



THE ARTISTIC AND AESTHETICS ANALYSIS OF THE COSTUME OF EGUNGUN ELEWE IN IGBOMINA LAND

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ABSTRACT: *Egungun is believed to be a visible appearance of the dead ancestors as spirits who occasionally revisit the living for festivals. During this visit, the egungun is clothed with beautiful attire that will become the embodiment of attraction. Despite several studies on egungun in Yoruba land, there is no comprehensive study on this type of egungun, thus creating a dearth of literature in this area of art history and thereby leaving in-depth research on the costumes of egungun elewe of Igbomona land. This study is targeted on the artistic and aesthetics analysis of egungun elewe of Igbomina land aiming to promote the Yoruba decorative art to document the findings in the annals of history. The study is descriptive as each of the items of the egungun elewe's costume is analyzed using the qualitative method. Findings reveal that the role, functions, and cultural significance of the egungun elewe of Igbomina land have aesthetic qualities different from other forms of egungun known in other parts of Africa.*

KEYWORDS: egungun, festival, tradition, costume, ancestors, elewe.



INTRODUCTION

Egungun masquerade is the spirit of departed ancestors which is worshipped periodically. These departed ancestors are known and addressed as “*ara-orun kin kin*” (heavenly tenants) visiting the community of the living for festivals, blessings, and celebrations. Some of these egungun in Yoruba land include Alapansanpa, Oloolu from Ibadan, Awodagbese from Ogbomoso, Gbegbe from Iragbiji, Elewe from Igbomina Yoruba in the towns of Ila-Orangun, Oke-Ila Orangun, and Arandun (Ola 2021).

Generally, egungun is an integral aspect of traditional religion in Yoruba land usually occasioned by a colourful gleefulness in deference of ancestors which the Yoruba people believe has an important influence on their living. According to Amech (2021), the costumes of Elewe are an assortment of intricate beautiful materials that reveal the creative impulse of the people of Ila-Orangun in Igbomina land. Virtually, egungun festival is a moment of paying allegiance to the spirits of departed heroes or heroines who had gone to the great beyond, yet have a spectacular influence on the living (Ojedokun and Atoi 2020). Occasionally, the festival is observed for some days every year (Kalilu (1991:17; Oyewole 2023: 139), where the whole period of the festival is regarded as hallowed (Ojedokun and Atoi 2020).

Worthy of note that the Elewe masquerade portends a slight difference in performance when compared with other masquerades through the pattern of their accompaniments in terms of entertainment, costumes, music, songs, and dance (Sanni 2019:63). In the conventional tradition of the Yoruba, there is a shared belief that egungun masquerade is a representative of the ancestors going by the composition of their costumes, festivities, and ritual processes (Summerour and Madden 2016:469), thus, the festival poses as one of the traditional means of preserving the cultural values of families of the ancestors among various communities in Yoruba land (Olaiya 2022:3). Contrary to the above observations, the Eegun Elewe combines a conglomeration of colourful materials of Ankara fabrics, and woolen materials with some fanciful craft objects.

Although the origins of egungun are sketched in the annals of Yoruba history, yet, some art historians made an x-ray of it to the Nupe tribe in Nigeria (Olaiya 2022; Adeyemo and Obadofin 2019). The worshippers believe the egungun is an incipient externalization of the spirits of deceased beings who occasionally attend to the living for social needs such as benedictions, festivity, and commemoration. To the Africans, the aesthetics and arty appearance of the costume of egungun is a special cultural festival applicable to the Yoruba race in West Africa and with their ancestries in Diasporas such as Cuba and Brazil (Olaiya 2022:1).

The force of the egungun festival in Ila-Orangun, (the head of Igbomina land) corroborates with Kalilu (1993:55, 56) and Drewal (2016:97) who argue that the practice of venerating ancestors has been an extant tradition for a very long time in all parts of Yoruba land where egungun masquerades appear in great apprehension accompanied with immolations and ceremonies to appease the gods which had been held in admiration. During the festival, the *ara orun kin-kin* (heavenly tenants) will appear in intricate aesthetic costumes in the spirits of the ancestors they represent. The whole events will suggest that both the egungun and the worshippers have a strong belief in life after death which manifests through their actions that the spirits of the ancestors are constantly indulging in the daily activities of successors



(Akande 2019:3; Oyawale 2022:140, and Akubor 2016:34). It is highly noticeable that egungun masquerades in West African countries especially in Yoruba land is one of the element of cultures and traditions that distinguished Yoruba race from other Western countries. It also plays a crucial role in delineating Yoruba traditional religion (Olaiya 2022:3).

Virtually, all facets of the social life of Ila-Orangun people mirror their culture; whether palpable or impalpable (Adejumo 2023:3). As the palpable cultures are made manifest through job specification such as arts, technological innovations, and agricultural engagements likewise, the impalpable aspects are shown in language known as Igbomina dialects, religion (traditional), literature, enactment, and fables (ibid). Nearly all the cultural paraphernalia mentioned shortly constitute the *Ekú* (Egungun costumes) and the whole nature of the festival. Olaiya (2020:3) asserts that the identifiable culture of Yoruba today has its conventional philosophy in egungun tillage. Despite the undermining influence of colonialists, the Atlantic slave trade, and Western exposure on Africans, the egungun festival remains exuberant among the people of Ila-Orangun (Adejumo 2023:6) because the body of behaviour of African people is occasionally driven by religions, festivals, egungun masquerades, arts, music, and folktales (Sanni 2019:61).

The carnal performance of any egungun in Yoruba land is triggered by the spirits of the ancestors the egungun is representing who performed under the mask of the costumes he wore Tonye (2024:4). The costumes define extensively the role played by the egungun masquerades in serving as a link between the people and their ancestors in the course of religious immolations (Olaiya 2022: 4 and Aremu (1991:6). Aremu collaborates with Oyedokun and Atoi (2020) that religion, antiquity and mythical assertions are germane to cultural narrations of the Yoruba. The force from religion and antiquity play crucial influence on the aesthetics of egungun costumes made of assorted fabric materials and other fanciful objects (Olaiya 2022:10).

Statement of the problem

Presently in Ila-Orangun, there is an unrestricted level of involvement in African tradition in both Christian and Islamic religions (Adebayo 2015), and the greeting increase in attendance of worshippers in two religions. As a result of this, many inveterate egungun worshippers have relinquished their belief in ancestors worship for either Christianity or Islamic religions without giving appreciation to the artistic and aesthetics richness imbedded in the costume of egungun elewe. Studies have revealed that regardless of the aesthetics relevance of egungun costumes in Ila-Orangun, many religious fanatics classify some of the egungun costumes as esoteric and fetish; devoid of human value or spiritual edification whereas there are extant esthetics and artistic values worthy of admiration in the costumes of Elewe masquerade of Ila-Orangun suffice to documentation in the art historical context.

Even though Western materials are combined in some instances with local materials to assemble the costumes of egungun Elewe in the modern era, many civilized communities derive little or no value from the variety of materials used in these costumes because of the people's inclinations in other religions. Makinde (2011:588) confirms that the emergence of new religions (Christianity and Islam) has halted some conventional preliminary sacrifices among the egungun creed members, and consequently undermines the obvious beauty of the costume of the Elewe masquerade.



The Study, Aim, and Objectives

The study is restricted to the ancient town of Ila-Orangun where Egungun Elewe formed the cardinal aspect of the people's cultural festivals and one of the unified cultural identities of all Igbomina towns and villages of which Ila-Orangun plays a central role. The study aims to x-ray the artistic relevance of the costume of eegun Elewe in Ila-Orangun as it is identified as one of the unified cultural identities of the Igbomina land, while the objectives are to promote the appreciation of the aesthetics richness of African skills in the context of the Yoruba decorative art, and to document the findings in the chronicles of art history for scholarly enrichment in the academic world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several scholars have emerged with studies on diverse concepts of egungun masquerades in Africa, precisely in the Yoruba communities. Drewal (2016); Ayinmode (2020); Saani (2019); and Ojedokun & Atoi (2020), acknowledge egungun as ancestors personified by referring to egungun as dwellers of heaven. Kalilu (1991) considers the aesthetic usage of sculpture in egungun costumes such as masks as a medium of expression of beauty in Yoruba traditional religion. Bakare and Barbieri (2023) extend their view on egungun costumes to the use of masks in a theatre group known as "Alarinjo". The study examines the interplay functions of costumes in egungun ritualism and Alarinjo theatre group in ancient times. Both cultural groups exploit traditional attires and reveal the imperativeness of costume to Alarinjo and Egungun. Oyawale (2022) attempts to outline the economic impact of egungun festival in Ogbomosho and other Yoruba land aside from the religious function posited by Olaiya (2022) where the author recognizes egungun as a representative of ancestors among the living in Yoruba land.

However, Aremu (1991) focuses on the relevance of costumes worn by egungun masquerade. The paper asserts that the important position of egungun in society is responsible for the choice of his costumes. Makinde (2011) agrees that egungun festival is to revere and appease the gods for certain blessings towards the living. Asaolu (2022) highlights the role of music in the egungun festival. The author considers this as a medium of invocation and veneration regarding egungun as sacrilegious in every society. Oyefeso (2023) regards the egungun festival as a way of growing the culture of people in Yoruba land and connecting with the ancestors most importantly in the Ibadan metropolis. However, there is a profound gap in the aesthetic and artistic relevance of the costumes of the Elewe masquerade which is very peculiar to Igbomina, especially Ila-Orangun; the political head of Igbomina kingdom.

METHODOLOGY

In-depth observation of different egungun costumes was carried out to deduce some underlying Yoruba aesthetics criteria embedded in the egungun costumes in Ila-Orangun. In achieving the expected result, a qualitative design with a descriptive-analytical method was employed to enhance the explicit aesthetic indices of egungun costumes. According to Carlos et.al (2015:88), qualitative analysis will assist the aesthetic analysis for better criticism beyond face value.



Information was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources of data collection include direct observation of the performance of egungun Elewe, and interviewing people, while the secondary sources of data collection were through reviewing related publications. Pictures of various egungun costumes were captured through the camera as visual data. The aesthetic analysis assists in being visually judgmental in the context of aesthetic canons of Yoruba traditional art (Daniel & Michael 2023).

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Ila-Orangun is a notable town in Igbomina land dominated by an eclectic heterogeneous collection of Yoruba race who trace their origin to Ile-Ife through the migration of one of the key bloodlines of Oduduwa (Adebayo 2015:1,2; Aboyeji 2018:67; Ibiloye 2011: 33), by history, the whole Igbomina land owned Orangun of Ila, one of the factors which made Ila-Orangun as the anterior nucleus of Igbomina towns. The land possession extends to the border of River Niger in Jebba, the North-Central of Nigeria. However, the larger percentage of this land is said to have been forfeited to Kwara State in the aftermath of Old Oyo encroachment and Nupe invasions in 1804 (Ibiloye 2019:106, 107).

Ila-Orangun was primarily known as a town overwhelmed with traditional worshipping and sociocultural practices owned to antiquity and descent. The people were saturated with diverse forms of traditional religion and festivals which include, Ogun, Sango, Oro, Oya, Osun, Obatala, and egungun, among others (Adebayo 2015:3). Almost every compound has one Orisa (deity) or other which they pay obeisance to monthly (ibid). Among the numerous social events in Ila is the egungun masquerade. The notable form of egungun peculiar to the people of this ancient town is Elewe masquerade which is invariably saturated with attractive costume that speaks volumes of Yoruba art practices.

Study reveals that the Elewe as an entertainment masquerade is celebrated alongside other egunguns to mark their festivals. According to an oral interview with Chief Ajiroba, Eegun eleweis usually celebrated every three years between June and August. Ila-Orangun is believed to be a pacesetter of Eegun Elewe in Igbomina kingdom. Oral interview with Oba Abdul-Raheem Adeoti Adewale Akolade, the Olomu of Omu-Aran, and some Ila-Orangun citizens reveal that Eegun Elewe (Elewemasquerade) is one of the crucial identities of all Igbomina land.

Egungunis a form of culture in Yoruba land with a depository tradition and assortment of festivals which is often saturated with social activities regardless of a century of colonization with attendance of Western religions acculturation and modern inducement (Omobowale et.al 2018).

According to Stite (2017) and Norma (1982:70), costume is important to the Yoruba race in Africa than any other group, and the use of clothing material together with other accessories has been a considerable means of distinguishing one egungun from another in respect of individual family. Moreover, the use of aso-ebi(uniformed dress) is worthwhile among Yoruba people especially at social events like weddings, burials, and coronations, among others during which unique fabrics ranging from lace, velvets, aso-ofi, and adire (Kalilu and Adeoti 2022) would fill the markets where the occasions were taking place. Unlike other forms of masquerades, the Elewe is usually regarded as one of the Yoruba traditional

entertainers; going from one place to another where popular traditional events are taking place. That is why they are somehow regarded as ‘Alarinjo’. One of the sharp distinctions that subsist between the Elewe masquerade and other egunguns that the entire intermingling activities and performances of the masquerade are socially fascinating, colourful, entertaining, scrupulous, and devoid of community intimidation or ferocity.



Figure 1: *Eegun Elewe* in Ila-Orangun going about entertaining people with dance

The Elewe performances are usually accompanied by local songs and traditional music (Figure 1). There are several materials associated with the masquerade which largely remain as discernible features of the costumes.

Shared Characteristics of the Costumes of Eegun Elewe in Ila-Orangun

The costume of Elewe masquerades includes certain outstanding features that delineate it from other egungun in Yoruba land. It is the whole form of the costume that narrates the characterizations and formalistic roles of the egungun among the people of Ila-Orangun and in the spirit world (Lucile 2017). Some of the costumes are the following;

The Ankara fabric is locally called iyile (dancing fabric) costume which covers their head to the waist. Ankara is light-textured and it allows free hand and body movement while dancing, especially with the acrobatic dance steps of the egungun (Figure 2). Olaiya (2022:10, 11) observes that the costume of egungun is ordinarily an artifact of consciously designed clothing materials. Aesthetically, the composite decorations and variations of the fabrics invariably expose the originality of Igbomina people. For instance, at the back of Elewe masquerade are a composite of local conglomerates with foreign fabrics which are carefully designed with colourful wools attached to Ankara fabrics (African print), Damask, Lace, Aran (Velvet), and Silk (Olaiya 2022).



Figure 2: *Elewe* masqueraders in their Ankara fabric materials

(ii) *Hand fan*: The use of local *abebe* (hand fan) is sacrosanct to *eegun Elewe* in Ila-Orangun. This hand fan is an essential element of their costumes which portrays socialization and entertainment quality of the performance (Figure 3). Ordinarily, *abebe* in Yoruba land is considered as one the elements that supplies pleasant feelings for noblemen in the society. In Yoruba local environment. *Abebe* is one of the local craft in Africa, in which the production is a source of income to the local craftsmen in Africa in the time past. Hand fan is commonly woven with flexible materials such as palm-frond leaves, grass, leather, and fabric among others.



Figure 3: the *Abebe* (hand fan), a part of *Elewe*'s costume materials

(iii) *Elewe* masquerade often hides one hand inside *Ekú* known as *Iyile* (costume) where the masquerade will remain undaunted with only a hand while the second hand will be used

to hold *abebe* (hand fan) throughout his performance. This identifiable tradition is replacing the use of cane and other dreadful costumes common to other types of *egungun* in Ila-Orangun (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Elewe masquerade with a hand visible while the other hand is hidden to the audience

(iv) *Saworo-ese*: There is an appearance of artistic decoration at the ankle of the *Elewe* masquerade's leg with multi-coloured threads and also, the legs are adorned with *saworo ese* (leg bracelets) – made of brass, which constantly create an organized sounds as the masquerade entertains his audience with the acrobatic dance steps (Figure 5)



Figure 5: *Saworo ese* (leg bracelet and woolen fabric) decoration of the *Elewe*

(v) The use of *saworo ese* has been a common costume to ancient indigenous cultural practices especially the *Alarinjo* theatre groups, cultural dancers, and the local magicians in Nigeria. Likewise, *Elewe* masquerade dance bare-footed (Figure 6) while some may simply wear ordinary slippers.



Figure 6: Elewe masqueraders dancing barefooted

(vi) *Bature*: Round the waist of the *Eegun Elewe* is an embellishment called *bature* (woolen props). *Bature* is a variety of colourful threads; compose of aesthetic elements capable of attracting people. It is embellished with sizeable leather materials called *awo* (leather) which are laid at the upper part of the waist. (Figure7). The skillful explorations of art elements to showcase the Yoruba decorative art such as weaving, leatherwork, and applique among others constitute the entire composition of the costume. According to Olaiya (2022: 2), the costumes are designed with contrasting colourful woolen fabrics, produced by skilled local craftsmen. However, it is sometimes done with industrial machine in these modern days. Occasionally, local materials such as metal and damask are added to increase the aesthetic richness of the costumes.



Figure 7: *Bature* costume of *Elewe* in Ila-Orangun

All the selected woolen materials are aesthetically built-up to attract the audience. The *bature* has been one of the unique costumes that delineate the attributes of *Elewe* in Igbomina land from other *egungun* that abound in African countries.

(vii) *Olonde owo* (hand bracelet): This costume is a crucial element peculiar to *Elewe* masquerade. It is an integral aspect of paraphernalia that facilitate uniqueness of cultural display of acrobatic dance the masquerade portends. Traditionally, *olonde owo* does not only beautify the masquerade, it simultaneously portrays virtue and astuteness of the ancestor the *Elewe* is representing in that community (Figure 8).

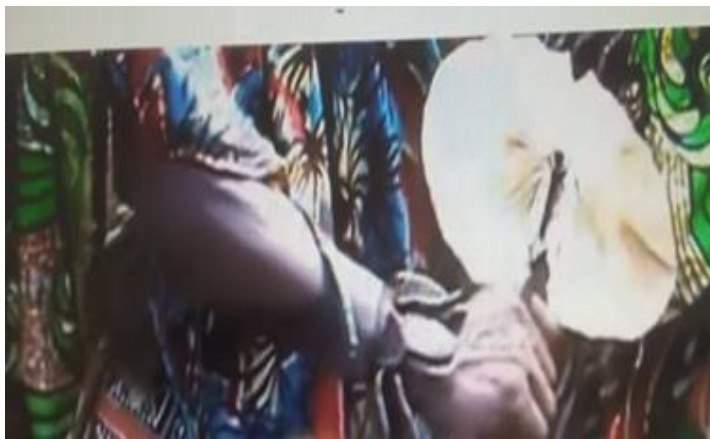


Figure 8: *Olonde owo* (hand's bracelet)

Artistically, the use of costume in *Elewe* masquerade articulates the incognito cultural properties of the Igbomina people of which Ila-Orangun is at the cutting edge. The intricate costumes are efficient to have triggered the *Elewe* into actions. Olaiya (2022:2, 3) considers the body of the costumes as “empowering materials” which unswervingly express the subtle aesthetic canons of the Yoruba people. It is unarguably sacrosanct that the only unambiguous direction to interpret the culture and traditions of any society is to unwaveringly verve in the way of their art, values, beliefs, and not by foreign cultures (Rowland 2001:15). The likes of African art imbedded in the costumes of *Elewe* masquerade are capable of integrating more effectively the aesthetics of culture and the admirable values of the Ila-Orangun people. Moreover, it is at the extreme end of art that people’s aesthetic values in term of religion, culture, fashion, and festivals can be effectively inculcated into the minds of the younger generations. Rowland further suggests that if there would be an appreciation of the aesthetics of any of the African cultures, it is through the work of art that was made preponderance during the Yoruba cultural display such as the costume of *Eegun Elewe*. Ordinarily, the role of the costume of the *Elewes* is not restricted to entertainment nor ancestral representation but rather to promote the aesthetic peculiarities of the Yoruba culture and its upkeep (Olaiya 2022:3).



The Artistic Qualities of the Costume in the Paradigm of the Yoruba Aesthetics Tenets

The principles of aesthetics are not confined to the Western conscious minds alone. The Yoruba ethnic group in Africa equally has concern for aesthetics in their way. There is a strong synergy in the concepts of *asa* (culture) and *ewa* (beauty or aesthetics) which is represented in the application of forms, shapes, texture, value, lines, and colours through the usage of costumes in the Yoruba traditional art and cultural display. Virtually, the Yoruba people are renowned for artistic display (Abiodun 2001:17). The fact that the costume of *Elewe* masquerade in Ila-Orangun is designed by a conventional rule guiding its outward appearance is aesthetically guarded. The settings of the costume with some paraphernalia reveal that the Yoruba have cherished principles that guide their artistic tendencies in any form. It is in the consciousness of the artistic indices that enables the *elewe* costumiers to operate within the frame of the Yoruba aesthetic canons.

Drewal (1989:14) identifies three underlying properties; words, images, and actions which this study considers peculiar to any form of Yoruba traditional arts; whether visual or non-visual. These three are capable of generating a platform for the perception of the whole frame of Yoruba artistic traditions. It is of note that these three concepts are notably integrated as essential aesthetic qualities of the costumes of *Eegun Elewe* in Ila-Orangun. For instance, Abiodun (1994:69, 70) enjoins art critics and art historians when critiquing Yoruba traditional art to look beyond the cultural aspect and focus on the intricate aesthetics qualities that have overwhelmed the whole form of any African arts. He observes that there is an element of *ase* (virtue or life force) in Yoruba art form. The Yoruba people believe that the beauty of *ase* is firmly rooted in the *ohun* (voice or words) spoken by the *Elewe* masquerade as he moves round blessing his audience during annual festivals. This is reiterated in the Yoruba adage that says “*enu eniyan lase wa*”, meaning; there is a virtue of authority in the voice of human being.

All the embodiments of the materials of the costumes are virtually sacred. There is a way the Yoruba people accentuate the functionalism of the costumes worn by *egungun* with words of authority. The kind of costume among the Yoruba has been supernaturally sanctioned for uniqueness of purpose. As *Elewe* performs, the prayers, encouragement, and aesthetic fun he offers symbolize his disposition as a representative of an ancestor.

Correspondingly, the artistic imagery of the costume of the *Elewe* masquerade such as hand fan, *saworo owo*, *saworo ese*, the woolen fabrics known as *bature*, and other imaginary attachments are sacred and cannot be used for any casual activity. However, whatever the form, in terms of colour, texture, shape, and price value, the costume items are aesthetics in as much as they are effective and relevant to the cultural performance. Moreover, the acrobatic action exhibited in the artistic body movement of the *Elewe* allays the shared palpable fear that usually clouded the minds of the common viewers at any performance of other forms of *egungun* in that festive period. The creative actions emanating from the *Elewe* are orchestrated by structured music directed by the *atokun* (moderator) also consists of aesthetic quality.

The apparent beauty entrenched in the costumes of the *Elewe* masquerade in Ila-Orangun is expressed on the grounds of the Yoruba aesthetics criteria. Abiodun (1994) considers eight characteristics upon which the aesthetic qualities of the *Elewe* masquerade in Ila-Orangun are examined.



The concept of *iwa* (character) is apparent in the exciting disposition of the *elewe* and was made manifest in the costume of the *Elewe* masquerade. The conglomeration of the items of the costume invokes a responsive attitude worthy of attracting people unto himself. The consciousness of *iwa* (friendly character) engenders the *atokun* (moderator), the *Elewe*, and the costumeir to maintain *oju inu* (inner eyes) in their entire respective tasks to acquaint with the nitty-gritty of every costume to that course. At this stage, it is expedient for the would-be designer of the costume of the *egungug Elewe* to have *oju ona* (design advertence) which is an essential quality expected of craftsmen in Yoruba land. This same *oju ona* is anticipated to guide the masquerade to be observant of the relevance of every item of his costume, thereby motivating him to perform according to the conventional rule of *Elewe* cultural display. Moreover, in the course of putting on the costumes, and setting out for performance, the masquerade must have imbibed the characteristics of *ifarabale* (meekness) and *iluti* (attentiveness) to grasp the coordination of the spirit world the *Elewe* is personified in order not to circumvent error along the line. As it were, the complete setting of the costume is expected to metamorphose the *Elewe* masquerade into action (Lucile 2017) as a messenger of blessing, and a deliverer of appreciation from the spirit world to the living (Adeyemo and Obadofin 2019: 301).

In addition to this, the *Elewe* masquerade is circumspect to imbibe the nature of *suuru* (patience) in setting out. He must not be intimidated to act contrary to the conventional principle of *Eegun Elewe* in Igbomina land. The masquerade must display implicit tenderness (*iwa pele*) under the *Ekú* (costume) he wears. The beauty of the *Elewe* masquerade rests on the ability to demonstrate *imoju-mora* (perceptivity) even with his environment. The *Elewe* must be wittingly conscious of the significance of all the costumes he is putting on. In light of this, the setting of the fragment of *awo* (leather) in his waist, the *saworos* sound, and other adornments result in the wonderful aesthetics of the culture and the identity he epitomizes.

FINDINGS/CONCLUSION

The perception of people towards the African art traditions is religion-motivated, and this has a negative influence on extracting the aesthetic qualities of African art forms such as the costume of *egungun Elewe*. Although the *egungun elewe* is a metaphysical being, and does not portend him as lacking aesthetic or artistic qualities which can easily showcase African art in African culture. There is no way the Yoruba can be deprived of their cultural right which is difficult to separate from the traditional elements of art. Everyone must realize that art permeates every Yoruba cultural practice which can only be presumed on the platform of analyzing or interpreting aesthetic qualities that are apparent in such culture. In light of the above, it is expedient to cultivate the habit of appreciating the beauty of art in the costume used to propel forward the identity of any society mindless the mystical composition such object may consist.



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