The creative economy of Èḳú Egúngún: an ancestral presence

By

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Abstract

This study examines the creative economy of èḳú Egúngún through its materials, aesthetics, and cultural significance. The layered textile assemblage constitutes the visible form of the Egúngún. While earlier studies on the interpretation of the Egúngún phenomenon had often been framed primarily within ritual and anthropological frameworks, this study approaches the èḳú as a mobile work of art produced through a complex network of artistic labour, patronage, and cultural negotiation. By drawing on visual documentation of the Egúngún festivals and on engagement with practitioners across Yoruba communities, the study analyses the structure, materiality, and evolving aesthetics of the Èḳú while situating its production within the localised creative economy. This research employs Alfred Gell's theory of art and agency, as well as Arjun Appadurai's concept of the social life of things, in examining the circulation of materials, artistic decisions, and the transformation over time of Egúngún aesthetics in response to contemporary pressures that include festival tourism, digital media, and heritage commodification. This paper argues that the Egúngún tradition functions as a dynamic system of cultural production in which the Èḳú serves as a central site around which ancestral authority, artistic innovation, and economic activities intersect.

Keywords: Egúngún; Ẹḳú; Economy; Textiles; Yoruba; Ancestors; Aesthetics

Introduction

The Èḳú Egúngún occupies a central figure in the Yoruba culture, as a representative and embodied presence of departed ancestors within the living community. Egungnun is believed to be able to mediate between the world of the

living and that of the dead. This is done through performance, movement and visual spectacles that support lineage continuity, moral authority and communal memory. The ẹ̀kú's layered structure is the heart of the Egúngún, which gives it its dynamic and visible form. The composition of the ẹ̀kú includes multiple fabrics, embroidered panels, amulets, applique designs and other decorative elements. The ẹ̀kú is not just an apparel for festivals but a complex object of art that is used in the transformation of the masked performer into an ancestral spirit.

Notwithstanding its significance within the Yoruba culture as a visual and performative spectacle, scholastic attention has focused primarily on its ritual meanings, performative structure and symbolic interpretation. Although these perspectives remain essential aspects of the Egúngún phenomenon, they sometimes underemphasise the material, artistic, and economic dimensions of the Ẹ̀kú Egúngún. The production of an ẹ̀kú entail the involvement of skilled artistic labour, selection of materials and decision-making on aesthetics, and financial investment.The Ẹ̀kú production involved skilled artistic labour, material selection, aesthetic decision-making, and financial investment. Those who participate in the production and renewal of the ensemble include tailors, textile traders, embroiderers, beadworkers, patrons, and ritual specialists. Collectively, these interactions constitute a localised creative economy that sustains artistic practice while reinforcing cultural continuity.

The Orange Economy, also known as the creative economy, refers to activities in which human creativity and culture are transformed into products and services valued for their originality and intellectual property. This economic model encompasses sectors including visual and performing arts, cultural heritage, digital media, design, and software. Iván Duque Márquez, former president of Colombia, and Felipe Buitrago Restrepo, former culture minister, introduced the term "Orange Economy" in their 2013 publication The Orange Economy: An Infinite Opportunity. The authors chose the colour orange because of its established association with creativity and cultural identity.

A prominent example of the Orange Economy is observed in the construction of ẹ̀kú Egúngún in Yorubaland, where the practice of honouring ancestors has

evolved into a hub of creativity and skilled craftsmanship. These èẹ́kú, also known as *àgó*, serve not only ceremonial purposes but also represent unique works of intellectual property, incorporating textile design, embroidery, leatherwork, and woodcarving. The production process supports a network of skilled artisans, apprentices, and traders, with traditional designs frequently updated to reflect contemporary styles and incorporate high-quality materials such as velvet, damask, and metallic brocade. By transforming cultural traditions into tangible art forms and live performances, the Egúngún practice stimulates local tourism, strengthens the textile industry, and promotes the transmission of valuable skills, thereby establishing this sacred tradition as a sustained source of economic and creative vitality for the region.

This study investigates the creative economy embedded in the design, the production, the renewal, and the performance of the Èẹ́kú Egúngún. The èẹ́kú ensemble is viewed as a mobile work of art, whose form has evolved through many cycles of ritual renewals and aesthetic alterations. Examination of the material, structure, and artistic process involved in its production has shown that the Èẹ́kú is situated within a larger discussion that includes heritage economies, cultural production, and festival arts in Yorubaland. The study also investigated issues of contemporary pressures, such as festival tourism, media visibility, and heritage consciousness, that are reshaping Egúngún aesthetics. These issues have generated tensions between tradition and innovation.

Literature review

A lot of scholarships on Egúngún study place so much emphasis on its performance, its ritual authority, and ancestral embodiment. All these highlight the spiritual and social roles of the Egúngún tradition, as related to strengthening linear structures and communal identity. Scholarships on Egúngún have mostly emphasised performance, ritual authority, and ancestral embodiment. The studies highlight the spiritual and social roles of Egúngún traditions, particularly as it reinforces lineage structures and communal identity. A lot of attention has been drawn to the dynamic interaction between costume, movement, and audience engagement through research works on Yoruba performance tradition. The

materiality of the Èḷkú Egúngún and its production as an artistic process have received comparatively limited attention within the art historical discourse.

Studies on Yoruba Egúngún traditions emphasised performance as a composite art form involving sculptures, costume, music, and choreography. Within such a framework, the textile component of the Èḷkú Egúngún ensemble emerges as a significant visual element by shaping perception and meaning, and within such analyses, the economic and creative labour involved in the production of their textile and sculptural assemblages remains insufficiently explored. The construction and maintenance of the Èḷkú requires not just artistic skills, but access to materials, financial resources and collaborative network.

Historically, scholarly engagement with Egúngún has primarily emerged from anthropological, art historical, and performance-based perspectives. Thompson (1974) emphasised movement, visual dynamism, and the performative activation of the Egúngún phenomenon. His observations regarding the layered surfaces and chromatic vitality of the Èḷkú Egúngún remain foundational for understanding its visual complexity. Similarly, Drewal and Drewal (1983) examined Yoruba Egúngún traditions as multidimensional cultural performances, highlighting the interplay of ritual, music, costume, and audience. Although these studies provide significant insights, they often treat costume as subordinate to performance rather than as an autonomous artistic structure.

Drewal (1992) further situates Yoruba Egúngún within a broader framework of embodiment and transformation, contending that the Egúngún costume serves as a mediating device that transforms identity and social relations. This perspective aligns with the Èḷkú's function as a transformative textile sculpture. Lawal (1996) examines Yoruba aesthetics, emphasising the concepts of Ase, visual vitality, and compositional balance. These principles are evident in the layered composition of the Èḷkú Egúngún, where colour, texture, and density generate visual impact.

In her own research, Barber (1991) investigated Yoruba performance and cultural expression, with emphasis on the fluid interaction between tradition and innovation. The relevance of her work is the understanding of how the ẹ̀kú evolves

through cycles of renewal. Picton (1995), discussing African textiles and their role in identity construction, notes that cloth functions as a medium of communication in Africa. All these scholars highlight here that within the Egúngún practice, layered textiles similarly convey lineage identity and prestige.

The attention of more recent scholarship has shifted towards materiality and artistic production, with Adepegba (1995) interrogating Nigerian art traditions and emphasising continuity and transformation in Egúngún costumes, while Kasfir (1999), highlighted the importance of African Egúngún as a site of artistic innovation. These perspectives support the argument that the ẹ̀kú should be examined as a complex art object shaped by artistic labour.

The origin and development of the Egúngún culture

Numerous myths and traditions on the origin of Egúngún abound. Some are cited by Samuel Johnson (1921), Olajubu, (1973), Aremu P.S.O. (1995), Romkalilu (1993) and Bolaji Campbell (2020), and three possible locales, namely, Ile-Ife, Nupeland and Old Òyó, have been suggested as the probable origins of Egúngún. These places have featured prominently in several Yoruba oral traditions and have been extensively discussed and analysed by scholars like Johnson (1921) and Babayemi (1980).

Traditional origin of Egúngún

Samuel Johnson (1921) suggests that Egúngún originated from the Nupe country, claiming that the interaction between the Nupe and the Yoruba people, and their geographical proximity, led to the spread of the cult to the Yoruba people. Other scholars, such as Abdul-Rasheed Na-Allah (1996), also suggested that Egúngún originated from the Nupe and that when the Nupe people invaded and sacked the capital of old Oyo in the sixteenth century, they were led by an Egúngún. The Nupe Egúngún are said to have been regarded by the Oyo people as *ara orun* (dweller of heaven) and, thereafter, fled at the approach of the Nupe forces. Though the Oyo people are said to have subsequently been initiated into the Egúngún cult, Adedeji (1970), however, explains that it wasn't until the reign of Alaafin Ofinran in exile that the Oyo people adopted the idea of Egúngún and developed it into a cult used for achieving political purposes.

On the origin of Egúngún among the Yoruba, Adedeji (1981), Layiwola (1986) and Ogundeji (2000) suggest it originated in about the fourteenth century, when Sango, then Aláàfin of Òyó, originated the ancestor worship festival to honour his departed father. Centuries afterwards, the festival had become formalised into an annual event of ancestry celebration, with specialised activities that include dance and displays, among others.

During the reign of Aláàfin Ogbolu, the incessant predatory attacks of the Fulani jihadists led to the relocation of the capital of Òyọ́ from Katunga to Igboho in 1590. (Adedeji 1981) The later resolve by the king, to return the capital to Katunga, led to six high-ranking chiefs reconnoitring the site before the king's advance force. These chiefs, known as the Òyọ́ mesi, were led by the Alapinni, who was also the representative of the Egúngún cult. The chiefs reconnoitred the deserted capital with six ghost mummers who frightened off the king's forces, thus effectively convincing the king that the ancestors and the gods were not in support of the relocation. These ghost-mummers were representatives of their principals and comprised an albino (Alapinni), the leper (Asipa), the hunchback (Basorun), the prognathous (Samu), the cripple (Akiniku) and the dwarf (Laguna). They were all representative councillors of the Òyọ́ mesi. (Adedeji 1981)

According to Adedeji (1981), another member of the Egúngún cult, who was the royal cymbalist, counselled the king to send six famous and trustworthy hunters to investigate the situation at Katunga. The hunters captured the ghost-mummers who were brought to the palace, and they eventually became entertainers under him. The narrative runs that their first public performance in the presence of the Oyo mesi was the enactment of the story of the ghost catcher. (Adedeji 1981)

Other historians, like Oludare Olajubu (1974), a folklorist and Yoruba literature, however, firmly assert that the Egúngún cult was founded, owned, and spread by the Yoruba people. She later recounts various Yoruba oral traditions that explain the origin of Egúngún among the Yoruba, tracing it back to Ile-Ife, asserting that all secret knowledge (*awo*) had a common origin, born at the creation of the world at Ile-Ife. (Olajubu 1980)

The origin of Egúngún, in Odù ifá

Myths on the origin of Egúngún are examined by Adedeji (!970) and Babayemi (1980), with both agreeing that one principal *Odù ifá*, known as *oturupon meji*, explains how Egúngún began. The *Odù ifá* states that whenever a man dies and is buried, his spirit joins the ancestors and becomes an Egúngún. Variants of this *odu* suggest that the term *ara orun* is derived from *ara orunmila*, implying that Egúngún is deified; thus, *ara orun* may not simply mean "dweller of orun," as Akande infers. (Akande A.O., 2019)

According to Adedeji (1970), ẹ̀kú denotes 'the realm of the dead or of spirit beings,' rooted in the *Odù ifá: Odu oworin se (Oworin ose)*:

Aruku, Aruku,
Arukuwoja-mata.
Oku taa gbe roja ti ko ta,
La gbe so sigbo.
Oun la tun gbe wale,
Taa daso bo,
Taa n pe leegun.

Translation:

Aruku (a corpse carrier).
He carried the corpse to the market but was unable to sell it.
The corpse was then thrown into the bush.
The same corpse was later wrapped in a shroud and taken
home and became what we now call the masquerade.

The *Odu-Ifa* narrates how, after *Oworin's* death, his son, rather than giving him a befitting burial, decided to throw his corpse into the bush. This son was eventually afflicted with impotence and, after consulting with *Ifa,* was advised to retrieve the corpse (skeletal remains), take it home and subject it to a befitting burial rite. In response, he located the remains, which he wrapped with a shroud (*ẹ̀kú-Egúngún*) and took them home for an elaborate burial ceremony. This ritual enabled him to later father some children.

The *Odu* explains the origin of a specific belief in the mystery of the Egúngún, explaining the origin of a specific belief in the mystery of the Egúngún, with the Odù demonstrating the thoughts and belief systems of the people, which are embodied in myths, legends, and allegories.

Egúngún festival

The art of masquerading could refer to a ritualised spectacle of performance and the religious–political order, or 'secret society,' that organises within Yorubaland. Masked individuals known as Egúngún are believed to be incarnate spirits who act in compounds, streets, and markets. (Willis, J.T., 2014) These masked spirits, along with their procession of drummers, singers, dancers, and other ritual specialists, arriving in places where people normally engage in social and economic activities, transform these areas into ritual spaces, effectively transforming pedestrians, merchants, and other observers into devotees in the ritual, who must make offerings or face disciplinary action. This event is mostly celebrated with fanfare and pageantry, which explains the festival nature of Egúngún celebrations.

The performance of Egúngún is synonymous with the festivals, which are, in fact, vital liturgical characteristics of all religions. Festivity is a significant aspect of religious ceremonies in the cosmology of the Yoruba people of Nigeria's South-Western region. (Idowu, 1973) The Egúngún festival, a significant religious celebration, is held annually to honour the spirits of the ancestors who are believed to live among the people. It is an ancestral cult that demonstrates the people's belief in life after death. The Egúngún festival time is regarded sacrosanct, with practitioners typically gathering annually from far and wide to celebrate, renew devotion, and pay reverence to the spirit of the living dead.

In most African cultures, religion is usually characterised by several festivals held at various periods to highlight the importance of particular aspects of the religion and to pass on the people's traditions. Religious and cultural plurality has long been a characteristic of human communities, and it has only grown stronger because of modernisation. Particularly for religious traditions and cultures today, the reality of such heterogeneous experience brings both challenges and opportunities. According to Gibson and Stewart, an event must meet at least one

(and preferably more than one) of the following requirements to be named a festival. (Gibson, C.R. and Stewart, A., 2009)

Èẹ́kú Egúngún

Various myths surround the origin of èẹ́kú Egúngún. Some claim the cloth was first used to transport a corpse, symbolising the spirit's return, while others say Egúngún were heavenly beings sent by Olodumare to stabilise the earth, and their èẹ́kú originated from the divine realm (Aremu P.S.O. 1983). Èẹ́kú Egúngún are made of colourful fabrics and may include cowry shells, feathers, horns, and animal skulls. Animal skins and feathers, seen as embodiments of deities, are sometimes used. Some Egúngún feature carved headpieces representing protective spirits (Aremu P.S.O. 2005).

Distinctive features mark the Egúngún ensemble. The innermost layer, 'jepe,' resembles a burial shroud and sits next to the masker's skin. A Yoruba saying highlights this intimacy: 'aso t'o kangun si eegun ni a n pen ni jepe.' The jepe, with netting for the face and hands, fully conceals the wearer's identity. (Fitzgerald, Drewal and Okediji, 1995). Over this, the okolombo tunic, often made from asọ òkè, carries gourds, charms, and amulets.

Atop this okolombo comes the main èẹ́kú itself known as èẹ́kú eegun. It is on this èẹ́kú that the layers of lappets are attached, which whirl and are sent flying as the masker dances. This movement has been referred to by Drewal as a "breeze of blessing" because he observes that the design and movement of the costume are closely related to the choreography of the concert. According to Drewal (1978), the breeze of blessing created by the Egúngún while performing may also be related to Oya, one of the wives of Sango, the god of thunder. Oya is considered the whirlwind of blessing that precedes Sango, the storm. To beautify the èẹ́kú and to make them powerful, the lappets are decorated with patchwork patterns, braids, sequins, tassels, and amulets. The amulets are believed to be endowed with therapeutic power and to protect against enemies at a time when the transformed masker may be vulnerable. However, the main protective amulets are usually worn inside the èẹ́kú (on the okolombo) and not outside.

Discussing *ẹ̀kú* Egúngún, Abiodun (2014) observes that during the annual festival, the masker, who is believed to be the ancestor, is enshrouded in *ẹ̀kú* made up of both old and new fabrics, which could also consist of plain or old, as well as local or imported fabrics. Discussing *ẹ̀kú* Egúngún art in Osogbo, Makinde (2011) submits that the spectators' response to the use of modern, fashionable fabrics adds to their interest and signals positive development. He concludes that the use of local and imported fabrics is now the trend in Egúngún regalia, which is evidence of foreign influence on some aspects of Yoruba culture.

Ademuleya (2002) and Adiji et-al (2017) posit that no material is sacred, but its sacredness is precipitated on its use, whether for secular or religious functions. These scholars observe that valuable textiles are used by the Yoruba in the celebration of the power and presence of their ancestors, in exquisite masquerade ensembles known as *ẹ̀kú* Egúngún. A common Yoruba saying is that *aso igba ni eegun n ro* (the masquerade is usually appareled in trending fabric). It is believed that the Oba owns all the Egúngún, although each belongs to a different lineage. So, the wealth of the king should reflect in the richness of the apparel of the Egúngún. Prosperous family members have been known to decide on and contribute fabrics as fineries on the *ẹ̀kú* Egúngún. In Ipetumodu, Egúngún Ehoro is the family masquerade of the current Apetumodu, Oba Joseph Oloyede, who annually donates rich and current apparel as his contribution to the attachment for Ehoro's ẹ̀kú.

Theoretical framework

The theories of art as agency and the social life of things are integrated in this study to examine the ẹ̀kú as both an artistic form and an economic artefact. The concept of art as agency posits that artworks can function as active participants in social relationships (Gell, 1998). In this context, the ẹ̀kú acts as a mediator between the performer and the audience, the living and the ancestral worlds, and between ritual authority and visual spectacle. Therefore, the ẹ̀kú functions as an agent of transformation and not merely as an agent of concealment.

The concept of the social life of things places emphasis on the movement of objects through the systems of exchange and value (Appadurai, 1986). The textiles used in

the production and annual addition of the ẹ̀kú often circulate through markets, trade networks, and patronage systems before being assembled into the final layered structures. Imported fabrics, locally produced textiles, as well as reused materials, have been known to coexist within a single ẹ̀kú Egúngún. This reflects the complex histories of acquisition and transformation, which establishes the èḳú as a dynamic material archive in which history is preserved through accumulation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative art-historical approach informed by visual analysis and ethnographic engagement. The visual documentation of Egúngún festivals provided relevant data on the form and structure, layering, colour relationships, and material composition found in the ẹ̀kú Egúngún. Observations of performance contexts engendered analysis of movement, spatial interaction, and audience response.

Much insight into the artistic decisions, production processes, and material selection that are crucial to the construction of ẹ̀kú Egúngún was gained through engagements with Egúngún practitioners. Engagement with practitioners provides much insight into artistic decisions, production processes, and material selection that are crucial to construction. Discussions with cult tailors, patrons, and performers illuminate the collaborative nature of the creative process. These interactions also reveal the financial and symbolic considerations that shape the renewal of the ẹ̀kú.

The ẹ̀kú as a mobile work of art

The ẹ̀kú is made from layers of textiles arranged to create volume, movement, rhythm, and visual density. Each layer adds to its overall look, making a surface that changes with the wearer's movements. Instead of being seen as a mere covering for a ritual, the ẹ̀kú functions as a sculptural textile piece that derives its artistic value from the way it is built up and how it is set in motion. The fabrics are arranged using principles like contrast, repetition, symmetry, interruption, and rhythm. The long strips of clothings are attached to create a flowing movement during performances, while appliqué and embroidery are used to highlight certain of its areas. This complex design is a reflection of the Yoruba people's preferences

for abundance, balance, and visual energy. This, according to Thompson (1974), is central to Yoruba and African art. These design choices turn the human body into a moving work of art by giving the ẹ̀kú more visual impact than ordinary clothing or costume.

Colour also plays a crucial role in defining the visual and symbolic impact of the ẹ̀kú. Brightly coloured textiles, metallic accents, sequined fabrics, and patterned materials create dense chromatic relationships that intensify visibility and spectacle. Within Yoruba visual culture, colours are rarely accidental. They are used to communicate status, vitality, ancestral authority, and spiritual energy. Deep red colours, luminous yellow colours, royal blues, whites, on richly patterned textiles are often combined to produce dramatic contrasts that are attractive to public attention, thus heightening the Egúngún's visual authority. Texture is equally significant within the artistic construction of the ẹ̀kú. Velvet-like materials, lace, brocade, damask, fringe, appliqué, and layered embroidery are used to create complex and rich surfaces. When these textured surfaces interact with light and movement, they generate fluctuating visual effects as the ensemble rotates or expands while in motion. Drewal and Drewal (1983) note that the aesthetics of Yoruba masquerades rely heavily on transformation and sensory impact, both of which are intensified through the material richness of the ẹ̀kú. The ensemble therefore functions not only as a ritual attire but as a sophisticated visual system in which colour, texture, and movement are combined to produce aesthetic vitality.

Fundamentally, it is movement that activates the artistic life of the ẹ̀kú. The visual form of the ensemble cannot be fully understood when it is in static conditions, because the meaning emerges through motion. As the Egúngún spins, bends, leaps, and gestures, the textile layers could be seen to expand, collapse, ripple, and circulate around the body, transforming the masquerade into a kinetic sculptural presence. This constant movement creates a changing visual configurations that produce the illusion of spiritual animation of the ancestral embodiment. When the flowing textile strips obscures the masker's physical body, it replaces him from a visible human to rhythmic motion and layered abstraction. Thompson (1974) has described African art as fundamentally performative, which is activated through movement, a concept which is particularly evident in the behaviour of the ẹ̀kú

during performance. The èẹ́kú's kinetic dimension reinforces the observer's perception of the Egúngún as a living ancestral presence rather than as a disguised individual. Through its movement, the ẹ̀kú made to transcends materiality and enters the realm of spiritual and artistic transformation, where the textile, motion, sound, and performance converges into one unified visual experience.

The artistic significance of the ẹ̀kú also lies in its capacity to function as a material archive of memory, lineage, and patronage. Over time, additional fabrics, decorative panels, charms, and embroidered elements are incorporated into the ensemble, allowing it to accumulate historical and social meanings. Older textile fragments may coexist with newly imported materials, creating layered surfaces that preserve traces of different periods of renewal and patron investment. This process aligns with Appadurai's (1986) notion of the "social life of things," in which objects acquire meaning through circulation, exchange, and transformation. Within the ẹ̀kú, textiles become repositories of social relationships, spiritual obligations, and artistic histories. The ensemble therefore embodies both continuity and innovation, preserving inherited traditions while simultaneously accommodating new aesthetic possibilities. In this sense, the ẹ̀kú is not a fixed object but an evolving artistic form shaped by cycles of renewal, competition, and creative experimentation.

Production networks and creative economy

Collaborative efforts among multiple participants are required for the production of an èẹ́kú because it comprises a complex array of components. Textile traders provide fabrics, cult tailors construct the layered structure, embroiderers contribute decorative elements, and patrons fund the overall process. These interactions form a localised creative economy. Just before the Egúngún festival begins, the cult tailors do not sew any other clothes aside from the èẹ́kú Egúngún, and they continue sewing throughout the period until the festival ends, which is why sewing the èẹ́kú is generally quite expensive. The cult tailors are known as **aláràn**á**n.** The textile materials used to construct the main èkú consist of three layers. The innermost layer of the Egúngún masker is called **jẹ̀pẹ́,** which gave rise to *kángun kàngun kángun, asọ tó kángun sí eégún lóńjẹ́ jẹ̀pẹ́*, a popular Yoruba axiom. Next to jẹ̀pẹ́ is **òkolombo,** worn over it, followed by the primary regalia known as **èẹ́kú,** made of

strips of colourful textiles. The foot coverings or shoes, called **ìbọ̀sẹ̀** or **àpabọ̀,** are common to nearly all Egúngún, although some, especially the smaller ones called *kunduke*, are known to go barefoot around town. The hand coverings or gloves used by the Egúngún to hide their hands are called **ìbọ̀wọ́.** The main regalia always includes a netted face covering through which the Egúngún observes. This tightly woven cover is an essential part of the èṣ̣kú Egúngún and is known as **ojú ayé.** All these textile products are an economic investment in the production of ẹ̀kú. Renewal cycles generate demand for materials and labour while artistic innovation is encouraged through competition among Egúngún groups.

The economy of the ẹ̀kú begins with its material production, which generates a chain of income-earning activities before the Egúngún even appears in public. The construction of the ẹ̀kú requires large quantities of textiles, aso-òkè, damask, lace, velvet, brocade, ankara, sequined fabrics, and imported materials, purchased from cloth merchants in local markets. This demand increases significantly in the months leading up to Egúngún festivals, creating seasonal commercial booms for textile traders and fabric suppliers. The **alárànán (**cult tailors) who specialise in sewing ẹ̀kú operate within this economy as skilled professionals whose labour commands high fees because of the technical knowledge required to assemble layered structures such as jẹ̀pẹ́, òkolombo, and the outer ẹ̀kú. Uninterrupted work continues on the èṣ̣kú during the festival season, and they often take precedence over other tailoring assignments.. This raises labour value and cost of production. Other Work on the ẹ̀kú continues uninterrupted during festival seasons, often taking precedence over other tailoring assignments, which raises both labour value and production costs. Embroiderers, appliqué artists, bead workers, and charm specialists are involved in creating decorative panels and attachments. Auxiliary elements like *ìbọ̀wọ́*, *ìbọ̀sẹ̀*, and *ojú ayé* (gloves, socks and face cover) also require individual fabrication. Each step constitutes a separate economic activity, showing that the ẹ̀kú is more than just ritual clothing; it is a multifaceted artistic creation whose production supports a network of artisans and traders.

The economic significance of the ẹ̀kú extends beyond its creation to include its role in festivals and cultural patronage. Egúngún families and sponsors regularly invest in upgrading and expanding the ẹ̀kú each year to uphold their status and visual

prominence, which fuels ongoing economic activity. Contributions from families, community members, and supporters abroad are often directed specifically toward enhancing the ẹ̀kú, covering the costs of new textiles, decorative elements, and structural improvements. During festivals, appearances by Egúngún generate income through honoraria, invitations to perform, and ceremonial visits to homes, where cash gifts are presented as tokens of appreciation for ancestral blessings. The opulent appearance of a well-layered ẹ̀kú heightens its social prestige and increases the financial rewards associated with public performances. Additionally, professionals such as photographers, videographers, festival coordinators, and tourism promoters benefit financially from the visual appeal of elaborate ẹ̀kú costumes, which draw crowds and cultural interest. Thus, the ẹ̀kú serves as both a work of art and a source of income, illustrating the interplay of aesthetics, patronage, and ritual authority in sustaining the creative economy of Egúngún practices.

Tradition, tension, and transformation

Contemporary Egúngún practices demonstrate significant adaptation in response to evolving social and cultural environments. The heightened exposure of Egúngún through public festivals and widespread media coverage has placed greater importance on visual spectacle, leading to the frequent appearance of larger performance groups and more intricate, ornamented costumes. While these innovations increase the dramatic and visual appeal of Egúngún displays, they can also create friction between the desire for artistic innovation and the need to maintain traditional aesthetic values. As a result, practitioners are often engaged in a delicate process of negotiating these competing demands, striving to honour ancestral symbolism while simultaneously embracing creative forms of expression.

Discussion

The ẹ̀kú emerges as a mobile textile sculpture that embodies Yoruba indigenous aesthetics and functions simultaneously as an economic catalyst. Its layered construction, chromatic intensity, and textured surfaces reflect Yoruba preferences for visual abundance, compositional complexity, and symbolic accumulation. The careful arrangement of textile strips, appliqué panels, embroidery, and decorative attachments transforms the ẹ̀kú into a dynamic artistic structure whose aesthetic

authority is rooted in material density. Beyond its visual impact, the making of the ẹ̀kú sustains networks of artisans, including textile traders, *alárànán* (cult tailors), embroiderers, bead workers, and ritual specialists, whose collaborative labour contributes to both artistic innovation and economic activity. The recurring renewal of the ẹ̀kú through the addition of new layers encourages continued patronage, stimulates textile markets, and supports specialised craftsmanship. In this way, the artistic expansion of the ẹ̀kú directly corresponds to economic circulation, reinforcing the relationship between aesthetics and livelihood. The creative economy of Egúngún, therefore, extends beyond performance to encompass material production, artistic labour, and patronage systems that sustain both tradition and innovation. Moreover, the visual competitiveness among Egúngún groups, driven by the desire for distinction and prestige, further stimulates artistic experimentation and economic investment, ensuring that the ẹ̀kú remains a living site of cultural creativity and economic exchange.

Conclusion

To sum up, the ẹ̀kú stands as a pivotal point where art, the economy, and spirituality converge in Egúngún traditions. As a complex textile creation, the ẹ̀kú serves as both a means for ancestors to be represented and as a storehouse of creative skill and financial investment. It's making, brings together networks of skilled craftspeople and supporters, and its ongoing renewal drives the continuous sourcing of materials and the pursuit of evolving visual styles. This process transforms the ẹ̀kú into a visual record and a valuable cultural resource, revealing patterns of patronage, family identity, and artistic change. Egúngún practices, as a result, adapt through ongoing cycles of creative development and cultural dialogue, especially as they respond to modern influences like festival tourism, media exposure, and growing heritage awareness. Examining the creative economy of Egúngún thus requires close attention to the material skills, layered craftsmanship, and collective efforts expressed in the ẹ̀kú. Highlighting the artistic and economic aspects of this ensemble shows that the ẹ̀kú is not simply a performance accessory but a core artistic form through which Yoruba communities express identity, maintain artisanal traditions, and foster economic activity.

The ẹ̀kú emerges as a mobile textile sculpture that embodies Yoruba indigenous aesthetics and an economic catalyst. Its production sustains a network of artisans and reinforces cultural identity. The creative economy of Egúngún, therefore, extends beyond performance to encompass material production and artistic labour.

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