Between Authenticity and Nostalgia

The Making of a Yoruba Tradition in Southern Benin

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This paper discusses the changing status of a Yoruba ancestor cult in the region of Abomey (southern Benin), what the evolution of this cult says about relations with the past, and the entwinement of the construction of a feeling of “Yoruba authenticity” with nostalgia. Through this, I will show how social actors can relate to the past in non-monolithic ways, dividing it between parts of themselves.

SOME ELEMENTS OF CONTEXT

Abomey was the capital of the kingdom of Dahomey from the seventeenth century, and therefore the very heart of Fon country. Until the French conquest, as is well known by historians of Africa (see Bay 1998, Law 2004), the kingdom of Dahomey captured large numbers of slaves, who were either sent overseas or kept locally to work in large plantations mainly involved in the international trade of palm-oil. With the progressive abolition of transatlantic slave trade during the nineteenth century, the kingdom kept more and more slaves locally and exported the product of their work. Many of those slaves were Yoruba, as the Fon kingdom of Dahomey was situated on the very western fringes of the Yoruba world, where the Fon raided villages and small kingdoms. Yoruba identity is thus quite largely associated in the Abomey region with slave origins, since most of the Yoruba families established in or around Abomey were founded by slaves or dependents brought there by the Dahomey army.

The Yoruba ancestor cult whose historical trajectory I will discuss below is the egun or egungun cult. This can be a form of ancestor cult in some regions of the Yoruba country. (On the relative unity of what, partially as a result of a missionary invention, has been designated as the Yoruba world since the nineteenth century, see Peel 2000). In fact, it is diversely associated with ancestors depending on the region of Yoruba country, but in the Abomey region, where it was brought by the descendants of Yoruba deported by the Fon army, as in southern Benin in general, it is entirely considered as an ancestor cult.

Normally starting with sacrifices on the ancestors’ shrine, the egun cult culminates with a masquerade, where the masked ancestors come back to visit their descendants. This masquerade is, as it is almost always the case in Africa, controlled by a male initiatory society. In the last decades, this cult has become more and more a symbol of Yoruba identity and authenticity.

In Abomey, there are many divinities, locally called *vodun*, whose foreign origin is well known and acknowledged. They were brought to the city after conquests or political alliances. This phenomenon can be classically understood in the context of the logic of accumulation of powers of the African “paganisms” (Augé 1982). Some Yoruba divinities (*orisha*) were thus imported to Abomey, in particular during the nineteenth century. Yoruba ancestor cults, however, were not encouraged or even not allowed in Abomey, in particular because of the “assimilationist” nature of Fon slave policy: slaves, dependents, or subordinates (the dichotomy between slaves and masters is in fact too simple to summarize the hierarchical system and the power relations in precolonial Fon society) were instead asked (or forced) to adopt their masters’ lineage customs. Progressively, slaves were integrated at peripheral and subordinate positions in their masters’s lineages. Yet the level of their integration would also depend on their competencies and their status.

**THE GUÉDÈGBE CASE**

In the next pages, I will develop in particular the case of the Guèdègbe lineage, which offers an interesting perspective on the evolution of the *egun* cult during the twentieth century. As Bernard Maupoil showed in his masterpiece *La géomancie à l’ancienne Côte des esclaves* (1943), this lineage was founded by the diviner Guèdègbe, who was a prominent diviner of Yoruba origin at the court of the last kings of Abomey, Glèlè and Béhanzin. At the end of the nineteenth century, Guèdègbe was also the priest responsible for the cult of the Yoruba *orisha* brought back to Abomey by the wars of the kings. His religious position was exceptional, and Guèdègbe was therefore not a slave.

His case actually illustrates well the limits of the Fon “assimilationist” model of slavery, showing the important position that could be acknowledged in the Abomey society to people born of slaves (Guèdègbe’s mother had been captured in Savè, approximately 100 km/62 miles north of Abomey), whose religious capital was important enough to enable them to become dignitaries to the royal court. Guèdègbe thus was the head of an independent extended family since the second half of the nineteenth century, and had himself dependent persons and families under his authority.

In the Guèdègbe family, however, the funerals and the ancestor cult were for decades first performed according to Fon customs, which Guèdègbe and his sons had appropriated. After the Fon funeral rites, a Fon ancestors’ altar was installed to worship a new ancestor. Some elements of Yoruba funeral rites remained present in the lineage ceremonies, added to the Fon rites, signs of a memory in pieces (Bastide 1970) of the “original” Yoruba lineage tradition. But only a Fon altar, an *asen*, was installed for new ancestors.¹

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¹ Two Ade type *egun* twirling their capes. Ouidah, 2006.
Actually, it was only in the 1920s, thus probably more than twenty years after the French conquest of Abomey,\(^2\) that the egun cult seems to have appeared in Abomey. Melville Herskovits is the first to signal its presence in the town. After his stay in Abomey in 1931, he writes that

> the chiefs, though they are not reconciled to it, are preparing to recognize it as a factor to be taken into account as soon as the Egu groups become large and powerful ... In some conflict between a chief and a man who is known to be a member of the Egu, more than common prudence is exercised by the chief’s representatives in settling the dispute, lest the members of the commoner’s group seek redress in his behalf (Herskovits 1938:245).

Actually, Herskovits accounts for the progressive affirmation of Yoruba families and lineages in the Abomean public space after the downfall of the Fon power on the city and the establishment of French colonial rule. Herskovits also describes a performance of the egun masks near the central market of the town, and the emergence of this Yoruba ancestors cult appears as truly tempestuous. One of Herskovits’s informants, of Fon royal origin, actually comments on the performance of the masks quite aggressively: "why should we have them [the Yoruba masks] here, when we have our own tovodu?" i.e., our own way to honor the ancestors. There is no doubt here that "colonial subjects [...] viewed the past from different and varied perspectives" (Lambek and Antze 1996:xiv).

In fact, it is clear that the appearance and first developments of the cult are sources of conflict, although their spread stayed limited to some Yoruba families. Indeed, it is clear from my oral sources that, in the beginning, the egun cult did not concern as many Yoruba families as it does today. For instance, in the first decades of twentieth century, Guèdègbe had forbidden that egun masks perform before his compound. The families that were at the forefront of the emergence of the egun cult were in those days families that recognized themselves as elegun, that is "adepts of egun". The quite relative unity of the groups that were progressively termed Yoruba in the nineteenth century is now well known (Peel 2000). In particular, the Yoruba groups are known to have been culturally and linguistically close, but at the same time to have worshipped different deities and have had different forms of ancestor cults.

In Abomey, however, a series of factors quite quickly produced a favorable context to the spread of the egun cult and its appropriation by a growing number of Yoruba, and even Fon, lineages:

(a) the loss of the social presence and pertinence of the master-slave distinction, and therefore the growing independence of Yoruba former slaves and of their descendents;

(b) the attraction for many men of an initiatory society such as the egun society, in a social context where there were no pre-existent Fon male initiatory societies (see Herskovits 1938:242–49, Law 2004:95);

(c) the numerous deaths of Yoruba women in Fon lineage, where they had been spouses (and thus the matrilineal link of more and more Fon people to the Yoruba).
Thus, during the twentieth century, belonging to the world of the initiates of the egun cult (as well as to the initiates of oro, another Yoruba initiatory society, which developed simultaneously, but whose developments are beyond the scope of this paper) progressively became an important marker of masculine identity among Abomey’s unconverted men, the majority of the population until now. Moreover, the audience of the cult has recently been widened again through UNESCO’s growing interest in Benin, in particular for everything that can be linked to the memory of slavery. This patrimonial interest coming from elite circles has certainly contributed in recent years in the reproduction of the symbolic capital of the cult, in a context which is not entirely favorable to it, since it is also associated with “fetish” practices, and therefore more and more condemned in Christian (especially Pentecostal) and militant Muslim circles.

On the whole, however, the egun cult in Abomey has accompanied the affirmation and recognition of originally stigmatised populations, and has now become a kind of “chevron”, that is, the contrary of a stigma (Javeau 1997, Vienne 2004) associated with the Yoruba, making them the original owners of a legitimate cult. Actually, the contemporary appropriation of the cult by Yoruba lineages which have not known this form of ancestors cult in ancient days, perfectly shows how the egun cult has become an emblem of an alleged “Yoruba tradition”.

For instance, an egun (together with an oro) shrine was installed in the Guédégbé lineage at the end of the 1980s. As stated above, it was Fon funeral rites that were practised there until then, and the diviner Guédégbé had explicitly forbidden some decades earlier that egun masks perform around the compound, showing through this that he did not recognize himself in the emergence of the cult. Actually, as one of the persons responsible for the lineage compound confessed in August 2005, the Guédégbé compound has been since the nineteenth century the head of the Yoruba cults and deities in Abomey, and having no egun (or oro) shrine progressively put into question the legitimacy of the Guédégbé lineage as the head of the Yoruba cults, insofar as the egun cult was gaining a large audience in the town and the surrounding region, becoming over the years the most popular Yoruba cult in the area.

Conserving its place of prominent Yoruba lineage, and its full Yoruba identity, finally required installing an egun (as well as an oro) shrine. The lineage head and his assistants decided thus to come back to the alleged “original” tradition of the family: as they were Yoruba, they had to have been adepts of egun and oro.

(top–bottom)
4 Face of an egun mask walking in a street of Ouidah, 2006.
5 An egun mask addressing the audience during a mask performance in Ouidah, 2003.
Drawing on what had already happened in a series of other “Yoruba” lineages, the lineage authorities thus declared that the lineage had in ancient times been worshipping egun (and oro), and they installed a new ancestors’ shrine combining egun and oro, as it exists in a series of Yoruba lineages in the Abomey region (but nowhere else to my knowledge). This new shrine was installed just beside the ancient Fon ancestors’ altars that had been installed for the lineage ancestors until then. The lineages authorities, however, continued to associate small Fon artifacts intervening in the Fon ancestralization process with the new Yoruba ancestors’ altars. This was because, as an assistant of the lineage head confessed to me, “when you are in someone’s country, you must necessarily perform his ceremonies.” But apart from this ritual concession, the Guédègbe lineage began to practise Yoruba lineage rituals around 1990, on the model of the Yoruba rites which were practised in other Yoruba lineages of Abomey. In 2004, after a Catholic celebration organized before the lineage compound, the coffin of the Guédègbe lineage’s chief was thus carried to his burial site inside the compound by egun masks. The lineage founder’s interdiction on egun masks performing around the compound was then long forgotten.

AUTHENTICITY AND NOSTALGIA

In fact, egun masks seem to have become a major symbol of Yoruba identity in the Abomey region (as in other parts of southern Benin as well). In Abomey today, the association between egun and slaves has been for a long time part of the manner in which Fon people consider the cult (c.f. the anecdote reported by Herskovits, above). In many Fon lineages that have appropriated the cult, it is well known (and reminded with more or less oratory precautions) that it is because of the presence in the lineage of Yoruba slaves in ancient times that the egun cult has been acquired in the lineage. Furthermore, without any contestation of this first perspective, in the lineages that claim a Yoruba origin and a status of “original” egun adepts, the cult is associated not with a past of slavery, but with its alleged familial origins. The cult thus allows its members to revive a lineage past anterior to the experience of subjection and/or slavery, which is de facto situated as a circumscribed moment in a longer lineage history.

Actually, this widespread Abomean Yoruba point of view on the past puts into perspective the slave condition of Yoruba lineages, while underlining that there was something before, the status of slave ceasing therefore to be an essential or ontological attribute of the lineage. The egun cult, rather than underlining an ancient condition of subjection or slavery, here revives or picks up the thread of an alleged familial tradition, supposed to be anterior to the experience of capture and subjection. In fact, the current worthiness of the cult intervenes in many cases as the motor of the rehabilitation of the lineage origins and as the sign of the persistence of a descent. There is thus today a clear claim of one’s Yoruba identity through the investment in the Yoruba initiatory societies, egun and oro, and a claim of one’s Yoruba authenticity through the appropriation of those cults. As we have seen through the Guédègbe’s case, it even becomes difficult to be fully recognized as Yoruba in Abomey today if one is not invested in at least one of those cults.

This form of claim of a Yoruba authenticity through the appropriation of the cult, however, is not unambiguous. In fact, the claim of the persistence of a descent beyond the experience of capture and subjection often entwines, at least among initiates, with a form of nostalgia, as everybody agrees to recognize that contemporary egun masks no longer have the power of the ancient ones. The good old days of the masks capable of pronouncing powerful spells and benedicitions are behind.

Initiates know that, today, the religious legitimacy of the cult is “under attack,” and they must regularly face defections in their own lineages: members of the lineage convert and refuse to continue to participate (and to invest, since the masks are very expensive) in the cult. The disregard of some Christians and Muslims towards ancestors and “tradition” certainly feeds into the nostalgia of many contemporary initiates. Narratives of the past power of the masks are actually evoked as memories or “souvenirs” of the past powers of the initiates, whose cult was more feared some decades ago. Such social conditions of nostalgia are at the heart of what shapes the ambiguous nature of the relations to the past that take place around the egun cult. It is, in many Abomean Yoruba lineages, both a symbol of Yoruba authenticity and an institution tightly associated with nostalgia, since there are many narratives which evoke the past powers of the masks, the past severity of the discipline of the initiates and of the cult organization, etc.

Finally, the feeling of authenticity and the nostalgia shared by many Abomean Yorubas are of course fed also by larger narra-
tives on authenticity and loss that circulate in the Beninese post-colony, but those narratives, and notably the diverse forms of nostalgia that are to be found in the African post-colonies, are beyond the scope of this paper.

Focusing on Abomean Yoruba lineages, I have tried to show here how, depending on the context and discussions, two ways or tropes of considering the past, authenticity, and nostalgia follow one another or entwine. The sentiment of loss, however, does not really undermine the pride of the persistence of a descent experienced by many Abomean Yorubas involved in the egun cult, since the latter occupies, in many cases, a key place in the worthiness of the lineage identity. Nostalgia nevertheless constitutes a memorial relation to the past that cannot be underestimated. Such a situation, where nostalgia and feeling of authenticity entwine, shows in particular that relations to the past are not made of well-constituted blocks (they can mingle sentiments of authenticity and of nostalgia, for instance), and that social actors can sometimes, in some sense, be divided between parts of themselves (Lahire 1998). Between nostalgia for the magical forces of which the preceding generations were the true depositaries, and the conviction that they are the heirs of the original practices of their ancestors, many contemporary Abomean Yorubas alternately mobilise two relations to the past, which are both interiorized, following one another or mingling depending on the context.

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Notes

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1 Regular interviews with Sranon Guèdègbe (August 2005, August 2006, August 2007), Adjaho Guèdègbe (idem), and Mrs. Elisabeth Guèdègbe (August 2007).

2 Regular interviews with Baba Azagoumangba, (late) Balé Sagbadjou, Alagba B. Bocokpè, balè Akankossi, and bua Nondicawo, between 2004 and 2007.

3 The way some friends commented my own initiation some years ago perfectly illustrates this point: “You are a man, now!”

References cited


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