eran*), pounded yam (*iyán*), and cassava starch meal (*èbà*). When all the food preparation was completed, everything was brought inside the *àkòdì* hall where all the members of the family and their invited friends and relatives, including the *àyàn*, had a big feast. After everyone had eaten and drunk to their satisfaction, then came the service of the *àyàn*, who provided the drum music to which skillful dancers (among the family members) danced one after the other. At the end of the dance performances that closed the *ita egúngún*, I proceeded to thank *Bàbá Qlópàádé*, the head of the family, for having given me the privilege to partake in their family's *ita egúngún* ceremony. In his friendly remark, he responded, "learned person, you are the one that came at the right time. Do you also know that tomorrow is the appearance of *Bàbá*?" (*Akòwé iwo lo mòṣò rìn. Sé o tún mò wípé òlà ni Bàbá máa jáde?*).<sup>11</sup> What the informant meant when he said I "come at the right time" was that the *Qdún Egúngún* of year 2004, of which I partook, had been scheduled for the "appearance" of *Badà* (the family's most senior *egúngún*), since the appearance of this *egúngún* occurs once every other year. "Had it been that you were unlucky, you could have come last year without having the opportunity to see *Bàbá*" (*ká ní oḍún èsì lo wá ni, o kò bátí ní ànḡfàní àti rí Bàbá*). My informant, *Bàbá Qlópàádé*, concluded his pleasantries with his peculiar sarcastic laughter.

Consequently, the following is the author's eyewitness account of the appearance and performance context of *egúngún Badà*, which occurred on Wednesday July 28, 2004. Early in the morning, the young males of the

11 Within the context of *egúngún* ancestral spirits, the Yorùbá term *Bàbá* is understood as a physical manifestation/appearance of the spirit of the family ancestor (the example of Ancestor *Badà*) in the form of *egúngún*. The process/ procedure by which a trained *arèkú*, who wears the *èkú/agò* to conceal his entire body and then appears in public, takes place inside the *ilérún*, an allusion to the spiritual realm of spirit beings.

family, just like they had done the day before, slaughtered another big goat in front of the family's *àkòdì* hall and then prepared the goat meat, which they transferred to the *obìnrin-ilé* for cooking, along with other assorted foods. The meal was meant exclusively for the family *òjẹ̀* and also the *àyàn*, who provided the drumming for the *egúngún*. Next, the family *òjẹ̀* proceeded into the family's *ilérun* to prepare for the appearance of *Bàbá* (i.e., *egúngún Badà*). (See Figure 29). Because of my birthright as an *òjẹ̀/egúngún* cult member (my maternal grandfather, the late *Ògúnwálé Ọ̀dáná-Fojúràá*, was of the *Ìgbórí egúngún* lineage), I had the privilege of being able to enter the *ilérun* with other *mọ̀ríwo* (the male *òjẹ̀* members) to partake in the preparation for the appearance of *egúngún Badà*. Following the completion of the preparation, the *egúngún* emerged from inside the *ilérun* and stepped out of the front door of the *àkòdì*. The *Egúngún* then proceeded to move very slowly as he stepped on the blood of the goat that had been spilled in front of the *àkòdì* building, an allusion to the ancestor's acceptance of the votive animal sacrifice. The *egúngún* then continued to walk very slowly, covering the entire *Badà Compound* (the distance of about one quarter-mile) as his royally designed long *ẹ̀kú/agò* trailed behind him like a bridal garment. As a sign of respect and also to keep the long sprawling robe moving freely, some minor *egúngún* entourage helped lift and align the extending robe on the floor. (See Figure 17a/b). The entire appearance and performance context of *Badà* took about twenty minutes before the *egúngún* returned to the *ilérun*, the spiritual realm of spirit beings to which the ancestral *egúngún* belong.

According to *Bàbá Ọ̀lópàádé*, "Now that the spirit of our family ancestor had been invoked and the *egúngún* appeared and had used his trailing *ẹ̀kú/agò* to ward off evil and all the imminent catastrophes, no death or diseases would come near any of our family members. Surely, *Bàbá* has ushered in a year of prosperity."<sup>12</sup> This affirmational statement validates the significance of *ọ̀pá-ikú* (derived from *ọ̀pá tí afi lé ikú nílẹ̀ Ọ̀jẹ̀*), the principal emblem of *egúngún* displayed on the *ojúbọ egúngún* that translates and alludes to "the whips that we used to drive death away from the *Egúngún* lineage-family compound." Accordingly, that this key symbol of *egúngún* is smeared with the blood of votive animals with the offering of wraps of *ẹ̀kọ* leaves no doubt that *Qdún Egúngún* is meant to drive death away or banish death from the homes of *òjẹ̀*, and family devotees at large. This significance is also noticeable in Bruce G. Trigger's passing statement that "the *egúngún* society...was concerned with limiting the powers of death" (Trigger 2003, 500).

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12 Interviews with *Bàbá Ọ̀lópàádé* (Head of the *Badà Èsúbí Egúngún Lineage*), *Ọ̀kèìgbó*. August July 19–28, 2004.



### Ije Egúngún

*Ìje* is the Yoruba term for the “seventh day.” As is used here within the context of the *Odún Egúngún* in Òkèìgbó, *Ìje Egúngún* is the seventh day of activities following the commencement of the annual *Odún Egúngún*. Except for one exception (the compulsory *Igbájà Egúngún*), by tradition, *Ìje Egúngún* is the last day when all public appearances and performance activities of the entire community *egúngún* formally end for that year’s *Odún Egúngún*. For that reason, *Ìje Egúngún* is characterized by the trouping out in a very large numbers, most if not all of the community’s *egúngún* that have not appeared since the commencement of that year’s festival. Hence, *Ìje Egúngún* is popularly described as “the day when all the *egúngún* have their last opportunity to fight to finish” (*àjàlò-àrùgbè egúngún*), an allusion to the *Egúngún* making sure to complete all the activities that they needed or desired to perform, since that day is their last chance to do so.

### Igbájà Egúngún

The Yoruba term *Igbájà* translates literally to the “market cleansing.” It is an allusion to the spiritual cleansing of the community, and by extension, the whole of *ayé*. Hence the Yorùbá philosophical saying “the Earth is a market” (*ayé lojà*). It is believed that the rite of *Igbájà Egúngún* is a form of an appeasement of all the community ancestors (manifested in *egúngún*) to ward off evil and protect all the townspeople against any imminent catastrophes like incessant death, especially of the community youths (*ikú-òwòwó*), contagious or communicable diseases (*àjàkálè-àrùn*), war (*ogun*), drought (*ògbelè*), and



Figure 30: Onílù-Àyàn

famine (iyàn), among others. This last phase of *Qdún Egúngún* is performed on *Ìje-keji Egúngún*, the 14<sup>th</sup> day following the commencement of the annual *Qdún Egúngún*; and is a ritual performance in which the impact of *àyàn* is mostly prominent. In fact, it is not an overstatement to declare that without the *àyàn*, who drum in their *dùndún* ensemble—which speaks the language of drum to which the *egúngún* dance performers display their dancing skills in turns—there is no *Igbájà Egúngún*. This grand finale rite of *Qdún Egúngún* is when most (if not all) of the community's *egúngún* converge in front of the *oba's* market/palace for the celebration of *Igbájà Egúngún*. The two groups of performers of *Igbájà egúngún*, whose performance contexts complement each other, are the *àyàn* and the community hosts of *egúngún*.

The author begins the *Igbájà Egúngún's* narrative and analysis with the professional orchestra of *onílù-àyàn*, who drum *dùndún*, the preferred drum ensemble in the performance context of *Igbájà Egúngún*. The reason for the preference for *dùndún* over any other drums, especially the *bátá*, is inconclusive. However, during my interview with Pa Adésopé Ìgbáladé (the custodian of *Egúngún Etiyeri*, one of the community's most senior *egúngún*), I was told that the *egúngún's* preference for a certain drum ensemble (*dùndún* or *bátá*) is by choice and not because certain drum music or acoustic patterns are easier to dance or decode than another. He explained further that both the *dùndún* and *bátá* are talking drums that produce an array of rhythmic patterns, which can easily be discerned and decoded by any skillful *egúngún* dance performer. However, I have found that there is usually only one talking drum in a *dùndún* drum ensemble, which is the lead drum (*iyáàlù*). But, in a *bátá* ensemble, there could be up to three talking drums, namely, *iyáàlù*, *omele-abo*, and *omele-méta*. Consequently, while a given *dùndún* music *egúngún* dancer has only one talking drum to discern and decode its language with the dance performance, on the other hand, his contemporary *bátá* music *egúngún* dance performer must discern all the two to three talking drums' surrogate speech produced in a *bátá* ensemble, in order to decode them correctly. I corroborate this point with two examples, namely: the drum's speech (the "drum language") of *dùndún*, and that of *bátá*, discussed as follows in that order.

**Example 1:** Language of *iyáàlù*, the only talking drum (in the *dùndún* ensemble):

**Iyaalu:**

*B'óbá ẹ̀ pé'mi nì'wọ̀ ni*

*Ñbá f'apá jó, f'apá jó*

*B'óbá ẹ̀ pé'mi nì'wọ̀ ni*

*Ñbá f'ẹ̀sẹ̀ jó, f'ẹ̀sẹ̀ jó*

*B'óbá ẹ̀ pé'mi nì'wọ̀ ni, ñbá fi gbogbo ara gbọ̀n rì-rì-rì-rì*

If I were you  
 I will dance with my hands unceasingly  
 If I were you  
 I will dance with my legs unabatedly  
 If I were you, I will shakeup my whole body continuously

**Example 2:** Language of *iyáàlù*, *omele-abo*, and *omele-méta* talking drums (in *bàtá* ensemble):

*Ìyáàlù: Qlóba-níkà (Qlóbańkà)*

**Omele-abo:** *Oorí*

*Ìyáàlù: Fìńkàn*

**Omele-abo:** *Oorí*

*Ìyáàlù: Fìńkàn - Fìńkàn - Fìńkàn - Fìńkàn*

**Omele-abo:** *Oorí*

**Omele- méta:** *Èrúkọ ro'ko ro'ko - Èrúkọ yẹ'nà yẹ'nà - Èrúkọ kọ'bè kọ'bè kọ'be*

**The combination of all the speeches delivered by all the three *bàtá* talking drums:**

*Qlóba-níkà/Qlóbańkà* (a given *egúngún*)

Your wooden mask headdress

Move it sideways

Your wooden mask headdress

Move it sideways continuously

Your wooden mask headdress

Like a hoe that clears the bush without end; it cleans the footpath ceaselessly, and then makes the ridges unendingly.

### **Analysis:**

In **Example 1**, the given *egúngún* dance performer would discern and decode (with his dance performance) the language of *iyáàlù*, the only talking drum in the *dùndún* ensemble. Whereas in **Example 2**, the given *egúngún* dance performer (*Qlóbańkà*) must discern and decode simultaneously (with his dance performance) all the three *bàtá* talking drum's speeches (transcribed above). It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the language of the *dùndún* drum ensemble is more direct than that of *bàtá*, which may have accounted for its preference in the performance context of *Qdún Egúngún* of Òkèìgbó.



Figure 31: Photo of Chief Gbémibádé Akínròmádé

On Tuesday July 27, 2004 (eleven days before that year's Ìgbàjà Egúngún--the grand finale of *Qdún Egúngún*), I conducted an interview of Chief Gbémibádé Akínròmádé, the head/highest chief (*oḃaláṣẹ̀/baálẹ̀*) of the *onílù-àyàn* of Òkèìgbó and Ìfẹ̀tẹ́dó. The subject of that interview was on the role of *àyàn* within the performance context of *Qdún Egúngún*. The following are the unedited words of the interviewee, which confirmed that the indispensable role of *àyàn* in connection with *egúngún* (as in the *Qdún Egúngún*) has been dated back to the beginning of time/existence. He said:

“In the beginning of time/existence, the *egúngún* were the spirit beings who brought peace and stability into the earth. When the *egúngún* were coming from the heaven, they first descended into the forest-grove of *egúngún*. As they were emerging/ appearing to the public from the forest-grove of *egúngún*, they stopped when they got to the entrance. It was there (at the entrance of the forest-grove of *egúngún*) where they were being escorted home/ to the public by the orchestra of drummers with the drumming” (*Láti ìgbà iwáṣẹ̀, Eégún*





Figure 32: Purification Rite of the dancing arena-ground of Egúngún

*ló m'áyé gún. Nígbà Eégún ǹbò lát'òde òrun, wón rò ka'lẹ̀ sí'gbò igbàlẹ̀. Nígbà Eégún ǹbò láti Igbò-ìgbàlẹ̀, Eégún ló dúró kí àwọn Onílù lọ mu wá).*

The interviewee explained further that since that time/day, the Àyàn have forever been drumming for *egúngún*. He concluded that the type of *dùndún* drum music that the *àyàn* drum for the dance performance of *egúngún*, especially during *Igbájà Egúngún*, is called *gèsé*, which comprises seven distinctive acoustic patterns (or rhythms), namely, *elékóto*, *láàntòtò*, *ìranpá*, *ìlù Sàngó*, *ìlù Oya*, *ìlù Òrìsà-Oko*, and *ìlù Qbátálá*.

The following is the author's eyewitness account of the performance context of the *Igbájà Egúngún* that was held on Saturday August 7, 2004 at Ìta-Ààrẹ (one of the major open-space markets/streets at Òkèìgbó that is ideal for such performances). The *Igbájà Egúngún* started with the dancing arena's purification rite, when an offering of consecrated water was presented (by way of sprinkling on the entire dancing floor) to Ilẹ̀, the Earth goddess, invoking the deity to purify the ground on top of which the *egúngún* were scheduled to



Figure 33: *Egúngún Alágò opening the floor*

dance, one after the other.<sup>13</sup> The purification rite was followed by the dance performance of *Egúngún Alágò*, whose permanent duty is to open the floor of the dancing arena, dancing before the other *egúngún*. The reason this arrangement is so crucial is that *Egúngún Alágò* is by tradition the most senior *egúngún* of the *sayégún*, whom God sent from their heavenly abode to stabilize the chaotic *ilé-ayé* in the beginning of time/ existence.

After *Egúngún Alágò* had completed his dance performance (i.e. he had danced to all the seven drum patterns/rhythms of *gèsé*), all the other *egúngún* who wished to dance moved out to the dancing arena from their seats and displayed their dancing skills in turns. Generally, the best known and most skillful *egúngún* dance performer is encouraged by the *aláàgbáà* to dance last; the reason being that the *egúngún* dance performer who dances best brings that year's *Igbàjà Egúngún* dance performance to an end. The spectators alike commend that *egúngún* with the accolade, "this *egúngún* dance performer had dismissed the crowd!" (*Egúngún yí ti fògbo o!*), an allusion that that year's *Igbàjà Egúngún* dance competition had come to an end. For that reason, the *egúngún* that danced last and dismissed the crowd at the *Igbàjà Egúngún* that

13 The purification rite of the dancing arena of *egúngún* during *Igbàjà Egúngún* is always led by the head of the *egúngún* cult (*aláàgbáà*), with the assistance of the rest members of the *egúngún* cult, who are known as the *òjẹ*. NB: There are both male and female *òjẹ* members in the cult of *egúngún*. However, except for one circumstance, only the male *òjẹ* are allowed inside the *ilérún* and/or *igbó-igbàlẹ̀*. And that one circumstance occurs when there is the need to lead any given female praise songs (*oriki egúngún*) expert chanter(s) into the family *ilérún* to chant their family's *oriki egúngún* on the *ẹ̀kú/agò* that are kept therein.



Figure 34: *Bièso-kòkò* dancing at Igbájà Egúngún

was held on Saturday August 7, 2004 was said to be *Bièso-kòkò* “just like the cocoa pods”. The name of this *egúngún* is an allusion to his *ẹ̀kú/agò* costume assemblages, as they were made of carefully cut pieces of cloth of a variety of harmonious colors, each piece skillfully arranged and sewn in a symmetrical pattern. Overall, the physical appeal of *Bièso-kòkò* clearly testifies to the abilities of his *ẹ̀kú/agò* shroud-costume designer as a creative artist with a high degree of mastery of all the principles and elements of design.

As the *egúngún* dance performers danced one after the other before *Bièso-kòkò*, the best *egúngún* dancer dismissed the crowd and spectators, including the experienced critics among them who commented on and evaluated the performances of the *àyàn*, as well as the *egúngún* dance performers. The author begins with their evaluation of the performance context of the *àyàn*, who drummed the *gèsè* drum music with their *dùndún* drum ensemble. The critics used body gestures, like head nods and verbal praising, such as “may Àyàn, the god of drumming prosper/protect you!” (*Àyàn ó gbè ò!*), to reward the drummers each time they played all the seven drumming patterns/rhythms of *gèsè* correctly. On the other hand, if any of the seven *gèsè* drum music patterns/rhythms were not played correctly or when the one that was supposed

to be drummed first does not follow suit (note: this did not occur in 2004), the critics would make such negative body gestures, such as shaking their heads.

Because the *ẹ̀kú/agò* is the sole emblem of *egúngún* that conceals or “kills” the human identity of the *arẹ̀kú*, and at the same time makes visible the in-



Figure 35: Mrs. Adéfúnké Àdúnní Sàádùn chanting *Oríkì Egúngún Abídogun*

visible spirit of the ancestor, *ẹ̀kú/agò* is therefore understood as a sacred insignia of the ancestors. In fact, to the *egúngún* devotees, *ẹ̀kú/agò* by itself is *egúngún* that is often referred to as “my father/ancestor” (*Bàbá mi*). Thus, usually during *Ìta Egúngún* in the off year in which a given *egúngún* will not appear in public, the elderly female children of the family ancestor *egúngún* known for being the best chanters of their family ancestor *egúngún*’s *oríkì* always go in front of their family *ẹ̀kú/agò* that are displayed inside the *ilérún* and chant the *oríkì*, which address the *ẹ̀kú/agò* as *Bàbá mi*. By tradition, that is the only one case in which any female *òjẹ/egúngún* cult members or devotees are allowed inside the *ilérún*, to chanting the family *egúngún*’s praise songs on the *ẹ̀kú/agò* of that *egúngún*. The following is an example in which the *oríkì* chanter Adéfúnké Àdúnní Sàádùn (one of the daughters of Òròlú Ẹ̀dẹ̀nìmòbí Abídogun, the owner of *Egúngún Abídogun*), addresses the *ẹ̀kú/agò* of *Egúngún Abídogun* as *Bàbá mi*.



*Bàbáà mí kú ọ̀dún òní ooo*  
*Abídolú òòò*  
*O kú ọ̀dún òní ooo*  
*Abídolú òòò*  
*Babaà mi, Alààpé lóde, Abọ̀dán rẹ̀rẹ̀*  
*Èdẹ̀mòbí, Èni t'áàá rò'sé fún*  
*Baba Adésọ̀jí, ta n'jẹ̀ ro're tí Baba tíí ẹ̀*  
*Òròlú moò rojò*

My father, happy celebration of today's festival  
 Abídolú (my father) greetings to you  
 Happy celebration to you for today's festival  
 Abídolú (my father) greetings to you  
 My father, who has an Àpé and Qdán trees in front of his courtyard  
 Èdẹ̀mòbí, you are the one to whom people always relate their poverties  
 Father of Adésọ̀jí, has anybody ever recounted the supports that you, our  
 father had rendered them?  
 Yet, father Òròlú, would never complain even when his beneficiaries don't  
 show gratitude.

As clearly shown in this *oríkì*, the *ẹ̀kú/agò* by itself is *egúngún*, and no spectators dare critique the aesthetic merits of any *egúngún* based on physical appearance. And also for the simple fact that *egúngún* is a spirit being (as is also the case among all the *òrìṣà*) whose divinity has elevated him above any mortals that could be judged, no one dares criticize any *egúngún* based on their physical appearance. The following *egúngún*-related “sacred words that must come to pass” (*àfòṣẹ̀*) best illustrate this fact: “Whatsoever evil or immorality that the *egúngún* commit is forgiven them because of the very fact that their divinity inside the *egúngún* forest-grove has elevated them above all mortals; so also I must not get punished for every ‘evil’ that I will commit today” (*B'éeḡún se'bi bó se'pa, Igbó-ìgbàlè la fi níjì; bẹ̀ẹ̀ gẹ̀gẹ̀ ni ohun gbogbo tí mo bá ẹ̀ lóni kí ódi àṣe gbé*). Babátúndé Lawal has also found another reason the Yorùbá always accept the “freakishness” or whatever evils that any *òrìṣà* (including Egúngún) do in the Yorùbá philosophical saying *àditú layé*: “The popular belief is that the cosmos is an unfathomable mystery (*àditú*) and there may be much more behind the actions of the *òrìṣà* than ordinary mortals can ever comprehend” (Lawal 2005, 166). In fact at Òkèìgbó, as elsewhere in Yorùbáland, it is forbidden to even point one's fingers at any Egúngún lest speak of passing judgement.

The only exception is that the spectators can praise or criticize the family members (often called the children) of any given *egúngún*, whose *ẹ̀kú/agò* is

beautiful, filthy, or raggedy, but they cannot criticize the *egúngún* to which the *ẹ̀kú/agò* gave form. For instance, if the physical appearance of a given *egúngún* is appealing, the spectators may commend his earthly children for honoring their ancestor with such an expensive cloth costume assemblage. But, on the other hand, if the physical appearance of a given *egúngún* is repulsive, critics may call the children of that given *egúngún* an array of derogatory names for their failure to show honor or respect to their ancestor, personified by the *egúngún*.

In contrast, because the *egúngún* dance performers, when honoring the ancestors (with their dance performances), also entertain the spectators at the same time, their dance performances can be critiqued. Thus, at this level (of the dance performance context), each *egúngún* is associated with the family owners to which he belongs. This necessitates the *egúngún* dance performer to display accomplished dance skills, so as not to bring shame on his family. This is reflected in the Yorùbá saying “if a given *egúngún* dance performer dances impressively, his lineage family-owners will feel overjoyed” (*B’égún ẹ̀ni bá jóo re, orí á yá’ni*). By contrast, if, on the other hand, a given *egúngún* dance performer dances poorly, which is a demonstration of mediocrity, his lineage-family owners will be disheartened.

What constitutes an embarrassing dance performance or an impressive one? Generally speaking, the acoustic patterns of Yorùbá drumming, as earlier explicated, operate as a verbal language or speech surrogate. They are messages that are expected to be discerned or decoded and acted upon or mimed (with dance performance) by any given *egúngún* dance performer. Hence the reason for referring to the *ilù* as “talking drums.” An impressive dance steps are a derivative of the *egúngún* dance performer’s acquisition of the following aesthetic traits: patience and buoyancy (*sùúrù*), drumming discernible ear (*etí-igbòlù*), wisdom (*ogbón*), insight (*òye*), and astuteness/cleverness (*imò*). All these attributes of a skillful *egúngún* dance performer are subsumed in the Yorùbá saying “the language of drum is conveyed in proverbs; only the knowledgeable dances impressively to its acoustic patterns; while the discerning or astute individual understands or decodes its coded messages” (*Bí òwe bí òwe là nílù’lù ògìdìgbó; ológbón ní jó; òmòràn nìi mò*).

For a better understanding of this, an illustration of an *egúngún* dance performer applying or neglecting the attributes is necessary. A given *dùndún* lead drummer may drum his *iyáàlù* (lead talking drum) to “speak” the following drum’s language-speech directed to a given *egúngún* dance performer: “if I were you, I would dance with my hands unceasingly; If I were you I would dance with my legs unabatedly; If I were you, I would shake my whole body continuously” (*B’óbá ẹ̀ pe mi nìwọ̀ ni, n̄bá f’apá jó—f’apá jó; B’óbá ẹ̀ pe mi nìwọ̀ ni, n̄bá f’ẹ̀sẹ̀ jó—f’ẹ̀sẹ̀ jó; B’óbá ẹ̀ pe mi nìwọ̀ ni, n̄bá fi gbogbo ara gbọ̀n*

*rì-rì-rì-rì*). But if the poor *egúngún* dance performer cannot decode the message of the drum's language-speech (above), he may be doing something else, such as jumping sporadically. Whenever this happens, in order not to embarrass the *egúngún* dance performer or members of his family openly, the critics often do not criticize him verbally. Rather, they use body gestures, such as covering their face with the left-hand palm, closing one eye (especially the left one), shaking their heads repeatedly (sideways), and so on. The drummers too, with their drumming (or drum language), may call the *egúngún* dance performer an array of derogatory names, such as *ikún-kò-létí*, a kind of squirrel noted for its deafness, an allusion to the *egúngún* dance performer being deaf or novice when it comes to understanding or decoding the language of the drum. On the contrary, a skillful and experienced *egúngún* dance performer would respond exactly (with his dance performance) to what the language of drum asked of him. Such a terrific *egúngún* dance performer is accorded a loud ovation by the spectators.

However, that the *egúngún* dance performer must do whatever it takes to impress the spectators and bring honor to their lineage family does not mean that they should overdo the dance performance. In fact, a skillful *egúngún* dance performer is the one who dances moderately (*iwòntún-wònsi*) and knows when to stop his dance when the ovation is loudest. The reason for this is that excessive or immoderate dancing may cause the *èkú/agò* to fall apart and expose the *egúngún* dance performer's concealed human body and identity. Thus, the following Yorùbá saying speaks to such immoderation, "it is when a given *egúngún* dances excessively/immoderately that his waistband of charms along with his bare buttock become exposed to the public" (*Ijó àjójù ní mú kí Olùwòran rí agba idí Egúngún*). Generally speaking, the cults of *egúngún* all over the Yorùbáland discourage an excessive dance performance of *egúngún*, since it may lead to the falling apart of the *èkú/agò*, which conceal the unknowable as well as the human identity of the *arèkú*. For that reason, a result of immoderate dance performance that leads to the exposure of a body part of any given *egúngún* dance performer is a grievous offence, which warrants harsh punishment. At Òkèìgbó, the cult of *egúngún* usually bans the erring *egúngún* from public performance for a period of five years. In addition, certain undisclosed rituals, which would ward off the bad omens that may follow for exposing the secret (or mystery) of *egúngún* to the non-initiates, must be performed by the *egúngún* cult. Unfortunately for the blundering *egúngún*, he is decreed to bear the entire cost of the monetary expenses of such propitiatory ritual.

The author has mentioned that the *egúngún* dance performer who dances best brings the *Igbájà Egúngún* dance performance context for that year to an end, and that such an *egúngún* will be commended with the accolade *Egúngún*



Figure 36: Adáradóhùn displaying his dancing steps at Igbájà Egúngún

*yí ti fògbo o!* What happens after the best *egúngún* dance performer has dismissed the crowd? Using the *Igbájà Egúngún* dance competition that was held on Saturday August 13, 2016 as an illustration, the following is the author's eyewitness account of what happened after the dismissal of the crowd by Adáradóhùn (a popular *egúngún* that is also noted for his poetic songs), the best *egúngún* dance performer for that year, 2016. All the *egúngún* that participated in the *Igbájà Egúngún* (on Saturday August 13, 2016) along with their individual *egúngún* lineage family members held bunches of leaves in their hands, which they whisked continuously in the air, as if they were chasing away flies, as they paraded the streets. They started the parade from the *oba's* marketplace (the center of the town) and ended at the outskirts of the town facing the road leading to a nearby Ondo community, where they all discarded those bunches of leaves and then retired to their respective homes. I was informed that the participants whisking bunches of leaves everywhere on the streets and later discarding the leaves in the bushes on the outskirts of the town was an allusion to the spiritual cleansing of the town, which wards off



evil and chases away all the imminent catastrophes from the community. In this way, the market/earth cleansing (*Igbájà Egúngún*) is a further confirmation of *Odún Egúngún* as a form of ancestor veneration, a spiritual device for driving death away from the individual *egúngún*-lineage family compounds and promoting the wellbeing of the devotees/townspeople. It also testifies to the origin and significance of *egúngún* found in *Odù Ọ̀wòrìn-Aséyìn*, which describes them as *sayégún*, the heavenly spirits sent by *Olódùmarè* to come and “stabilize the world of the living” when it was threatened with collapse.

### Language of Drum for Egungun as an inciting and action-prompting vehicle

As already established in this study, the role of *àyàn*, who drum for the *egúngún*, especially during *Igbájà Egúngún*, and thereby provide an avenue for individual *egúngún* to display their dancing skills, is fundamental within the *Odún Egúngún*. However, it needs to be stressed that the significance of *ìlù* as a vital Yorùbá traditional musical instrument goes beyond this level. In actuality, the drumbeats of the *dùndún* drum ensemble—especially those of the talking drum *iyáàlù* that functions as a speech surrogate, mimicking the human voice and which can therefore be understood as having its own language, that of the drum—entail an action-prompting vehicle that is powerfully inciting and energizing. The author illustrates this point with the following episode of an eyewitness account, which was caused chiefly by the nature of the given language of drum (i.e. the drum’s speech) that were drummed for *Egúngún Aláwopàlà* in the year 1912.

The episode occurred during that year’s *Odún Egúngún* between *Egúngún Aláwopàlà* and Aaron Ọ̀bìsèsan, a Christian resident of Ọ̀kèìgbó, which resulted in his death. For a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding this deadly episode, a knowledge of the background history of the religious landscape of Ọ̀kèìgbó in the period (late 1800s–early 1900s) of which the episode was symptomatic, is necessary. In January 1899, when Christianity was newly brought to Ọ̀kèìgbó, both the new converts and those that would not (under any circumstances) do away with their indigenous religious beliefs and practices lived together peacefully for at least a few days. However, things started to change when the town was greeted with incessant clashes between the new Christian converts and the adherents of the community’s traditional religion, for instance *Egúngún*, *Orò*, *Àlúkú*, *Edì*, *Ọ̀lójó* (also known as *Ọ̀gún*), among others.

Many local historians in Ọ̀kèìgbó believe that the *mêlées* between the newly converted Christians and the community’s *òrìṣà* devotees were often caused by some of the Christian converts, who habitually seized or looted

their family's religious carvings at night and then destroyed them, at their urging of their pastors. Actions such as these were rationalized and justified on grounds that images and idols of traditional religions needed to be destroyed so as to make sure that the "devilish beliefs and uncivilized traditions" were eradicated at once. For instance, on January 5, 1899, David Débóókú confiscated some religious carvings from his family's *ojúbo*, where members of his family venerated their ancestor spirits, which he shamed and exhibited as idols in a nearby Ondo town. A few days later, on January 15, 1899, another new Christian convert--whose original Yorùbá name was Òjó Akínwándé but took the name David following his conversion to Christianity--cast into the nearby Òni River the "*Igbá Odù*, which he inherited from his father...Christians broke taboos and traditions with defiance during festivals" (Babajide 2005, 64).

On that fateful day in 1912, during that year's *Odún Egúngún*, as Aláwọpálà was emerging from Egúngún's forest grove (*igbó-igbàlẹ*), he was greeted/hailed with the following drumbeats of the talking drum *iyáàlù* (in the *dùndún* drum ensemble), which carried the following action prompting message (of the language of drum) to Aláwọpálà, inciting and calling the *egúngún* to skirmish:

*Aláwọpálà, Gbángbálà, Olóyèdé Òjẹ*  
*Rùgùdú kọnrùgùdú!*  
*Ìkòtún Ari'dà d'ogò ní'lé Qlótí*  
*Òtún Onílòkó, wọn ti mú'dà wọn a lẹle*  
*Òsì Onílòkó, wọn ti mú'dà wọn a dẹrẹ*  
*Agbedegbédé Onílòkó, wọn ti mú'dà wọn jẹrán lóri*  
*Aláwọpálà, oò fi kònkòtì sa?*  
*Èni o pé oó pa, igbàwo lo pá?*  
*Má mà pá sí kòrò, gbangba ni o pá sí*  
*Sìò, emi lò òbá kiri!*

Aláwọpálà, descendant of Gbángbálà and of Olóyèdé Òjẹ

What a brave personality!

Ìkòtun who threatens/duns a debtor with his sword till the person settles his/her debt

The masculine-trait Ìlòkó, are brutal with the sword

But the feminine-trait Ìlòkó are soft with the sword

The brave Ìlòkó that we know never hesitates to assault with the sword

Aláwọpálà, why can't you assault with your sword?

By the way, when did you kill the person you swore to kill?

Don't kill him/her in secret, you should instead kill him/her in public

Shame on you that you have not fulfilled your promise!

As this above calling into action praise chant (*oríki*) that was being drummed with *iyáàlù* (*dùndún*) intensified, all the bystanders/spectators started to run away from the *egúngún* for fear of the imminent unpleasant reaction by Aláwopálà, to the language of the drum, as seen above. But there was someone by the name Aaron Òbìsèsan, himself a former *egúngún* devotee before he converted to Christianity and who therefore knew the *egúngún* cult's secrets, who remained unmoved. He stood in a confrontational stance in front of the *egúngún* (Aláwopálà). Within a second, both had started to engage in a fight-to-finish scenario that claimed the life of Mr. Aaron Òbìsèsan. This led to a big street fight that ensued between the adherents of *egúngún* on one side, and the Christian converts on the other side. It took the effort of the district officer at Ondo (Òkèìgbó was at that time part of Ondo Province) to restore peace between the Christians and the followers of Egúngún and other forms of traditional religion in the community.<sup>14</sup>

Since then, a number of precautionary measures have been put in place, and they have proven successful many times. Among them is the designation of someone among the members of each of the *egúngún* lineages to serve as their family's *egúngún* bodyguard (*atókùn egúngún*), who follows the *egúngún* everywhere. In particular, every warrior *egúngún* (*egúngún ológun*)—such as Egúngún Aláwopálà, Akíngbadé, and Aróbatè—is obliged to have an *atókùn egúngún*. It is the responsibility of that *atókùn egúngún* to make sure the *egúngún* doesn't have access to any dangerous emblems, such as weapons, belonging to that *egúngún* whenever being incited by the language (or surrogated speech-message) of the talking drum. An example excerpted from the earlier cited one was “Aláwopálà, why can't you assault with your sword? By the way, when did you kill the person you swore to kill?” (*Aláwopálà, oò fi kònkòtì sa? Èni o pé oó pa, igbàwo lo pá?*) For that reason, all the weapons owned by an individual *egúngún ológun* are kept only for display in the hands of the *atókùn egúngún*. Similarly, to be an *atókùn egúngún* required that one be very skillful when it comes to understanding and deciphering/decoding the language of the drum. So, for instance, when the talking drum says “whack or assault him/her with a weapon if he/she refuses to run away from you” (*Ta làbilàbi jo, b'óbá kò, b'óbá kò ti kò sá, ta làbilàbi jo*), the *atókùn egúngún* will handle the *egúngún* with an *àtòrì*, instead of an assault weapon like a machete or a sword.

14 For further reading on how Christianity came to Òkèìgbó and the resulting conflicts between the new Christian converts and the practitioners of traditional religious practices in the town (late 1800s–early 1900s), see Olu Babajide, Òkèìgbó: A Melting Pot of Notable Towns (2005, 62–64).



Figure 37a: Èkú-Agò Egúngún Abídogun



Figure 37b: Egúngún Abídogun

Another precautionary measure that I found intriguing concerns Egúngún Abídogun. Bàbá Israel Olóyèdé (aka Folly), the wearer of the shroud-costumer (*àwòrò-arẹ̀kù*) of Egúngún Abídogun did inform me that in the olden days, there had been no time that Egúngún Abídogun had not beheaded at least someone whenever he appeared in public every other year. That perpetual unpleasant scenario had led the family (of Egúngún Abídogun) to take drastic precautionary measures, and they redesigned the *ẹ̀kú/agò* of Egúngún Abídogun without the hand sleeves. Thus, now without the hand sleeves, Egúngún Abídogun was unable to handle anything, not even an *àtòrì*--and certainly not a sword or machete--during the *egúngún*'s public appearance every other year. It is said that the human skull, which today adorns the headdress of Egúngún Abídogun, belonged to the last victim that he beheaded before the hand sleeves of his *ẹ̀kú/agò* were detached as a precautionary measure.

The final precautionary measure discussed in this study is that today (in which no one is above the law), the *àyàn* too are now legally (and morally) obligated to keep warning their clients (the *egúngún*) of the imminent danger as well as the consequences (in terms of a heavy punishment), should any *egúngún* carry out or put to action that which the drum's language-speech (or message) has instructed. Such warning language that the drummers get across with their talking drumbeats to their *egúngún* clients includes the following:



*B'óbá burú tán*  
*Ìwọ nìkan ní ó kù*  
*B'óràn bá dé'lẹ́ tán*  
*Ìwọ nìkan ní ó kù*

If you act foolishly and things get nasty afterwards  
 You are the only one that would face the full wrath of the law  
 If things get ugly and become catastrophic  
 You are the only one who will face the full wrath of the law

### Study Reflections

As has been elucidated in this study, African art, specifically among the Yorùbá, and as Rowland Abiodun's body of scholarly works have proved, is an *oríkì* that exists both in visual and verbal forms. This study has also added "performance," specifically the language of *ìlù* along with the *egúngún* performance actions, as the third form of Yorùbá art as *oríkì*. Consequently, the study has established that a critical study and understanding of Yorùbá art, in addition to its "appreciation," requires the mastery of Yorùbá, the language of the people who gave the art its form and content. The study has suggested, as is also well put and illustrated in Rowland Abiodun's groundbreaking 2014 work, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art*, that Yorùbá art is *oríkì*, whose history, meaning, and cultural relevance are subsumed primarily in its verbal form. Hence the need for a command or near-mastery of the Yorùbá language at the levels of speaking, writing, and reading for any meticulous study and/or better knowledge of the art. Finally, the study has also established the relationship existing between the *àyàn* and *egúngún*, a form of *iwà* that exists in the *ẹhìn-iwà*, and can always manifest in physical form through a religious device called *Qdún Egúngún*, which is fundamental to the understanding of the art and ritual of *egúngún*.

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