

Whirling Return of the Ancestors: Egúngún Masquerade Ensembles of the Yorùbá,
July 15, 2016-January 8, 2017

This exhibition celebrates the rich and varied artistry of Egúngún, the masquerades that honor the presence and power of ancestral spirits among the Yorùbá peoples of West Africa and their descendants in the Americas. Older Egúngún ensembles on loan from Brown University's Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology are displayed alongside an ensemble newly commissioned from Yorùbá artist-priests in Ouidah, Republic of Benin.

The Yorùbá proverb "*Omo l'aso èdá*" (Children are the clothes of a person) points out that children, like clothes, are what we show to the world, and we are judged accordingly. These ensembles are altered over time, constructed of layers upon layers of disparate textiles that are appliquéd, patched, and sewn into panels, or lappets. The oldest textiles are found at the core of the ensemble, while the outer layers present expensive, exotic, and fashionable choices from the contemporary global market.

As assemblages, these works represent the artistic sensibilities and collaborative inventiveness (*imojú mora*) of the women and men of a family; as vibrant ensembles in action, they are multidimensional feasts for the senses. They are worn in performance at annual festivals of remembrance and renewal, at funeral celebrations and other special occasions, and during moments of social crisis and catharsis such as drought, epidemic, or social upheaval. Amidst the animated crowd, the complex drum rhythms, and the shouts and songs of family choruses, the Egúngún performer stamps, leaps, and whirls, layers of lappets flying outward on the air, creating a "breeze of blessing."

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Yoruba
Egúngún Masquerade Ensemble, 2015
Textiles embellished with sequins and cowrie shells
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2016.32

This newly commissioned costume is emblematic of the spirit of collaboration, continuity, and innovation in Egúngún artistry. Priest-devotees and artists created it using colorful green and red sequins and choice fabrics from around the world, expressing the dynamic changes and interactions of our globalized era. At the same time, the makers honored the past in the animal imagery: monkeys, elephants, goats, snakes, butterflies, and lions are deeply associated with mythic histories and legends concerning the veneration of ancestors.



RISD MUSEUM

Egúngún Masquerade performances in Nigeria, Benin, and the United States, 1986-2014

Color; with sound

Lent by Henry John Drewal TL49.2016

Yoruba

Egúngún Wooden Headdress (Ére), ca. mid-20th century

Wood with paint

Courtesy of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University, Gift of W. Brill 98-20-47 TL55.2016.1

Egúngún ensembles are crowned by elaborate wooden headpieces, or *ére*, that celebrate hunters and warriors, legendary heroes and heroines, and founding and deified ancestors (*òrisà*)—the countless divinities who populate the Yorùbá universe. This headdress honors hunters. The hunter in the center wears a distinctive coiffure or cap that falls to the side and is embellished with protective gourd amulets. He is surrounded by other humans, monkeys, crocodiles, and birds—animals with powerful liminal or transitional associations. The birds evoke the spiritual powers of women in Egúngún traditions. A talking drum (*dùndún*) sits in front.



Yoruba

Egúngún Masquerade Ensemble, ca. mid-20th century

Textiles embellished with cowrie shells

Courtesy of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University

Gift of Samson and Leslie Ashamu 86-33A TL55.2016.2

The long rectangular cloth panels in Egúngún costumes recall the shape of sashes worn by women (*òjǎ*). *Òjǎ* symbolize the mythic history of Egúngún and the collaboration between Ológbojò, the ancestor of Yorùbá sculptors, and Èrúbàní Abímbówó, the Yorùbá queen mother who commissioned the first costume in the late 18th century. The sash connects a “great mother” (*iyá nlá*), her children, and their ancestors, signifying cooperation and the power willingly bequeathed by women to men for worshipping and celebrating the departed. The abundant display of sashes is a prayer for the three cardinal blessings: wealth, good health, and long life.



RISD MUSEUM

Yoruba

Egúngún Masquerade Ensemble, ca. mid-20th century

Textiles embellished with cowrie shells, aluminum, thread embroidery, leather, pitch, brass, plastic buttons, and plastic sequins
Courtesy of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University

Museum purchase with funds from the Haffenreffer Special Funds 95-12-2 TL55.2016.3

This ensemble was created from a variety of carefully chosen fabrics, including silk velvets and damasks, European printed cottons, and Africanized Dutch wax prints. Located at the core are traditional indigo-dyed handwoven textiles, some of which are visible here at the bottom.

Most Egúngún ensembles are festooned with an assortment of empowering objects meant to “make things happen”—herbal and medicinal concoctions encased in leather, cloth, or gourd; cowries and plastic buttons; wooden and metal figurines; and brass bells and earthenware. To encounter an Egúngún is to experience a powerful kinetic sculpture that is alive and throbbing with the supernatural life-force and spiritual power of an ancestor.

Yoruba

Egúngún Masquerade Ensemble, mid-20th century

Textiles embellished with thread embroidery, brass spangles, plastic sequins, glass beads, brass, wood, animal hides, and cowrie shells
Courtesy of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University

Museum purchase with funds from the Haffenreffer Special Fund 95-12-3 TL55.2016.4

This brightly colored Egúngún costume celebrates a royal ancestor by depicting a lion on a summit. The entire ensemble is festooned with symbols of royalty, authority, or mystical power—elephants, rams, and birds boldly adorn the sequined lappets in yellow, red, green, and blue. The map of Africa decorates each of the cloth panels. The lappet cascading down the back of the costume carries an inscription that identifies members of this lineage as wielders of the sacred authority and power, or *ase*.



RISD MUSEUM

Yoruba

Egúngún Headdress (Ére), ca. mid-20th century

Wood with paint

Courtesy of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University

William C. Mithoefer and Renee-Paule Moyencourt Collection

Gift of Peter Klaus and Dr. Anita Klaus 2004-15-40 TL55.2016.5

This elephant-motif headdress symbolizes power and authority. Protective gourd amulets crown the brow, and a talking drum in praise of this hunter-warrior ancestor rides above the head. The interlace motif on the pointed ears evokes the principles of collaboration, inclusiveness, and infinity—Yorùbá ideals that extend to relations between the living and the departed. Distinctive physical features of the departed include the scarification marks seen here on the cheeks and temple, the ritually chipped front teeth (considered a mark of beauty among the Yorùbá), and the full beard, a symbol of masculinity and maturity.

