

PORTRAITS OF 'THE DEATHLESSNESS OF CLOTH'

Leonce Raphael Agbodjélou's *Egungun Masquerades* series¹

by Ruth Simbao

*It is the aso [cloth] we should greet before greeting the wearer.*²

If, as the Yoruba saying suggests, the *aso* (the cloth or the clothes) should be greeted before the wearer due to the extreme importance of cloth in Yoruba culture, then who or what performs the role of the 'sitter' in Agbodjélou's contemporary Egungun³ portraits: the figures or the cloth itself?

Despite the 'facelessness' of the performers, Agbodjélou's representation of these clothed figures can be interpreted as portraits, partly due to the stillness of their poses. Immobile, the magnificent detail of the Egungun costumes – which often include layers of richly appliquéd cloth panels, golden thread, beads, palm fronds and "medical attachments, *oogun*" in the form of "amulets, animal skulls, old and new coins and cowries"⁴ – can be slowly and methodically regarded.

This level of visual detail that is afforded the viewer in these static images, contrasts significantly to the energetic vision of these composite costumes performing in Egungun masquerades that are usually associated with death. When in dance, the panels of cloth fly away from the body, creating a visual swirl that seems to reach out to the spiritual world – "the strips and panels blend together and the colours fade into one another until nearly all details disappear and the costume becomes part of everything and is immortal, like Olodumare".⁵ As Rowland Abiodun suggests, "Cloth thus becomes a tangible point of contact with the *orisa* [gods] and the ancestors".⁶

In the Benin Republic, "Vodun⁷ adepts and masquerade performers dress first to please their gods and offer them an appropriate manifestation in human life".⁸ This masquerade is linked to Egungun associations, and at times to an 'Ifa diviner (*babalawo*) [who]...determines that an Egungun should be made'.⁹ Egungun figures are interpreted variously as actual spirits that embody the masquerade costume and mediate between the living and the dead, performers who impersonate the spirits of the dead as a form of honouring the ancestors, or as people who simply perform for entertainment.¹⁰ Besides complexity and debate in terms of how, exactly, the living relate to the dead through various Egungun masquerade forms,¹¹ there is a close tie between the ancestral spirits, cloth, and a regenerative 'life source' (*ase*). Life and cloth are foundationally connected. *Aso*, the word for cloth or clothing, is a "noun formed by adding the prefix *a* to *so* (meaning to bud or regenerate)".

Furthermore, due to the fact that "cloth survives its owner and not the reverse, the Yoruba believe that, when humans return as ancestors, they will once again be covered completely, with cloth even as the Egungun, ancestral masquerade, is also covered with cloth.



Egungun Masquerades VI | 2015 | Pigment Ink on HP Premium Satin Photographic Paper | 148 x 110 cm

In Yoruba thought, the deathlessness of cloth is comparable only to Olodumare, the supreme and self-existent being and creator-in-chief. The socioreligious and aesthetic significance of cloth in Yoruba belief, far outweighs its destructibility as a material object".¹²

The layers of cloth in these images, then, become regenerative portraits of power or life force. While Western "...[p]ortraiture and death have a persistent, intimate relationship, founded on the genre's arguably primary function of capturing an individual's likeness as a bulwark against absence",¹³ in the *Egungun Masquerades* portraits, likeness surrenders to the complete covering of the face.

Hidden beneath cloth, the recognisable features of individuals on earth disappear, eschewing likeness. However, due to cloth's association with 'life force' and a spiritual form of 'immortality', the Egungun portraits seem to *draw presence*, linking the individual to the broader world of others beyond the earth.

As Borgatti argues, African portraiture is generally far less concerned with likeness than Western portraiture is,¹⁴ not due to a lack of ability to produce representational art (as some Europeans erroneously thought), but rather due to sophisticated and evocative forms of symbolism as well as the drive to link individuals to those who are around and beyond them. While Western posthumous portraiture, for example, relies on replicating what has passed – that is, recognisable facial features – in an attempt to safeguard against absence,¹⁵ Agbodjélou's portraits forgo all human facial features. By replacing facial features with cloth associated with ancestral spirits and *ase*, he draws what has already departed, profoundly close.

The portrayals of these 'faceless' figures can also be interpreted as portraits due to their subtle reference to twentieth century studio portraiture in West Africa, which often portrayed sitters posing with props, against ornate backdrops or in elaborate attire in order to register status. While this well-known style of studio photographic portraiture is more readily discernable in Agbodjélou's series *From Dahomey to Benin* (2010) and *Musclemen* (2012) that are visually informed by the works of Joseph Moise Agbodjélou who worked in Porto-Novo and Malick Sidibe and Seydou Keita who worked in Bamako, the *Egungun Masquerades* series subtly references this history of photography.

As with Keita's photographs in which his sitters project a "cosmopolitan, 'à la mode' society...with the use of props and attire",¹⁶ the Egungun costumes "serve as important status symbols for the living".¹⁷

As Abiodun explains, "Because the purpose of the Egungun's visit is to bless relatives and the community, it must appear substantially better endowed than the recipients of his blessings in order to be credible...In other words, there has to be verifiable evidence that the Egungun itself possesses enough to be able to give abundantly and sufficiently to those on earth. It is not unusual, therefore, for an Egungun costume to layer expensive and contemporary fabrics from overseas on top of highly regarded traditional Yoruba cloths".¹⁸

With a cosmopolitan flair comparable to that of much West African twentieth century photographic portraits, Egungun costume designers combine local cloth and accouterments with materials from "Germany, Indonesia, or the United States" with the greatest of ease, reflecting the fact that "In Yoruba thought, tradition and change are not antithetical". This effortless ability to bridge what in Western thought is often framed as opposing – tradition and change, parallels the Egungun's role of connecting the living and the dead. *Aso* – that which buds and regenerates – is so critical to the Egungun, that it becomes viable to interpret the cloth itself as that which performs the role of the 'sitter' in Agbodjélou's portraits. While the mortal figures beneath the cloth are far from immaterial, it is cloth rather than individual likeness that becomes the bulwark against absence.

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¹ Rowland Abiodun refers to 'the deathlessness of cloth' in his discussion of the importance of cloth (*aso*) to Yoruba culture. See the *Africa* volume of the, edited by Joanne B. Eicher and Doran H. Ross, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010, p. 301.

² Ibid., p. 298.

³ The Yoruba word, Egungun, is generally translated into English as 'masquerade'. Olawole Francis Famule distinguishes between Egúngún (masquerade) and egungun (bones) in his PhD dissertation, *ART AND SPIRITUALITY: THE IJUMU NORTHEASTERN-YORUBA EGÚNGÚN*, 2005, p. 38. In this essay, I take my lead from the spelling of Agbodjélou's title *Egungun Masquerades*.

⁴ Famule, p. 36.

⁵ Abiodun, p. 302. Olodumare is a supreme being.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ It is critical to distinguish the Vodun religion from the negative stereotypes of 'voodoo' that are often simplistically conflated with Vodun. See Suzanne Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology and Power*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995.

⁸ Joseph C. E. Adande, "Benin" entry in the *Berg Encyclopaedia of World Dress and Fashion*, edited by Joanne B. Eicher and Doran H. Ross, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010, p. 217.

⁹ Schiltz, Marc, "Egungun Masquerades in Iganna", *African Arts* 11(3), 1978, p. 52.

¹⁰ Henry Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal refer to "diverse spirits (*ara orun*) who manifest themselves either as voices in the midnight or as masqueraders that honor the ancestors". See their article "More Powerful Than Each Other: An Egbado Classification of Egungun", *African Arts* 11(3), 1978, p. 28. Ulli Beier refers to the Egungun entertainers as Agbegijo (literally 'we dance with the wood'). See his article, "The Agbegijo Masquerades," *Nigeria Magazine* 82, 1964, pp. 188-199.

¹¹ It is important to recognise that Egungun practices are complex and can differ in terms of detail and nuance across Yorubaland, which spans parts of Nigeria, Benin and Togo. Agbodjélou's photographs focus on Egungun in Porto-Novo, the capital of Benin.

¹² Abiodun, p. 301.

¹³ Kate Retford, "A Death in the Family: Posthumous Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England", *Art History* 33(1), 2010, p. 75.

¹⁴ See Borgatti, Jean and Richard Brilliant, *Likeness and Beyond: Portraits from Africa and the World*. New York: The Center for African Art, 1990.

¹⁵ Retford, p. 75.

¹⁶ Simbao, Ruth, "I ka nyè tan: You look beautiful like that" in *Flava: Wedge Curatorial Projects*. Toronto: Wedge Gallery, p. 16.

¹⁷ Drewal, Henry, p. 18. Marc Schiltz similarly suggests that the costumes and social gatherings connected to this masquerade are expensive and as such are seen to increase one's reputation. Schiltz, Marc. "Egungun Masquerades in Iganna", *African Arts* 11(3), p. 52.

¹⁸ Abiodun, p. 301.

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