

Proceedings
of the

**Father Kevin Carroll
Seminar 1994**

Edited by: R. I. Ibigbami Bolaji Campbell



TECHNIQUES AND PRACTICES OF
YORUBA WOOD CARVING

JOEL 'LADE ADEYANJU

This essay discusses some of the basic techniques of traditional wood carving practices among the Yoruba. It attempts to explain why certain carved images are decorated. It also appraises the contributions of Father Kevin Carroll's experimental Workshop to the development of wood carving tradition in Nigeria. The study evaluates the styles and themes of traditional carving in general.

The Significance of the Study

The Yoruba carver has continued to serve as a mirror of his environment, culture and the mythology of his society. Similarly, there are immense resources in traditional art especially carvings which has hitherto remained untapped. One of the justifications of this study is that many contemporary Nigerian Artists are ignorant of its constituent elements, and connotation.

Since Leo Frobenius (1913), in his book The Voice of Africa, first drew attention to the high quality of bronze, terracotta and stone carvings of Ife, several publications have appeared on Yoruba Art. By 1964, Cole and Thompson (1964) had been able to collect enough materials to publish a sizeable bibliography of Yoruba sculpture.

Adugbologe

Adugbologe was the most famous carver of the great Yoruba town of Abeokuta. He was a renowned producer of masks for the Egungun cult, and also statuettes of twins (ere-ipeji). (Fagg and Plass 1973 p.90). He died in 1945.

Having given these brief notes on some of the prominent carvers of Yoruba land, it is necessary to describe the types of wood which the traditional carver employ in expressing their creative endowment.

Beecroft (1976 p. 84-85) explains that wood has been used for carving for over 5,000 years. He describes wood as a 'living' thing until it is cut down for carving purposes.

There are both soft and hard wood. The hard wood comes from trees with broadflat leaves. Examples are Oak, Okota; and chestnut or castaned. The soft ones are from trees with narrow, resinous leaves as Pines and Hemlock.

Medium hard wood are known as Yew or Taxus. The woods are carved when soft, although the process of seasoning may sometimes harden it.

The most common wood used for carving in Yoruba-land are 'Iroko' (Chlorophora excelsa); 'Aberinberin' (Richonidendron africanum) also called 'Erinmado' 'Ogbo' and Ogbungbun; 'Ire' (Funtumia elastica); 'Omo' (Corilia Milleri) Ogono (Khaya) 'Ayan', (Aspelia africana). 'Ayan' or 'Apa' is used for carving drums, verandah posts, and door panels. (Dalziel 1948).

Khaya is used for carving mortars, 'Iifa' devination trays, bowls and door panels.

'Omo' (Corida Milleri) is used for carving house posts and drums; 'Ire' for verandah posts, figures twin statuettes and ritual utensils. Lawal (1989 p.112) states that 'Ire' is believed to have a high level of spiritual "sensitivity". Hence it is not surprising that images and 'ritual objects

are some of the characteristics of his work. His works could still be found in Obo-Ile village as of 1964. Most of them have however disappeared into foreign museums and private collections. He died in 1954 at the age of 75. (See Carroll 1967 p. 86).

Bamidele

Bamidele, son of Arowoogun was Lamidi Fakeye's master. In Fakeye's description of his masters work, he comments that this remarkable carver carved with both hands. Even then, Bamidele's works lacks the sharpness of features characteristic of his father's work. His carvings are therefore more deeply carved with the quality of a three dimensional work. It should be mentioned here that Bamidele's work generally reflects solid masses. An example of his carving is the equestrian figure. While in the Catholic Workshop at Oye Ekiti, he produced over sixty three works made up of door panels, cribe sets, madonnas, chests, posts and so on.

Olowe of Ise

Olowe can be described as perhaps one of the best and most original Yoruba carver of this century. In the 1930s, he carved a group of works for the palace of Ogoga of Ikere in Southern Ekiti. The carved figures represent Ogoga himself enthroned with his beaded crown. His most senior wife was carved standing behind him and a warrior on horse back standing to his left while another (back view) gaily decorated, was carved standing on his right. Thus Olowe has graphically depicted the palace life in a compositional setting. This style is perhaps one of the best representation of his carvings. (Fagg and Plass 1973 p.91).

Two major books exclusively devoted to Yoruba sculpture were published by Kevin Carroll, and Frank Willet in 1967. Since then other equally important books have been published by William Fagg, Farris Thompson (1971), John Pemberton (1982) and Henry Drewal (1984b). Inclusive are several journal articles, exhibition catalogues and Master's and Doctoral dissertations by both foreign and indigenes scholars. Although most of these publications have concentrated on the historical and iconographic aspects of Yoruba carvings, this essay is a bye-product of a recent field investigation on the techniques and practises of traditional wood carving in Yorubaland particularly in the last decade.

A brief discussion of some reputable traditional wood carvers will be pertinent at this stage as this serves as a veritable background in our understanding of this unique artistry that has attracted much seminal discourse in recent time.

Lamidi Fakeye

Easily the most renowned Yoruba wood carver of the twentieth century, Lamidi Fakeye was born into a family of wood carvers in Ila Orangun in 1925. (Carroll K. 1967 p.13).

Lamidi, a fourth generation Yoruba carver, is perhaps the most celebrated Neo-traditional carver in Africa. His fame has spread far and wide from his humble home to France, and several parts of the United States of America. In 1947, a workshop on traditional crafts was set up by the Catholic Mission at Oye Ekiti. Father Carroll who coordinated it invited him to the workshop. This was an opportunity for Fakeye to produce carvings both for the catholic church and other traditional institutions, until he was able to set up his own workshop in Ibadan. It is significant to note that Lamidi Fakeye was encouraged to carve foreign European theme in traditional form and style. A Typical example of

Lamidi's carving of this era is "Mary". In one of his recently carved figures, Oduuwa which marks a complete departure from the traditional style of depicting the head 'Ori' in the ratio of 1:3 or 1:4, this present carving appears to be more realistic, the changes noticeable are probably the result of his contact with the West. (Fakeye 1988p 154).

Bamigboye

Bamigboye has been described as one of the greatest Yoruba carvers. He was highly respected as 'Elepa' Mask carver of Omu in Ilorin Kwara State. Many of Bamigboyes carvings have been identified by William Fagg, a leading scholar of Yoruba Art. (For illustration, see fagg and Plass, 1973, p.91 and 92). A general description of Bamigboye's carvings culminate in such prominent features as the elongation of the neck, hooked nose, flared and distended ears and protuberant lips.

Arowoogun

Dada Arowogun in the words of Lamidi Fakeye (1988 p. 142) is the greatest Yoruba carver that ever lived. Having observed his carving of a woman breast-feeding her child, and a dog cleaning the infant's faeces with its tongue simultaneously "I decided there and then to learn to carve like this remarkable man". Arowoogun was also a carver of Masks whose distinct style of carving consists of delicately marked lines and robustness characterized by bulbous forms. Some of his early carvings include Mother and Child which was published by Carroll and dated around 1919. Another work titled King on Horse back was dated 1953. Arowoogun's carvings are easily recognizable because he makes use of Fex caps very often. The crested coiffure and intricately carved motifs

The Training and Style of traditional Carvers Training.

In the past, an individual becomes a carver because he was born into the profession. Just like the apprentice carvers learn on the job, he also runs errands, sharpen tools and carries woods from the forest. Later on, simple objects like dolls, ladders and trays etc. were given to him to improve his skills.

Carroll (1967 p.91) confirms that posts, doors and figures were carved under the supervision of the Master Carver, Arowoogun. But in the end, the Master claims credit for the work. It is often difficult to attribute carvings to an individual except where stylistic features are traceable to a particular artist. William Fagg (1965 p.31) identifies the works of Olowe and Arowoogun as a result of the presence of such characteristic features.

The Yoruba Style

Schapiro (1953), describes style as the constant form or constant element in a given work of art that identifies the work of a given individual, group or period. Although this essay is not concerned with style, it is important to stress that features like proportion e.g. heads, $\frac{1}{3}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ to the whole body), the large and protruding eyes, the flattened nose, with a wide base, bar lips, elaborate hair-do and marks, like 'Pele' (three vertical marks). 'Abaja' (three horizontal marks) or 'Gombo' (lines running from the side of the head to the chin) etc have been used in identifying individual as well as regional styles of carvings. (Adeyanju, 1990 p.18 and 19). The regional style and substyles are briefly described as follows:

are usually carved from the wood of the tree because of its sensitivity.

'Aberin berin' (Richoni-dendrum africanum) is used for carving dolls (Omolangidi), twin figures and other various types of masks.

'Iroko' (chlorophora excelsa) is a softwood. Carvers use it immediately it is felled because it hardens after seasoning. Verandah posts, doors, mortars, bowls, trays and many other materials are carved from Iroko tree.

Bascom (1973 p.75) describes the traditional Yoruba carver as having the ability to attain a spiritual depth in his work as a result of personal inspiration. Without a rough sketch or outline, the carver visualizes the image in the wood to be carved and proceeds to realise it by first blocking out the shape and delineating the forms. The carver is able to make this visualization possible as a result of his training. From his master, he acquires various techniques of carving. In most cases, this technique result in the production of a fixed style which broadly speaking identifies the generality of Yoruba carving. The continuity in the production of Yoruba carved forms is made possible because of the existence of Yoruba carving guilds. Two of the most popular ones are: Ajibogunde and the Opolulero.

The Ajibogunde who trace their ancestry to Aha (Old Oyo Empire) seem to specialize in carving of dolls, statues and masks. The Opolulero who hailed from Iwata are said to specialize in carved posts. However, this is not to say that these guilds did not produce other carvings outside their specialization.

out with big adze to bring out the shape of the figure. The second phase is known as 'Aletunle' (clarification) the shape and forms are further clarified with a smaller adze and made distinct. During the third stage known as 'Didan' or (smoothing) the leaf called 'Ipin' (*Ficus asperifolia*) is used to smoothen the carving. During the fourth and final stage, 'Finfin' (delineation) lines are incised with knives and made distinct (See Adeyanju 1990 unpublished, Carroll 1967 1967, p.21-26, and Fig. 76 to 79. Thelma and Newman 1974, p.286-288).

Most carvings from Yoruba land are monoxylous, the carver starts with a block of wood, and what finally emerges, without any attachment is the completed form. The basic tools employed in carving are several sizes of adzes and small knife. Sometimes a chisel and hammer are used in addition, a hook-shaped knife is used to hollow out small cavities like the back of masks. Sometimes, a hot poker bores holes into the work.

Measurements are made by handspan. With a large adze, the carver chips away excesses, blocking out areas until the form takes a rough shape, the carver then makes use of

The Oyo Style

The 'ere-ibeji' statuettes from Oyo sub-style are generally elongated, they are smooth and rounded with facial marks.

Carvings from Egba-Egbado sub-style are slightly more realistic with full cheek and lips. Frequently the pupils are pierced. Sometimes there are three marks on the forehead.

Carvings from Igbomina Ila sub-styles have slightly elongated face and frequently with high rise hair-do, and a subtle smile or grin. (Adeyanju 1990 Unpublished).

Having described the training and style used by carvers, a similarity runs through the process of producing a carved piece.

The Carving Process (Techniques)

The Yorubas believe that the trees from which they carve an image has a life of its own. The 'Iroko' (chlorophera excelsa) for example is believed to have strong spirits dwelling inside it. As a result sacrifices are made to the 'spirits' believed to live in the trees to ensure the success of the carving. After the tree has been felled it is cut into small chunks and taken back to the village. In some cases the bark is removed and the general shape of the item to be carved blocked out. Sometimes the carver finishes his carving in the forest under special arrangement. In some cases, the carving is done in the grove of the cult or the shrine of Orisa which eventually makes use of carved object. More often carvers produce their works at home. The Yoruba carving process can be divided into four phases. They are; 'Ona lile' 'blocking out' The wood is roughened

means of transportation and as instrument of warfare. The gun motif reminds one of the introduction of this weapon into Yorubaland in the nineteenth century.

Some other representations are in form of animal figures for example those associated with mystical or religious activities. Monkeys, snakes, leopards, Elephants and lizards are inclusive.

Ritual furniture include 'Odo Sango' (carved mortars) 'Opon Ifa' also a carved divination bowl.

Ritual implements include 'Agba Ogboni' used by (Priests of the earth goddess Igbin used by (Obatala priests) and 'Gbedu' used by (Osugbo priests) are also carved to emphasize their sacredness.

Apart from the above themes, architectural sculpture is encouraged because of the abundant supply of trees in the rain forest areas where Yorubaland is situated. Some examples are posts, lintels, door-frames used in palaces and temples.

Some Reasons why certain Carved Images are Decorated

Some of the Reasons why carvers decorate finished carving emanate from the desire to enhance the aesthetic quality of the work. In Yoruba culture, the good things of life are appreciated. Hence both men and women express their feelings aesthetically in their mode of dressing and in the application of body adornments. Body markings, tattoos wearing of chain are some of the common examples.

The carver in like manner equally adorns his carved pieces to further beautify them so that it becomes more attractive and appealing to him and the observer of the carved object.

FINE/ARTS UNIVERSITY I.A.

three main colours, they are cream, rose and brown.

The combination of these three colours when carved separately, can be glued. The result is possible because thorn is soft.

Themes

Notwithstanding the religious basis of a good majority of Yoruba wood carvings, most of the themes are taken from everyday life. Free standing carvings are usually in form of human and animal figures, standing or seated, sometimes performing a recognizable activity. On door panels and house posts, groups of figures may be represented.

According to Roy Sieber (1966) traditional African sculpture can be regarded as "Art for life's sake" because of its close link with those cultural mechanisms on which depends the maintainance of the social and spiritual well being of the society. A mother and child figure for instance, may symbolise the protection which the society (represented by the child) expects from a divinity (represented by mother).

Various types of themes found in Yoruba carving are centred on the human figure, especially with women performing different tasks including kneeling down carrying a gift bowl or breast feeding a baby. Figures such as these, reflect the maternal and life sustaining roles of women in traditional Yoruba society. There are also samples of carvings that represent Yoruba deities and goddesses. Such figures as Yemoja, Osun and Ova, have been carved on shrine doors and house posts.

Male figures are carved either standing or holding a gun. Sometimes they are carved sitting on horse back. This symbolize the prestige attached to the horse, and also as a

credited to Yoruba carvers, and to the artists of Africa as a whole. It should be noted that Kevin Carroll invited Lamidi Fakeye one of the celebrated Neo-traditional carvers to participate in the experimental workshop. Fakeye's inspiration in carving forms began before his contact with Arowoogun and his son Bamidele, to whom he was apprenticed. Credit should therefore be accorded the late Kevin Carroll for the interest he had in Fakeye and in African Arts.

It should be noted that unlike the 1897 punitive expedition and the destruction of art works in Benin, the product of the Oye-Ekiti workshop were bought from the artists. This remarkable gesture is worthy of note and should be credited.

Father Carroll's, greatest achievement is in the realization of his vision of bringing to light the Yoruba traditional carvers. Unlike the Portuguese exploitation of Benin artists, who were presented with foreign materials to execute European themes for commercial purposes that suited the European taste, Father Carroll's workshop encouraged the Yoruba Carvers to carve foreign themes in traditional Yoruba style.

Conclusions

The importance of traditional carvers in the society cannot be over emphasized. They have made their contributions by carving pieces that serves as reminders of what obtained in their own time.

Of significance to artists are the techniques employed in carving, which has penetrated into the contemporary periods. Artists therefore have various ways of benefiting from carved pieces. They can draw them, imitate the carved pieces by producing replica in wood, stone, and clay or

Decorations are attached, incised or applied to carved pieces. Notwithstanding the fact that religion and aesthetics do influence the nature of the types of decorations of wood. The carved image are meant for religious purposes may have an inset of glass in its eyes, or real human hair on its head. Some may have cowrie shells glued to some parts of the body. In Yoruba culture the 'Ire Ileji' twin statuette play a significant role in the religious and social life of the people. Just like the Makonde Masks and the Dan Masks are regarded as sacred figures.

Decorations in form of lines, striations and sometimes colours are employed by carvers in Yorubaland. Some of the names as identified by Adeyanju 1990; Aremu, 1988, are 'Onilawiniwimi' (Intricate lines), 'Iru eku' (rats tail), 'Onibo' (relief carving) and many others. In order to confirm whether the different types of decorative motifs which carvers employ serve any purpose in the enhancement of beauty, 'bu Iyi kun' Adeyanju (1989) isolated some of the decorative elements from the carved piece and found that the carved pieces (sculptures, dood carvings and houseposts) looked better with decorations than without.

It should be noted that some societal norms can also be gleaned from carved forms just as the Egyptian hieroglyphics. They seem to serve as social reminders of the acceptable standards of the norms and believes of a given people

The significance of Father Kevin Carroll's Workshop to Nigerian Art

The interest of Father Kevin Carroll in art and aesthetics found most vivid expression in the Oye Ekiti Workshop. His major contribution can be

metals. They can add and subtract whatever features they wish for the present times.

It appears that the numerous Orisa, and other deities which the Yorubas believe have control over certain portion of their lives will continue to encourage the representational aspects of art. Wood carving essentially has served this role as a medium of expression. Unfortunately, the carving tradition is on the decline. For example, technology has fashioned new carving tools which are fast replacing the traditional types of adze and knives. The modern tools may make the carvers work ^{regretably however} more easily, ~~the~~ traditional touch of carving will continue to disappear.

Similarly, carvers are getting more enlightened and prefer to have modern education rather than pursue with zeal, the art of traditional carving. The sons of the celebrated carver Fakeye the Neo-traditional carver is an example. Fakeye now experiments with realism in his approaches, an example of this in his recent work Oduduwa - which stands in front of the Oduduwa Hall of the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife.

Efforts should be made to encourage the traditional carvers through organized exhibitions. The study of their works and especially the decorations on them may serve as a source of inspiration to younger artists.

It is also suggested that more workshops be organized especially those that encourage the carving of objects using traditional motifs, just like the Late Father Kevin Carroll did in Oye-Ekiti in 1947.

- Adeyanju J.L. (1990) Decorative Elements in Yoruba Wood Carving. Unpublished Thesis. Masters of Arts. Fine Arts Department. O.A.U. Ile-Ife.
- _____ (1990) 'Ona' Decorations in (Yoruba) Arts and Crafts. Oritamefa Proceedings. An International Conference on Yoruba Art (ed) Moyo Okediji. Fine Arts Dept. O.A.U. Ife p.92.
- Aremu P.S.O. (19) "Decorative patterns as important factors in Evaluation of Lamidi Fakeyes' Carving." in Yoruba Images Essays in Honour of Lamidi Fakeye. (edited) Moyo Okediji. Ife Himanities Society. p.123.
- Bascom W.L. (1973) "A Yoruba Master Carver: Duga of Ioko" The traditional Artist in African Societies edited by W.L. D'azevedo, Bloomington; Indiana, Indiana University Press p.75.
- Beecroft G., (1976) Carving Techniques. B.T. Batsford Ltd London. 84-85.
- Carroll, K.F. (1967) Yoruba religious Carving: Pagan and Christian Sculpture in Nigeria and Dahomey. London; G. Chapman p.12, 21-26 86, 91, 107.
- Dalziel S., (1948) The useful Plants of Tropical West Africa Crown Agent, London.
- Drewal (1974b) "Gelede Masquerade; Imagery and Motif". African Arts. 7(2) 95-96.
- Fagg, W., and Pemberton J. (1982) Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa. Alfred Knopf New York.
- Fagg W. and Plass M. (1973) African Sculpture and Anthropology. Studio Vista/Dutton p.90,91.
- Fagg, W. (1965) Tribes and Forms in African Art. Tudor New York. p.81.
- Lamidi Fakeye - Personal Interview (May 1989).
- Lawal B. (1974) "Some Aspects of Yoruba Aesthetics" The British Journal of Aesthetics London No 15, Vol.3, p.239-249.
- Lawal, B. (1977) "The Living Dead". Art and Imortality Among the Yoruba of Nigeria". AFRICA 47(1), p.50.
- _____ (1989) "A pair of Ere Ibeji" (Twin Statuettes) In Kresge Art Museum Bulletin Vol.1, p.11-12.
- Schapiro, M. (1953) "Style in Anthropology Today" edited by G. Kroeber. New York.

Siebar, R. (1966) "The Visual Arts" In The African World. edited by R. Lystad. New York.

Smith M.W. (1967) The Artist in Tribal Society
The Free Press Glencoe, New York.

Thompson R.F. (1971) "Black Gods and Kings" UCLA.

Thelma and Newman T.R. (1974) Contemporary African Arts and Crafts on site working with art and processes
George Allen and Unwin Ltd. London p.286-288.

Willet, F., (1967) Ife in the History of West African Sculpture. London.