Yoruba Woodcarving: New Characteristics, New Uses

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Abstract
Yoruba traditional woodcarving has existed for immemorial generations, though the perishable nature of woodcarving makes it impossible to ascertain when it actually started. It is one of the most prominent and profuse art practices of the Yoruba. It is used majorly to service the pantheon of Yoruba gods like Sango, Ogun, Ifa, et cetera, cults like Oro and Ogboni including other religion-inclined worships and acts of veneration. It is also used as an architectural support in the palace and in the houses of Yoruba title holders. Since the contacts of the Yoruba with the agents of westernization such as colonialism, urbanization, education, new technology, Christian religion etc., the traditional Yoruba woodcarving has changed to contemporary whereby it possesses new characteristics and new uses. This paper, therefore, aims at focusing on the transition of Yoruba woodcarving from traditional to contemporary. It takes a cursory look at the contemporary characteristics and uses of the Yoruba woodcarving that make it different from its traditional forms. Data for the study were sourced from secondary literature and oral interviews The works of a two Yoruba woodcarvers were examined and analyzed using

formal and contextual methods, the result of the study found that, the contemporary woodcarving now have dimensions of elongation, abstraction and texturisation and they are now mainly used for adornment of homes, decorative pieces and as a souvenirs. The conclusions were drawn based on the outcome of the analysis.

***Keywords**: Contemporary woodcarving, traditional wood carving, Yoruba woodcarving, new characteristics, new uses*

1. Introduction

The Yoruba people occupy majorly the Southwestern geo-political zone of the present day Nigeria. They spread southwards of Nigerian borders to the People's Republic of Benin and Togo and are sub-divided into sub-groups such as Egba, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ijesa, Ibarapa, etc. They are a people that have been acknowledged for their rich and composite culture. The culture of the people has revealed their peculiar political system, social activities and organizations, economic lifestyles, religious beliefs, art practices and their cosmos. This cosmos is about their spiritual and temporal environments. These two environments have been very conducive for the formation of their various socio-cultural traditions and artistic creativity.

The diverse art practices of the people are products of these socio-cultural and religious beliefs of the people. There are abundant literatures that testify to the fact that the Yorùbá are the most prolific art-producing people in the south of the Sahara Africa (Bascom, 1969; Fagg and Pemberton III, 1982; Willett 1993; Lawal 1996, etc.). According to Pogoson (1991) the Yoruba have a rich varied artistic tradition, more copious than any other ethnic

group in Nigeria. The Yoruba art practices for which they are world-acclaimed include, pottery, weaving, textile design (tie and dye), beadwork, metalwork and woodcarving. The most widely renowned art practice is woodcarving. In corroboration with the above, Adepegba (2007) notes that the art of woodcarving has been found to be the most phenomenal of all the Yoruba art form going by its impressive scale of production and diversity of expression.

The materials available in their environments for the production of their diverse art equally influence their art productions. As for woodcarving, the Yoruba occupation of the rain forest parts of Nigeria where the abundance of wood is an invaluable asset plays an evidential role in their profuse production of woodcarving. The physical environment is not the only motivation for their woodcarving, their belief in the existence of beings in the spiritual cosmos of the people contributed to the production of their woodcarving. As such, the works are mostly representational symbols of worship and veneration of gods and ancestors who dwell in the spiritual realms but pay intermittent visits to the physical world. In line with this, Underwood (1964) asserts that Yoruba woodwork is an expression of likewise of a deity or spirit.

Yoruba artistic tradition is dynamic and has embraced changes brought about by external factors. According to Okediji (2008), the Yoruba perceive themselves as perpetual pilgrims and this is reflected in the constant change and transformation of their art forms. Due to contacts of the Yoruba nation with agents of westernization like education, Christianity, travelling, colonization, new technology, etc., their woodcarving art has changed and is now referred to as neo-traditional woodcarving. It is also referred to as contemporary woodcarving because its characteristics reflect

what is present now. These new characteristics of the art have also resulted to its new range of uses. This paper aims at focusing on modern characteristics and uses of the Yoruba woodcarving that make it different from the usual traditional forms. The works of Bisi Fakeye andAyanladun Ayandepo will be examined in the course of justifying the objectives of the study.

2. Traditional Yoruba Woodcarving

In the primordial Yoruba setting, traditional woodcarving is a specialized profession and the knowledge of carving skill was transferred informally by apprenticeship from the master to the young learner. The main material for woodcarving was wood and this include species like, *omo*, *iroko*, mahogany, *oroo*, etc.; and the tools for carving were locally fashioned by blacksmiths and they include adze, u-gouges, and v-gouges, knives and local mallets (Bisi Fakeye, personal communication, 2006).

The carvers were important members of the society and were patronized by the traditional rulers and their chiefs to carve door panels (see Plate 2), house posts, walking sticks, stool, etc. Also, they were majorly patronized by the diverse religious associations and cults as carvings were both in high demand and in regular use for the service of the pantheon of their over four hundred gods. As a result, the commonly carved forms and motifs are *Opon Ifa* (divination trays) *Iroke Ifa* (tapper) *Ere Ibeji* (twin commemorative figures) mask and headdresses (Plates 3),*Ose Sango* (Sango's wand), shrine sculpture, *Ogbon*i drum (Plates 4), *Esu* figure, etc. (Adesanya, 1999).



Plate 2: Carved door panel, Osi-Ilorin. Source: William Fagg (1982).



Plate 3: Epa masquerade headdress, Ekiti Region. Source: The Newark Museum (2012).



Plate 4: Large drum of the Ogboni cult, Ijebu-Ode. Source: William Fagg (1982).

2.1. Characteristic of Traditional Yoruba Woodcarving

It must be noted that there are individual carver's style and sub-regional styles of Ekiti, Oyo, Abeokuta, Ketu and others. Yet, there is a common canon that differentiates the Yoruba carvings from other carvings from elsewhere. This includes the peculiar rendition of hair coiffure; costume (waste cloth, buba and sokoto); line textures and patterns, etc.

The common denominator also includes the depiction of pieced eye pupils, nasal and aural channels, facial makings and the1:4 head to body proportion of figures. Other characteristic of the traditional Yoruba woodcarving is depiction of social activities like palm wine tappers, traders, equestrian figures, etc. Some of these depictions reflect the happening in the society. The works are also usually symmetrical and frontal.

2.2. Yoruba Woodcarving: New Characteristics

It must be noted that the contemporary Yoruba woodcarving did not start where traditional Yoruba woodcarving ends but a transformation of the former. This change began in early 19th century. According to Adepegba (1995), the 19th and 20th Centuries have brought immense changes to the African life. The forms inherent in traditional African art before the contacts with the compulsive agents of westernization, became modified, therefore new styles that conform to European standards and proportion become the order of the day. Since art became a subject taught in walled schools as against the tradition apprenticeship method, new guidelines and principles for producing artworks, new perimeters for evaluating them and new platforms for sales of artworks are presented. Formats of executing artworks also changed and this also affects the visual language of our art.

One of the moments that redefined the Yoruba woodcarving was the Oye-Ekiti workshop organised by the Catholic mission in 1947 as spearheaded by father Kelvin Carroll and O'Mahoney where some Yoruba carvers were made to produce Christian themes in the traditional forms. The workshop produced the likes of Lamidi Fakeye (Carroll, 1969). According to Adepegba (2005), the carvers from the workshop produced several door panels, house posts and independent figures (see Plate 6) for institutions and private collections.

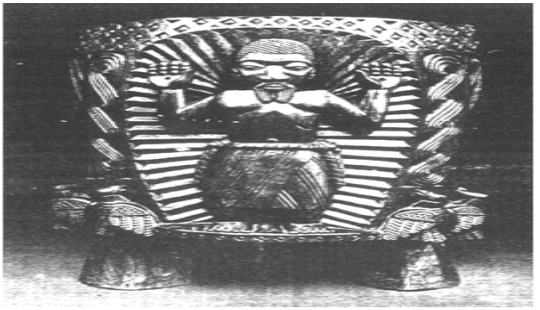

Plate 6: Baptismal font showing the Rising Christ by George Bamidele in 1985. A product of Oye-Ekiti experiment. Source: Frank Willet (1971).

Yoruba woodcarving now bears new characteristics. A world of difference now exists between traditional and contemporary Yoruba woodcarvings even though both coexist. One very indicative characteristic of traditional Yoruba woodcarving is its usage in the service of the pantheon of Yoruba numerous gods and other acts of worships and veneration. In other words, the art was essentially functional, either serving as religious symbols and utility or decorations in the king's palace. Following the vitality of acculturation as promoted by the aforementioned agents of westernization, Yoruba cavers started to experiment with the ideal of art for art's sake. Contemporary Yoruba art now provided the artist a way to broaden his artistic horizon to suit emerging realities.Formally trained artists also influence traditional carvers. Dike (2003) asserts that there is departure from linkages of art with religion or ritual worship to aesthetic, expression of ideas and values and social comments.

Contemporary Yoruba wood carving now combines all of these with modern functional and utilitarian purposes, and also for art-for-art's sake. The use of new tools has gradually contributed to the changes. Yoruba woodcarving

> process requires different tools. The most commonly used of the tools are locally fashioned by blacksmiths or by some of the carvers themselves who doubled as blacksmiths. Nowadays, there are many imported tools such as V and U gouges of different sizes (see Plate 7), chisels, adzes and mallets for woodcarving. Jigsaw, sandpapers, grinding machines and drilling machines are equally used for intrinsic shape and sophisticated finishing. The modern Yoruba carvers seldom make use of stone to sharpen their tools; they now make use of imported metal filing tools. (Bisi Fakeye, personal communication, 2006).

Woodcarvings in contemporary Yoruba also enjoy improved finishing and preservation by virtue of the availability of modern wood-working materials. Sometimes, foreign wooden frame are also used to prop the finishing of contemporary relief woodcarving (see Plate 8).Different and rare wood species of different sizes needed for various works, serving different purposes are also made available through the ease ofmodern transportation. They also employ realism and abstraction alongside the Yoruba traditional form.

Though, woodcarving is a subtractive type of sculpture, contemporary wood carvers use complementary means to prop the qualities of their works. The use of metal earrings and stands, and marble bases is now common (see Plates 12 and 13). This is in a bid to increase the visual appeal of the works. Then, pigments generated from earth and plant substances were used to add colour to some of the carvings, but now the use of enamel paints and wood finishes are popular. Other characteristic features of contemporary Yoruba woodcarvings are found in how it borrows, on purpose, elements from other cultures it interacts with.

To the contemporary Yoruba carvers, woodcarving as a profession does not only give them recognition in the society, it also serves even more as a means of economic sustenance and livelihood. The modern wood carvers are patronized chiefly by individuals (including the foreigners), governments and private institutions, Galleries and Museum owners. Training to become a carver is not limited to apprenticeship but also through Student Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES), workshops and other formal methods (Adepegba, 2007).

2.3. New Characteristics: New Uses

The fact that there are new characteristics as an upshot of the modern and contemporary nature of Yoruba woodcarving necessitates new uses. A modification in patronage has led to change in uses. According to Jegede (1983), patronage in the modern sense is now a more organized affair. Neo-traditional wood carving now serves more as furniture, decorative pieces, containers, architectural adornment (see Plate9), game boards, gift items, insignia of office, *et cetera.* This new lease of variant usage gives room for the new choices of themes somewhat different from what they used to be.

The exposure of wood carvers like Bisi Fákeye and Ayanladun Ayandepo to Westernization helps them to employ a variety of contemporary themes, which are non-representational, but tell modern stories of socio-political experiences, economic hardship, moral decadence, tribal sentiments and religious fanaticism, and other vices in the society. The contemporary carvers, like social critic, try to provide answers to the problems of their society and its existence through their thematic outbursts. These themes are similar to those of the contemporary avant-garde artists working in other media. Some other themes are mere

adaptations of traditional carvings for aesthetic purposes. Examples are equestrian, kneeling, and mother and child figures. Recurring contemporary Nigerian art themes like drummers, dancers, flutists, mother and child, couple and sellers are also common in their themes (Adepegba, 2007).

Innovative themes also characterize some of the contemporary Yoruba woodcarvings. Such innovative works as against the traditional carving forms include kola nut bowls for guests, games board with animal and human Marquette's, gifts items, political totems, bangles, wall hangings, paper weights, portraiture among others. In the traditional setup where animals are depicted, they are those used for sacrifices and esoteric connotations, but some of the animals so used now also include those that appear in songs and folktales. There are many more possibilities but these depend largely on the carver and his repertoire of knowledge, skill and experience.

The dominant features of Yoruba traditional carving such as stiffness, frontality and distortion of proportion have blended with and sometimes given way to contemporary elements like rhythm, movement, normal body proportion and the production of figures that can be enjoyed from every side rather than from the front only. According to Ajayi (1991), artists deliberately alter size and other characteristics of their figures for aesthetic and symbolic purposes. They also added the dimensions of elongation, abstractionism and texturisation while evolving their contemporary wood carving character. The bodily features of the works are frequently and more deliberately idealized and rendered in geometric forms.

The hitherto communal art has become individualistic. Works of art no longer belong to the community but now collectors' delight. The works that were usually kept or displayed

in the shines and only seen during festivals and performance are now modified as decorative pieces in the homes, displayed in museum, galleries, on the net and as public artworks. An example of this monumental work is Lamidi Fakeye's *Oduduwa* (Plate 10) at Oduduwa Hall lobby in Obafemi Awolowo University. Those that can be found in the corridors of the palaces are no longer used as a pillar that supports the building as they had been used in traditional Yoruba setting, but now used to decorate the palace corridor or lobby. They are arranged such that visitors or tourists can appreciate the form and style of the carvers of the community. Another example is found in Ake Palace in Abeokuta (Plate 11).

Carved doors of palaces or shrines were meant to tell stories of past historical events, but some carved doors in contemporary times are mainly found in churches, modern houses, community halls and homes. Church door carvings depict biblical stories of Jesus' crucifixion, ascension, parables, etc. (See Plate 6) and for other types of doors the activities being carried out in places where they adorn are sometimes illustrated. Since Islam forbids the use of image or representational art for worship, mosques do not employ the use of woodcarving. However, a few Muslims who are lovers of art do acquire woodcarvings with non-representational images for the adornment of their homes.

More so, some contemporary Yoruba woodcarvings are now produced for visitors or tourists to take home as souvenirs or curios. This is what Bascom (1973) calls tourist art, he sees it as art that has aesthetic merit, but is often technically and aesthetically inferior. This is because some of them are usually mass-produced at times in advance for sale through traders at hotels, airports, and galleries, and at times by the roadside. Some of these souvenirs can be found in the houses and offices of individuals. Some arefor decoration while some are used as utilitarian objects.

2.4. Evidence of Coexistence of Traditional and Neo-Traditional Yoruba woodcarving

To underscore the reality of the transition of Yoruba traditional woodcarving to neo-traditional, two artists'works will be examined. They are Bisi Fakeye who resides in Lagos and Ayanladun Ayandepo who resides in Eruwa, Oyo State. Two works each will be analysed and they are: *June 12* (Plate 12) and *Adura lo n gba* (Plate 13) by Bisi Fakeye and *Aseyori* (Plate 14) and *TokoTaya* (Plate 15) by Ayanladun Ayandepo.

2.5. Analysis of Olabisi Fakeye's Works

Bisi Fakeye is a traditional carver who after his interactions with Lagos-based academically trained artists began to show the tendencies of modernity in his works. He deliberately embraced the new consciousness that followed Nigerian independence and FESTAC 1977 and the desire to satisfy his patrons some of whom are elites and expatriates. *June 12* was carved in 2003 ten years after the annulment of June 12, 1993 general election in Nigeria.
The work, which is a blend of tradition and modernity, is a social commentary of an important watershed in the political history of Nigeria.

This purpose is one of the significance of modern art but the forms are closely related to the traditional carving style. Yet one can see the introduction of elongation and idealization. *June 12* is a portrait of MKO Abiola the one believed to have won the June 12, 1993 election. It is an elongated semi-realistic piece, suspended on an iron rod firmly installed on a marble base. The anguish in the face of the figure communicates the essence of the work and draws people's attention to the hullabaloo that characterized the June 12 election.

The other work *Adura lo n ngba-Agbarako* (Prayer is what can do it not strength)is a reflection of Yoruba belief in the efficacy of prayer. The work is a depiction of a female figure in the attitude of prayer. This nude figure has the characteristics of traditional Yoruba wood carving features (nudity, frontality, hair coiffure, protruding breast, etc.) from the head to the waist. However the lower parts, which include an idealised leg with geometric and semi-abstract forms with the additional adornment of metal hair ring and metal standing attached to wood base, are evidence of neo-traditional forms in this woodcarving. It is a decorative piece; According to Edewor (2014) Bisi's practice has situated his artistry with the main stream of modern art without undermining the Yoruba traditional forms, which is his springboard.

2.6. Analysis of Ayanladun Ayandepo's Works

Ayanladun Ayandepois a Yoruba woodcarver and also a formal art school graduate. His works celebrate Yoruba cultural beliefs as reflected in the rich usage of cultural motifs and objects in his works. The combination of traditional and modern forms in his works reveals him as an artist that has balance his culture with the influences of modernity. *Tokotaya* is twin figures that were separately carved and rendered in Yoruba proportion. It celebrates the modern-day 'one wife-one husband' syndrome as against polygamy. These works tend to support and preach the ideals of monogamy. Yet the traditional attributes are evident in the rendition of costume, hairdo, etc. of the works. One can notice the use of geometric shapes on some parts of the works.

Aseyori (Achievement) is a semi-abstract figure of an achiever with his trophy in a half-seated position. The work is a semi-abstract figure with disproportionate parts. It is obvious that the rule of frontality is broken in the work by the fact that the

figure is looking sideways. The neck is elongated and the head full of life. The work, which is lavished with typical embroidery textures, characteristic of Yoruba art, has a lot of movement and rhythm. It relives the modern essence of using art to depict important situations in a man's life. It teaches about the place of reward as the fruit of hard work and achievement. According to Elebute (2014) Ayandepo's treatment of his sculptural designs is with an intimate knowledge and understanding of Yoruba graphic symbolism.

3. Findings and Conclusion

The works of the artists examined have authenticated the new characteristics that have emerged as a result of modernity that was necessitated by the agents of westernisation occasioned by contacts with the colonial masters. The new characteristics were also as a result of new patronage. The new patronage gave birth to new uses as discussed in the course of the paper. Despites this change, the new works still bear some elements of the traditional woodcarvings. This is why the modern traditional woodcarving is referred to as new traditional or neo-traditional. Since the newness of the art is prevalent in 'nowness' then, it is contemporary Yoruba woodcarving. It must be noted, however, that what is contemporary today may not be contemporary tomorrow.

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