

# Precepts for Tenure Ethics in Yoruba Egungun (Masquerade) Proverbs

by

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## Abstract

Noting and expatiating on a substantial number of close similarities between public office in contemporary society and the Egúngún tradition in Yorùbá culture, this paper identifies Egúngún as symbolic representations of public office holders; and introduces the term 'tenure ethics' to refer to the principles required for proper conduct in public offices that are not of life-long durations. Hence, proverbs traditionally directed at masquerades via Egúngún that guide their conduct during annual public outings were examined. Fourteen of the proverbs were analyzed to yield five precepts for ethical conduct of leaders in government, public service, politics, and business. The precepts are: (1) a public office holder's self-perception as a leader is necessary for proper conduct in public office; (2) public perception of office holders as leaders creates in the mind of the public the justifiable expectation that public office holders shall conduct themselves properly; (3) attached to public offices are special mandatory positional duties and values with which public officers must abide; (4) there are special positional privileges attached to public office; and (5) public office is temporary.

Therefore, this paper advocates a deeper intellectual interest in African cultural festivals and activities to comprehend and propagate embedded philosophical ideas and cultural principles that may be relevant for contemporary social engineering at the national and local level.

## **Introduction: Yorùbá (1) *Egúnguń* Tradition**

The *Egúnguń* festival (2) is always full of sights and sounds that give immense entertainment to all spectators, both indigenes and visitors in every community where it is held. This is however not what is of real importance in the festival. The artistic aspects (3) – costumes, acrobatics, singing, drumming, dancing, community fellowship, and feasting – important as they are, are not the ultimate function of the *Egúnguń* festival among the Yorùbá. Thus when attention is carefully paid to the underlying ideas of the festival, it becomes obvious that we ought to go deeper than the artistic surface if we hope to reach and benefit from the social message that the festival strives to portray (4).

In the indigenous thought of the Yorùbá, nature consists of spiritual and physical phenomena. And reality, in that worldview, is not partitioned; but rather, there is a permanent continuum between physical reality and spiritual reality. In this way, the two aspects of reality are continuously interacting with one another so it is not often easy to separate them in thought and in practice. An aspect of this idea of nature is the entrenched belief that physical death is not the cessation of life for persons, and it is believed that those who died at ripe old ages and who lived morally well on earth, become ancestors, who have now acquired a spiritual existence continue in many ways to participate in the affairs of their families and communities (5), hence one fundamental way in which they do this through re-enacted in the *Egúnguń* festival.

One significant way of referring to the ancestor nature of *Egúnguń* is in their popular cognomen “*Ará òrun ‘kínkin’*” (i. e. ‘Inhabitants of heaven’), and through reflection in the saying: “*Ìyá ẹ̀ni leéguń ilé; baba ẹ̀ni lòrìsà ojà*” (I.e. ‘One’s mother is the masquerade at home; one’s father is the legend/god in the market place.’). In a significant way, parents are held not only in the highest esteem, but also as role models and guardians for their offspring. So, the *Egúnguń* at home moulds the child’s character domestically, while the child relies on the father in the public, and ideally, the child gets its home training from the mother, and its introduction, initiation and guidance into the wider public life from the father, thus every child’s life is thus completely circumscribed by the parents’ life. And analogously, the community’s life is believed to be fully in the hands of the ancestors as they perform their roles from the spiritual world.

Thus, *Egúnguń* enjoy much reverence and adoration from the community in the same measure that people expect much from them. Likewise, their costumes represent the degree of their social status, both as a group and as individuals, thus indicative of the position of *Egúnguń* in Yorùbá culture as the willing homage, surrender, and cheerfully given gifts and provision and presented by the festival crowds and the entire community which highlights the supplications of the people, as individuals and as a community, make to the *Egúnguń* during and after each festival.

From the foregoing, the *Eguṅguṅ* are rightly describable as symbolic public figures in control of the people's social life in Yorùbá culture, and as such, there exists between the people and their *Eguṅguṅ* a social contract.

Furthermore, the Yorùbá know that those in the costumes and behind the masks are living persons among them, and many of them even often know the names of the persons wearing the masks during *Eguṅguṅ* festivals and other outings (6). However, once the *Eguṅguṅ* has emerged from the grove (*igbó igbàlè*), it ceases to be regarded as an ordinary human being; and it has from that moment taken on the spirit of an ancestor, and in its acquired spiritual personality, each *Eguṅguṅ* is regarded as deserving of the respect, support and maintenance of the entire community. However, it is clear to the discerning that in a short while the festival would soon be over and the spirit will be out of the persons who were in the masks. Hence, in a significant way, the *Eguṅguṅ* festival is an annual re-affirmation or re-enactment of the social contract between the ancestors and the community which marks the institutionalization of periodic social commentary and communal appraisal of the community. And also the *Eguṅguṅ* festival provides an opportunity for a review of the performance of each *Eguṅguṅ* in meeting the people's expectation during the preceding year, and provides a time for the *Eguṅguṅ* to interact physically with their patron-communities through entertainment, inspired directives, moral reproach or praise, benediction and gratitude (7).

### **'Tenure Ethics' and the *Eguṅguṅ* Festival**

The term 'tenure ethics' used herein refers to the principles of right conduct in public offices that have fixed not-till-death durations. Such offices may be by appointment, selection or election. As such, tenure ethics is concerned with conduct in positions of authority and leadership that is non-private and thus have shorter than lifetime durations. And ideally, such positions are to be found mainly in government, in national public service, local community service, and organized private corporations.

Those in leadership positions, in such places mentioned above, are in many significant ways analogues of the *Eguṅguṅ*. Like the *Eguṅguṅ*, public office holders are constantly in critical public glare. The community in which they serve always looks up to them as legends and sages, who should be morally upright, above board and honorable persons worthy of emulation by members of the public. Like the *Eguṅguṅ* (masquerades), public office holders always have an aura of mystery created around them such that they are simultaneously known and unknown to the populace. As the Yorùbá say, "*Mòrìwó lẹrì, ẹ ò lè réégún*" (literally: 'You have seen only the palm fronds; you cannot see the masquerade'. That is, 'you cannot perceive the masquerade beyond its mask and outer garments', (sometimes including palm fronds).

In other words, the masking-attire is a permanent veil between the masquerader and the people, in the same way that the bureaucratic appurtenances (trappings) of public office normally shield the office holders from being fully perceived and comprehended by the public. The atmosphere of mystery impairs and impedes the public's knowledge of the office holders as well as the 'secrets' of public office; such as equally exist in *Igbó Ìgbàlè* (the *Eguṅguṅ* grove). Thus, public office, like the *Eguṅguṅ* tradition, is also heavily shrouded in myths, a feature that constitutes part of the firewalls of security, awe, secrecy and secretiveness erected around both public office and the Yorùbá masquerade tradition.

And like masquerades, public office holders are maintained at the expense of the public that echo the Yorùbá invocatory proverb "*owó olówó leégún ñ ná, asọ aláso lògà ñ dà bora*". ('The masquerade spends others' money, the chameleon is clad in others' clothes').

Public office, without doubt, is the engine of governance in any society. This is even more so in a democracy where the public sphere is an arena of conflicts in a glass house, and the reason why proper conduct in public offices is of ultimate importance to the social life of any polity and democratic organization. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, however, public officers' conduct is not always ethically proper. Worse still, it is not always easy or practicable for the generality of the people to admonish and correct erring public officers. This is why in each free society; there exist social critics who from time to time, at great risk to their persons, express the people's feelings about the conduct and performance of their leaders and public officers. In traditional Yorùbá society, the *Eguṅguṅ*, among others, perform this corrective role, and in doing this, they serve as a medium of social criticism that include teaching social values and principles of good conduct.

In Africa, public office holders in a large majority of cases tended to give the worrisome, but wrong impression, that African people are inherently incapable of managing the public sphere properly. This is more clearly seen in the governance of the states on the continent in the last fifty years or so. Most conspicuous and pernicious of the problems of Africa's public office holders' conduct are those of incompetence, corruption, fraud, despotism and various forms of abuse of office, basic issues in the management of the public sphere that Africa must tackle well as a necessary condition for the continent's growth, development and survival.

Contrary to the impression that may be suggestive from the prevailing situation, however, African cultures, in their various manifestations, cannot but contain sound ethical principles for the proper conduct of those charged with the responsibility of managing the social life of the people. It is in this belief that the *Egúnguń* aspect of Yorùbá culture is being explored to re-discover and bring a critical awareness of the rational social values and ethical principles contained in it that can be profitably blended into formal, informal and non-formal African educational and leadership training programs. Furthermore, this is shorn of an uncritical longing for the past (8), since the *Egúnguń* tradition, in one form or another, is still very current in most African societies and actively participated in and patronized by most African governments for tourist attraction and foreign exchange earning purposes.

### ***Egúnguń* Proverbs and Tenure Ethics**

In contrast, *Òwe*, Yorùbá proverb, has been defined as “a speech form that likens one thing or situation to another, highlighting the essential similarities that the two share” (9). Conversely, this is more so in a culture that attaches much importance to the spoken word and speech generally. Hence, according to Nicolaisen, “traditional proverbs are truly the prismatic verbal expression of the essence of folk-culture” (10); and in Seitel’s view, proverbs are “short traditional...statements used to further some social end” (11).

Proverbs are generally held to express universal, unexceptionable truths such that their use in a discussion or argument is tantamount to an appeal to established and incontrovertible authority, often incisive in their claims and terse in their formulation, and generally deduced from a close observation and sober examination of life, life forms, and habits, the environment and natural phenomenal. And in concerns for the functions of proverbs, William Bascom (12) identified the following four: i: mirroring the culture; ii: affording members of the society an outlet for psychological and emotional tensions that could not be expressed in other speech forms; iii: aiding in education and socialization; and iv: maintaining conformity to accepted patterns while simultaneously validating institutions, attitudes and beliefs.

Thus, the focus of this discussion is on the public office holders rather than on the public. Hence, the *Egúnguń* proverbs of interest in this context are those directed at *Egúnguń* and are intended to provide guidance and standards of acceptable conduct for them in the discharge of their duties and the corresponding enjoyment of their social status. In other words, the proverbs of our interest here are those that pertain to the setting of standards for social interaction and ethics, and for which *Egúnguń* are used as a medium of public education as people watch them perform at their festivals. In particular, we shall not be concerned here with what *Egúnguń* say to the people, but rather focus on the Yorùbá ideas of public office ethics that have been encapsulated in what is said proverbially to and about their *Egúnguń*.

Thus, fourteen *Eguṅguṅ* proverbs have been collected for analysis under five headings with each heading prescribing a set of principles and precepts for ethical conduct in public office.

### **Analysis of *Eguṅguṅ*-directed Proverbs**

- Precept 1: *Ethically proper conduct in public office requires a correct self-perception as a leader or an elder by the office holder.* The following proverbs present this precept:

. i. *Ẹni tí à ń wò, kì í wòran.* (The actor should not become a spectator. That is, a person who is being looked up to lead should not abdicate his/her duties or derelict in them. In other words, a person who is the focus of public attention should not lose focus.)

ii. *Eégun senu jéjé mutí.* (An *Eégún* drinks with care.)

iii. *Jéjé leégún àgbà ń jó.* (A mature *Eégún* /an *Eégún* elder dances with care.)

The position of an elder is important among the Yorùbá and thus warrant a set of behavioral expectations from whoever is honored with the label not set by age or wealth; but rather an ascribed public social status based on proven integrity, demonstrated wisdom, community service, and knowledge. Thus for the Yorùbá, eldership is a social-value title, a position that requires grace, etiquette, refinement and decorum in comportment, in speech, in appearance and in all activities. So whoever is to be called a leader or an elder must not be given to rash, violent or indecent behavior. It is also expected of such a person to be disciplined in all forms of consumption – food, drinks, and sex. And in this same connection, such persons must also be moderate in their acquisitive tendencies, because an *Eguṅguṅ* should not behave like a ‘*Tòmbòlò*’ – a juvenile imitation of *Egúngún* – who eats the freely supplied food until it defecates on itself (“*Tòmbòlò bólobólo, òjòlèlè jẹ móinmóin suára*) (i.e. one who indulges in the privileges of office to the point of messing up).

Consequently, leaders, elders, public office holders must keep away from relationships and companionships that could impugn their own integrity. Hence, they say: *Eegun kò gbòdò tawó àgbà dówó ajá.* (I.e. The bone should not pass from the elder to the dog. An elder should not be a cohort or benefactor of persons publicly known to be of questionable/shady character). Leaders ought, therefore, to avoid actions that could cause them and those associated with them serious embarrassment or scandals for which they might need often inconvenient high face saving. And in line with indigenous Yorùbá characteristics, therefore, leaders should always calculate in reticence (13). Therefore, a person in a leadership position who falls short of these expectations relegates him/her self to a ridiculous position as indicated in the following general behavioural proverbs:

[‘*Ohun tó yèni ló yèni; okùn ọrùn kò yadiẹ.*’ (i. e: ‘What is befitting is what is befitting; a necktie does not befit a chicken.’) ‘*Àgbàlagbà tó sàgbàdo módìì, sọra rẹ dẹgbé adie.*’ (i.e: ‘An elder who ties corn to his waist turns becomes a mate of chickens.’) ‘*Àgbàlagbà kì í se lán gbàlán gbà kiri*’ (I.e: An elder does not hobble about aimlessly’)]. Therefore, it is expected of an elder, a leader, a public office holder, to maintain the dignity of his/her position (i.e. *Ibi àgbà làá bágba* / it is in an elder’s place that an elder is to be found).

The message of these general proverbs is that any position of leadership carries a corresponding load of responsibilities that must be creditably borne by whosoever occupies it. Thus failure to so carry the attached responsibilities of one’s public office could bring one to disrepute in a variety of ways, and therefore a leader, or public office holder, is expected therefore, to see his office as a sacred position that should not be debased by those who are privileged to occupy it. Hence a public office holder, therefore, who correctly perceives him/her self as a leader/an elder will not engage in aimless, purposeless, disgraceful, and irresponsible behavior, or indulge in any form of socially despicable or morally reproachable conduct; such a correctly self-perceived public office holder will always be in full control of his/her body and mind.

Among the Yorùbá, it is believed that the white chicken is the elder among chickens. That is, as they say: ‘*Adie funfun làgbà adie.*’ But of a leader or an elder who belittles or deprecates his or her position, they say: ‘*Adie funfun rẹ kò mọra rẹ làgbà.*’ {i.e: ‘His or her white chicken does not know itself as an elder.’} The important thing in this context is that an elder or a leader must have a sense of shame in order to be able to behave ethically in public office. This is because a person without a sense of shame can do anything without bothering about its goodness or badness, its rightness or its wrongness. That is, a person without a sense of shame cannot have a sense of morality, which is the foundation of ethical conduct in life. And as the Yorùbá say: ‘*Eni tì kó nítijú lẹ su sọjà.*’ {i.e: a person without a sense of shame can openly defecate in the market place.} Thus such a person will have no inhibitions or qualms to misbehave and mess up in public office which is not expected of an elder or a leader. Clearly then, to do well in public office therefore is a necessary condition that one must accurately comprehend the ethical demands of public office and behave accordingly; otherwise, one comes to shame and disrepute in the long run. Hence, this is part of what the Yorùbá mean when they say: ‘*Eni tólójú lojú n tì.*’ {I.e: ‘Only the discerning can have a sense of shame.’}.

- Precept 2: The privileges of public office derive from what the public expects from holders of such offices.

The proverbs under this heading highlight the Yorùbá view that respect and performance are reciprocal values of public office. And in return for the respect and provisions given, the leader is expected to conduct him/herself competently with dignity in office; while in failing the leader might lose the respect of the people, and forfeit his/her official privileges. Accordingly, among the relevant proverbs here are:

*Eéguń kì í sẹ̀ni à ń gbá lójú.* (i.e. an *Eéguń*, an elder or a leader/public office holder, is exempted/protected from public assault, attack, or challenge) which refers to the idea of state or official immunity that is enjoyed by incumbent public office holders that protects them from public harassment and embarrassment in the course of performing their duties. Undoubtedly, the immunity is conventionally intended to ensure that the serving public officer is neither distracted nor obstructed from the performance of his/her duties by frivolous and diversionary squabbles and litigations for actions or inactions that are not clearly or strictly of a personal nature. This privilege, as has been witnessed in Nigeria, for example, has very often been abused by many office holders who erroneously see it as a cover for committing illegalities and as a tool of oppression and repression. However, as noted above, maturity is expected of those who are to be honored with positions of leadership because an elder masquerade must dance cautiously (i.e. *Jéjé leéguń àgbà ń jó*). Hence, although the Constitution or other institutional arrangement offers him/her protection from arrest or prosecution for certain wrongs committed or allegedly committed in the course of discharging his/her official duties, a public office holder who wishes to retain the respect of the relevant public and perpetuate his/her good name and social prestige will not abuse the privilege of immunity. Failure to realize this point by many Nigerian leaders in recent times, for instance, had led to their eventual loss of position and public disgrace. In the same manner, it occurs occasionally that an errant *Eéguń* who indulges in extremely unbecoming conduct while on a public outing is unmasked by spectators and sometimes arrested and prosecuted. In such cases, the *Eéguń* had lost its ancestorship with all the honor and prestige that go with it. In this regard, public officers are being enjoined to realize that the privileges of their offices are not inalienable rights; rather, they are performance-secured benefits.

*Bééguń ẹ̀ni bá jóore, orí a yá atókùn un rẹ̀.* (A masquerade's good performance encourages its conductor or guide). For example, good performance endears a leader to his/her people, supporters and followers. It is to be noted in this connection that contrary to the practice common among many African leaders, genuine acceptance and support by the public cannot be achieved through any form of bribery or coercion (the 'settlement' syndrome); rather it is through hard work and exemplary good performance that a leader can hope to secure the constant respect and support of the people.



Since *Eguñguñ* performances are normally in the open, it is only in terms of public evaluation that each *Eguñguñ* is to be judged and marked for further patronage or despise. Analogously, leaders are to be judged by their public performances rather than by other set of subjective, secret or parochial criteria. In this way, leaders who fail to perform up to the level of public expectation can be neatly and objectively rejected. Conversely, if leaders realize this correctly and know that the public is sufficiently discerning as to be prepared to enforce their judgment on the conduct of each leader or public office holder, there would be greater commitment to excellence, service and accountability in the conduct of national, communal and corporate affairs. In this regard we may say that the fear of public opinion is the beginning of political/public office wisdom.

- Precept 3: Public Office Entails Mandatory Positional Duties.

Over and above the moral duties required of all persons, certain positions place additional special duties on those who hold them. These additional duties, which are mandatory, are prescribed as the necessary consequences of the benefits, advantages, and privileges that are attached to each positions/offices for the enjoyment of their holders.

Thus, this is part of the ethics of public office that such duties should be regarded as categorical imperatives that must be obeyed with the seriousness and sense of responsibility that is humanly possible to muster in all situations, involving the following *Eguñguñ* proverbs:

*Isó inú èkú, àruñmóra* (the fart inside the cloak must be tolerated). Quite often there is exceptional pressure on public office holders arising from many quarters, and also public office holders are the targets of frivolous, false, baseless, pointless and destructive criticisms from members and segments of the public being served by office holders.

In unity, performing as an *Eéguñ* is pleasurable and rewarding; but there are concomitant displeasures like situations that apply to public office holders. Thus the pressures and often-undeserved displeasures of office must therefore be borne with equanimity, gallantly and without any complaints whatsoever. And accordingly, the challenges (pleasant and unpleasant), the pressures, and the displeasures of public office must be seen as the necessary entailments of public service that every office holder must expect to encounter and be prepared to endure with maturity and a calm disposition.

In order to act in conformity with the ethics of public office, a public officer experiencing the fart in the cloak should courageously bear his cross. To quit, either by launching self-exculpatory reprisal attacks, or sulking under the pressure, or resigning from the office would amount to an immoral (selfish) abdication of one's duty post and betrayal of public trust. Tenure ethics requires, therefore, the qualities of strong character (to weather the storms of office), infinite perseverance, and unrelenting commitment to the right and good always (to withstand the pressures of office) in incumbent and aspiring public office holders.

*Èbìtì tó pa eéguń kò jèbi; kínni Owólàńké ń wá ní ìdí ẹyìn.* (The trap that killed the masquerade is not to blame; what did *Owólàńké* (a masquerade) want to do with the palm-fruit bait in the trap.)

Public office is an arena of limitless temptations for those occupying and given the high regard in which those who occupy any public office are held. However, it is expected that they will always not fall into the temptations. Should any one of them fall into temptation then, the consequent ignominy is well deserved, and the most common of these temptations are various forms of official and financial corruption. For their own sake and in their best self-interest, therefore, public office holders should keep their hands clean always, and in order to justify their positions and the accompanying privileges, public office holders must always be above board in their public and private conduct.

Clearly then, public office holders should strive always to be compliant with all relevant legal rules because the law, ideally, is not a respecter of persons. In this connection, the Yoruba proverbially say “*bÍ òfin bá dá àjànàkú, fọnrọń òwú kan a máa gbê erin dè*” (i.e. ‘An elephant floored by the law can be chained with a single piece of cotton thread’).

- Precept 4: Public Office Holders are Presumptively Entitled to Appropriate Privileges of Office.

Yorùbá culture grants that to every public office are attached certain privileges for the smooth and unhindered performance of the duties of such offices. The privileges also are regarded as deriving from the high esteem of such offices in the perception of the people, and in return for their duties and services to the society, those occupying public offices should, in the thinking of the Yorùbá, not be begrudged for their enjoyment of their official privileges.

Thus the *Eguńguń* proverbs that inform this precept seem to have a focus similar to the precept of diplomatic/official/state immunity discussed above, and in this connection the *Egúngún* are considered to be deserving of protection from any form of assault, disturbance, or harassment in the course of performing their public functions.

And accordingly, *Eéguń kì í silé wò ká nàá lóré; baba kò sònà níbí là á wí* (i.e. “An *Eéguń* is never whipped for entering a house in error; rather, we redirect him”). The importance of this proverb is that the innocent mistakes of a public office holder in the course of performing his/her legitimate duties ought not to be punished. This is not to say that the errors should not be mentioned or pointed out to the officer concerned. However, shortcomings by officers should be constructively criticized and appropriate suggestions made to enable them to do better. This follows from the conviction of the Yorùbá that no one is perfect, such that we should always assist one another to improve on our respective performances rather than finding faults and seeking punishment for every mistake made. There should be the spirit of critical cooperation between the leaders and the masses in the society if positive progress in an atmosphere of cordiality is to be achieved.

In return for the respect and cooperation from the public, public office holders are expected to take criticisms with maturity and in good faith. They should not feel too full of themselves; as such an attitude towards criticism could alienate them from the public. Thus an *Eguńguń* who is recalcitrant when told that he/she had strayed into a wrong house might be disgraced to the extent of being unmasked in extreme cases. In effect, this privilege of protective respect is not an absolute entitlement for the *Eguńguń*, because their reciprocal self-respecting conduct validates their entitlement to this and other privileges. Thus, the public might confront an unduly combative public officer with an equally combative attitude towards a situation that rather than enhance the beneficial performance of the public officer might hinder it to the detriment of the officer’s career and the welfare of the public.

*Eguńguń kì í sẹ ni à ń gbá lójú.* (i.e. “An *Eguńguń* does not deserve to be slapped”.) This, as with the foregoing proverb, reiterates the position of the Yorùbá on the issue of respect and protection of public office holders, and as guardians of the society, they deserve the respect of everyone else in the society. This is not only to ensure an unhindered performance of their duties, but to also demonstrate the high esteem in which leaders ought to be held. More often than not, the respect is not for the officers as such, but for the office that they occupy and for the institution they represent.

The point of this proverb, therefore, is that public offices should not be desecrated through the disrespectful treatment of those who occupy them. However, this is also a case in which each office holder has to earn the enjoyment of respect and protection from the public. Where a particular office holder abuses his/her position to the extent that the public loses confidence in him/her, such an officer forfeits his/her claim of entitlement to the privilege of immunity from litigation, assault, disrespect, harassment and embarrassment from members of the public. Since respect is naturally reciprocal, it is expected that public office holders will always in the course of performing their duties show respect to others and that they will not be unnecessarily belligerent, contentious, or confrontational.

*“A kì í kó iríra atókùn, kí á dìgbò lu Eguṅgún* (i.e. You cannot hate the masquerader’s guide and then collide with the masquerader” (14). This proverb points to the high regard the Yorùbá place on institutions rather than on the particular functionaries in such institutions. Thus, even when one does not like a policy of government or a constitutional institution, those charged with the responsibility of implementing such policy or running the institution deserve to be respected by the public, not for their own sakes but for the importance of the policy or institution to the society. This further places on public office holders the duty to earn public’s respect ethically.

*Owó olówó ni Eguṅguṅ ñ ná.* (i.e. “The *Eguṅguṅ* spends other people’s money”). During their public outings, *Eguṅgún* depend on public patronage for their sustenance. In addition, the cost of robing *Eguṅguṅ* is the responsibility of others rather than that of the *Eguṅguṅ*. The *Eguṅguṅ* is thus said to be oblivious of the cost of its costumes in the same way that a corpse does know the cost of its shroud. (i.e. “*Eguṅguṅ ò moye à ñ rẹkú; òkú ò moye à ñ ragò*”.)

A discerning masquerade is expected to know that he owes his well being to the pleasure of his patrons. As such, every *Eguṅguṅ* that intends that he should continue to be catered for should always perform to the expectation of those who cater for him. This is because even though he is regarded as an ancestor with much respect, his patrons are still his masters and benefactors. This is because “*Bótìwù kímú alágbàro gùn tó, ẹni tó gbóko fuṅ un sì lògá ẹ*”. (i. e. “No matter the length of a farm labourer’s nose, the person who gave him the farmland to till is still his master”). And therefore, public office holders ought to realize that although they are the actors, they are servants of the people. Only their serving the public satisfactorily legitimizes the sustenance, patronage and maintenance they enjoy from the public treasury wherein the sole purpose of being materially and financially maintained by the society is that they could be free from routine human daily worries so as to perform their duties to the society well. When they fail or derelict in their duties, therefore, they forfeit the moral right to further enjoyment of this privilege, and even when they are performing their duties well, leaders should not be extravagant, wasteful, or remarkably ostentatious at the expense of the public treasury.

## The Temporality of Tenure

One thing that most public office holders, especially Africans, often forget, and hate when they remember it, is that anybody's time in office is limited. African leaders seem to be unable or unwilling to accept the idea that all public offices are held for specified periods of time. Recently, The Associated French Press (AFP) reported that "A five-million dollar prize is to be launched in London aimed at promoting good governance in Africa, by enticing the continent's leaders to leave office instead of clinging to power" (15) The assumption here, perhaps, is that African leaders cling to power because they lack money to spend after leaving office. This is doubtful, considering the amounts of money owned by several sit-tight African leaders in various foreign currencies in several countries outside the African continent. It seems to be more plausible to say that many African leaders fear to think of having to leave office and lose the privileges and immunity of office because they had misbehaved in several fearsome ways during their tenures.

Why so many African leaders have so grossly misbehaved in office will be an interesting phenomenon to investigate. This is however not the focus of attention in the present discussion. And additionally, the Yorùbá have long realised that being continuously mindful of the temporality of public offices will always guide serving leaders and other public office holders both in their conduct and in the discharge of their duties. This message is conveyed in the following *Eguńguń*-directed proverbs:

*Eni Eguńguń n lé, kó mó a rójú; bó ti n re ará ayé ló n rẹ ará òrun.* (i.e. "Those being pursued by *Eguńguń* should persevere because the people from heaven also become tired like the earthly people"). This is to say that no matter how powerful and strong anyone in public office is, he/she will sooner than later become weak and tired. It is therefore only a matter of time before the pursuit - that is, the exploitation, the persecution, the manipulation and the victimization of the hapless people by those in leadership positions - comes to a natural end.

*Ohun tó n tań leéguń oduń; omo alágbàà n padà bò wá fowó ràkàrà jẹkọ.* (i.e. "The annual *Eguńguń* festival is something that will come to an end; the children of the traditional chief in charge of the festival and the *Eguńguń* tradition will return (from the festival) to buy the food that they erstwhile got free and in abundance during the festival.") Similarly, at the end of a public office holder's tenure, the privileges, the largesse, and the public sustenance will cease and he/she will unfailingly have to become self-fending. This is to caution public office holders against developing appetites, habits and standards that they may be unable to maintain when they return to be on their own.

Leaders and other public officers who had cultivated extravagant tastes and habits while in office often never want to leave office because they realize that such tastes and habits will not be maintainable for them in private life. They thus either try all means to perpetuate themselves in office for as long as they can or they abuse their positions to amass wealth illegally in the hope that such ill-gotten wealth will sustain their unrealistic standards when they are out of office.

The positive pedagogical point of this proverb is that public office holders should learn to live in moderation within their legitimate incomes from which they make reasonable provisions for post-tenure life. Doing this will enable them to avoid corruption while in office, and prevent frustration, financial embarrassment and disgraceful decline in standards of living when they are no longer in office.

*Eguṅguṅ tó má a padà dèniyàn kì í rorò nínú èkú.* (I. e. “The *Eguṅguṅ* (masquerade) that will become a human being again is never hostile while in the mask.”) Since public office is ideally never held for life, leaders and sundry public officers ought to be constantly aware of the fact that they will yet become ordinary citizens living among the people they once ruled or exercised power over. Hence, in order to be able reasonably to hope to live peacefully, happily and without fear after their tenure, public officers should learn and strive not to be callous, corrupt, dishonest, unresponsive or disrespectful to their people while in service. This proverb thus advocates humility, moderation and respect for persons as virtues that leaders and public officers should cultivate and live by for the sake of that time when they must cease to be in office and become ordinary citizens again. Unfortunately, many African leaders and public officers appear never to put this precept into practice because they often behave as if they will remain in office forever.

## **Concluding Remarks**

It has been noted severally that the Yorùbá are an essentially pragmatic (16). Hence, often guided by principles and practices that have previously worked well for them. Such successful precedents become canons of shared values that are set up as standards of social interactions and morality. In many cases such precedents become linguistically immortalized as proverbs (17) or other expressions of folklore such as stories. (18)

In this paper attention had been focused on proverbs that occur in the context of the *Eguṅguṅ* tradition and festival among the Yorùbá of Nigeria to highlight and articulate the ideas of leadership for those who occupy top positions in public service, which the Yorùbá have always cherished and advocated. In the pursuit of its objective, the paper took *Eguṅguṅ* (masquerades) as symbolic representations of leaders of the society. This was done in the context of the Yorùbá view of the nature of reality in which a physical realm and a spiritual realm form a continuum in continuous interaction with each other.

The focus had been on the ethical principles expected to guide *Eguúguú* during their annual public festivals that transferred analogously to the leaders of the society to serve as guides to their conduct while in office. Hence the fourteen selected proverbs were analyzed to yield five precepts in which an ethics of public office could be built. The precepts that emerged from the analysis of the *Eguúguú* proverbs and other related explanatory proverbs are:

- A public office holder's self- perception as a leader is necessary for proper conduct in public office;
- Public perception of office holders as leaders creates in the mind of the public the justifiable expectation that public office holders shall conduct themselves properly;
- There are attached to public offices special mandatory positional duties and values with which public officers must abide;
- There are special positional privileges attached to public office;
- Public office is temporary.

Considering the low level of governance and public service in many African nations today, it will not be an overstatement to say that the precepts above are as relevant now as they could ever have been in traditional Yorùbá society. The peculiar problems of post-colonial Africa require that relevant progressive aspects of African traditional cultures be creatively repackaged and re-introduced into the continent's socialization media. And in particular, recharging the generality of the people with the time-proven values and virtues of various, we see African peoples through an articulate cultural education as a major concern of African governments. This is to replace the current seemingly meaningless displays of cuisines, dances, songs and attires at wasteful picnics, carnivals and jamborees misleadingly dubbed "cultural festivals" at which nothing culturally fundamental is taught to the people.

As rightly noted by Bewaji (19), most discussions of African arts "have ignored the critical, analytic and philosophical implications of the artistic objects of their study in any serious depths, and in many cases and discussions of Africa and, its Diaspora arts by Western scholars did not anticipate any deeper meaning, even while recognizing the religious, social and cultural content of the objects of arts being examined." Thus an example of such objects of art that Bewaji alluded to is the *Eguúguú* mask (20).

Constructively, the fundamental lessons, virtues and values, articulated in this paper, can be profitably harnessed for the promotion of improved governance and public service delivery. And more generally, the precepts articulated above, and similar ones, can be developed into educational materials for national orientation and sustainable development. In view of the great potentials of indigenous cultures for the transformation of contemporary society, it can be strongly advocated that African and foreign interests in African arts and cultural festivals should be accorded a more serious and studious attention beyond the current merely ephemeral sensuous pleasures of the sights and sounds of the art objects and festivals.

In conclusion, this paper has tried to show that the notorious mismanagement of the public sphere by most African leaders and public officers in post-colonial Africa is not inherent in either the cultures or the nature of African people. The menaces of inept governance and public mismanagement appear most likely to owe their origination and perpetuation to a widespread lack of proper cultural understanding and a deep lack of education in the nature and principles of tenure ethics especially among the political and professional elites on the continent. As this discussion has shown, there is, among other things, an implicit Yorùbá indigenous text on tenure ethics in the *Eguṅguṅ* festival. It is quite possible, and indeed to be expected, that other festivals in Africa contain similar and other valuable implicit texts from which could be articulated credible indigenous ideas for theories of good governance, sustainable development, and efficient social organization that will be most readily comprehended by most African people and also possibly adoptable in other societies (21).

#### NOTES AND FOOTNOTES

1. See: Abimbola, K., *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, Birmingham: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2005, Òkè, M., “Logic of Yoruba Conjunction”, *OYE: Ogun Journal of Arts*, vol. 2, 1989: 116 – 120, Gbadegesin, S., *African Philosophy: Traditional Yorùbá Philosophy and Contemporary Realities*, New York: Peter Lang, 1991; Atanda, J. A., “The Yoruba People: Their Origin, Culture and Civilization”. In *The Yoruba: History, Culture and Language*, J. F. Odunjo Memorial Lectures, Series 5, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1966; Ojo, G. J. A., *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Perspective*, Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1966, Olubayo Lawore, *Cultural Ethos of the Yorùbá*, Ibadan: University Press Plc., 2004, & Internet websites for detailed accounts of the identity of the Yorùbá – their language, religion, traditions, population, and socio-cultural status nationally in their homeland, Nigeria, and globally in their Diaspora.



2. Abimbola, K., *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account* Birmingham: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2005, Gbadegesin, S., *African Philosophy: Traditional Yorùbá Philosophy and Contemporary Realities*, Bewaji, J.A.I., *Beauty and Culture: Perspectives in Black Aesthetics*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2003, Ajayi, I. O., *Odun Egúngún ni Ile Kaaro-Oojiire*, Ibadan, Nigeria: All-Gold Publishers, 2005.
  
3. This is what is always highlighted and emphasized during National and International cultural shows in which Nigerian Masquerades always inevitably feature. A very recent typical example is “Abuja Carnival, 2006”. For a view of such artistic aspects, see: <http://www.virtualmuseum.info/collections/collectioHome.asp>), <http://www.rootsandrooted.org/egun.htm>, and Bewaji, J. A. I., *Beauty and Culture: Perspectives in African Aesthetics*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2003:
  
4. See: Ajayi. I. O., *Odun Egúngún Ni Ile Kaaro-Ojiire, Op cit.*, and the following: <http://www.virtualmuseum.info/collections/collectioHome.asp>, and <http://www.rootsandrooted.org/egun.htm>, and
  
5. Ajayi, I. O., OP. cit, Gbadegesin, S, Op. cit., and Oyeilumi, Babalorisa Adeyemi Efundeji “Egun (Ancestors) set the standards”, at: <http://www.rootsandrooted.org/egun.htm>
  
6. Ajayi, I. O., Op.cit.
  
7. Oyeilumi, Babalorisa Adeyemi Efundeji, “What is Egungun”, at: <http://www.rootsandrooted.org/egun.htm>,
  
8. Òkè, M., “Cultural Nostalgia: A Philosophical Critique of Appeals to the Past in Theories of Re-Making Africa”, *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2006: 332 – 343, (Internet Access: <http://www.njas.helsinki.fi/contents/vol.15num.3.html>).
  
9. “The Good Person: Excerpts from the Yorùbá Proverb Treasury”, at <http://libr.uul.edu.2000/yoruba/yoruba/...>
  
10. Nicolaisen, 1994: 197, in Yusuf, Y. K., “Yoruba Proverbial Insights into Female Sexuality and Genital Mutilation”, *ELA: Journal of African Studies*, 1& 2 : 1997: 120. See also Oladeji, Niyi, “Proverbs as Language Signposts in Yoruba Pragmatic Ethics”, *Second Order (new series): An African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1988: 45 – 57; and Lawuyi. O. B., “The Tortoise and the Snail: Animal Identities and Ethical Issues Concerning Political Behaviors Among the Yoruba of Nigeria”, *Second Order (new series): An African Journal of Philosophy*, (new series), vol.1, no. 2, 1988: 29 – 45.

11. Seitel, 1984: 124, in Yusuf, Y. K., *ibid.*
12. Bascom, W., “Four Functions of Folklore”, *The Study of Folklore*, edited by Alan Dundes, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965: 279 – 98. See also Oladeji, Niyi, *Op. cit.*, and Lawuyi, O. B. *Op. cit.*
13. Olubayo Lawore, *Cultural Ethos of the Yorùbá*, *op. cit.*
14. Isaac O. Delano, *Owe Yoruba*, Ibadan: University Press Ltd., 1979: 32.
15. *AFP Journal Internet*, 26 October 2006.
16. Oladeji. N., 1988, *Op.cit*; Abimbola, K., 2005, *Op. cit.*
17. *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)) for instance says: “A proverb is a pithy saying which gained credence through widespread or frequent use. Most proverbs express some basic truths or practical precepts”.
18. Lawuyi, O. B., in *Second Order*, 1988, *Op.cit.*
19. Bewaji, J. A. I., *Beauty and Culture: Perspectives in Black Aesthetics*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2003: 2.
20. Bewaji, J. A. I., *Beauty and Culture*: 88.
21. Such as discussed in Carola Lentz, “Local Culture in the National Arena: The Politics of Cultural Festivals in Ghana”, *African Studies Review*, Volume 44, Number 3 (December 2001): 47 –72.