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## **Cross -Currents and Transmigration of Motifs of Yoruba Art**

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### **Abstract**

*The Yoruba of South-western Nigeria are endowed with a deeply cultural and religious environment. The people's culture and worldview are expressed through legends, folklore, time tested proverbs, wise sayings and a keen observation of their environment. This is expressed in their various art forms, and no art work is never considered completed or aesthetically pleasing if it is devoid of one form of decorative motif or the other. However early scholars concentrated on the sculptural art forms and neglected the*

*decorative aspect of the people's art which really is the essence of the culture as it serves as a visual representation of their philosophy of life and the world. The paper, through field research, analytically studied the different art forms practiced by the Yoruba, and establishes how the same set of motifs run through the many forms and typology, thus bringing to the fore the intrinsic significance of these motifs in the life of the people.*

**Key words:** Yoruba, art, transmigration, motifs

### **Introduction**

The Yoruba are highly industrious. They engage in a host of professions and occupations. It is however for their visual artistic traditions that the people are renowned globally. The earliest artistry among the people dates back to 800 BC at Iwo Eleru, where finely worked stone implements were found.<sup>1</sup> The people have variously been described as the producers of the largest arts of Africa by William Fagg and as the most prolific artists of sub-Saharan Africa by William Bascom<sup>2</sup>. Notable authors such as Frank Willett<sup>3</sup>, William Fagg<sup>4</sup>, Farris Thompson<sup>5</sup>, Robert Brian<sup>6</sup>, Franz Boaz and Drewal<sup>7</sup>, and Margaret Plass and Fagg<sup>8</sup> have referred to the rich sculptural heritage of Owo, Ife, and Esie. Notable among the people's artistic traditions are wood carving, pottery, cloth weaving, bead-making, blacksmithing, mat-weaving, leather work, gourd decoration and patterned cloth dyeing known as *Adire*. Contemporary art practices also support the foregoing historical facts. Past works by Kojo Fosu<sup>9</sup>, Bruce Onabrakpeya<sup>10</sup>, Dele Jegede<sup>11</sup>, W. Lawrence<sup>12</sup>, Marshal Mount<sup>13</sup>, and Cornelius Adepegba<sup>14</sup> have shown that works of many late 20<sup>th</sup> century Nigerian artists are still eclectic, drawing from their historical past in spite of foreign influences.

The Yoruba people are traditionally deeply religious in all things, and the keynote of their life is their religion.<sup>15</sup> Their religious and political systems are pyramidal in nature with Olodumare and divine kingship, *Oba*, respectively at the apex of the two systems. Out of these two systems has arisen a vibrant artistic milieu. The people in addition to these are endowed with a prolific intangible artistic traditions such as proverbs, time honoured stories, myths, legends, folklore, ethnic activities, and deep observations of their natural environment, from which most of the traditional symbols, motifs and patterns known as '*ona*' (pattern) have been drawn.

Art is an expression of the context of a people's philosophical, cultural and religious worldview, and hence the artist within that society is expected to

express his understanding of his milieu. Once the motifs made by the artist have come into being, they belong to the realm of art, and can be technically modified, amplified or reduced without changing their meanings.<sup>16</sup> Though they may be expressed in many forms, there is always a consensus to their meaning, and according to Eliade,<sup>17</sup> they have important, unchanging function in all societies, transforming a thing or an action unto a realm other than that seen by the ordinary eyes.

Visual images according to Vansina<sup>18</sup> are more impactful than sound because they are more immediate, more concrete, and because they are coded in the human memory twice; first as sound and secondly as image. He posits further that “when several representations of the same theme are quite similar, they must have an historical connection” The decorative motifs of Yoruba art therefore function as language, or as a coded vehicle for transmitting the spoken or written word. They are meaningful part of the people’s day-to-day lives, and a form of dialogue between the the artist who expresses his experience in his works and the broader populace who understand his expression based on the same worldview and milieu which they both share. As it is commonly expressed, “*owe l’esin oro, bi oro ba sonu, owe la o fi wa; ologbon lo nri*”. A wise and intelligent Yoruba man is advised in proverbs and not in common street language.

The bulk of early authors on Yoruba art focused their attention primarily on the sculptural art tradition of the people to the neglect of their decorative art tradition which is a true reflection of their socio- cultural life. This attitude, according to Sieber<sup>19</sup> stems from the Western aesthetic values derived from the early introduction of African sculpture to the Western art world and the ranking of art into "fine" and "decorative". This is insidious echoing of Western prejudices also inflicts a hierarchy on African arts wherein the decorative arts are considered inferior to sculpture.

Herskovits<sup>20</sup> defined art as the “embellishment of ordinary living that is achieved with competence and has describable form”, and since aesthetic drive, according to Vansina,<sup>21</sup> is universal, the Yoruba artists do not completely forgo the embellishment of even ordinary utilitarian objects such as cooking pot. The motifs of the Yoruba therefore do not derive from any foreign symbols but are rather completely Yoruba in their origin. It is an art tradition of a people and derives from their philosophical worldview.

The most significant historical study on the Yoruba is the detailed and pioneering work by Johnson.<sup>22</sup> Though he discussed extensively about the people's towns, location, political history, social and military life, occupational, cultural, social, and artistic lives, he however left out the motifs used on the art works discussed.

Studies abound on different aspects of the people's art and crafts; such as Callaway<sup>23</sup> who discussed the advantages and disadvantages of modernization, on the craftsmen and their crafts, Bascom<sup>24</sup> who gives an insight only into the motifs and patterns of *Adire* production, Fagg<sup>25</sup> who did an overview of some of the peoples crafts, Wahlman<sup>26</sup> who gave an impression of the artistic scene in contemporary Africa, Adepegba<sup>27</sup> who studied art practices in Nigeria from its earliest tradition to the present period, and De Negri<sup>28</sup> who worked on body adornment and markings. Other scholars such as Bray<sup>29</sup> studied the traditional leather workers in Oyo, their products, and some of the motifs found on them, Sieber<sup>30</sup> studied the crafts of the Yoruba town of Ede only with a brief reference to weaving, *Adire*, and embroidery, and finally, Kalilu's<sup>31</sup> through his work on the arts of Old Oyo has been able to confirm the artistic wealth of the Oyo Yoruba through the extant provincial towns who claim the metropolis for the origin of both their lineages and their arts. None of these authors as reflected in their different areas of focus however examined the motifs transmigrate within the different art traditions.

Areo<sup>32</sup> in her analysis of these motifs, grouped them into four namely: geometric shapes comprising of dots, lines, squares, rectangles, circles, triangles; figural pattern comprising of zoomorphic patterns of flora and fauna; since culture is not static, but dynamic in nature, this dynamism is reflected in skewmorphic patterns comprising of man-made objects such as, scissors, umbrella, electric fan, architectural objects and so on; and the final group made up of letters and patterns made from the alphabets. The Yoruba art traditions on which these decorative elements can be found have been grouped into two; three dimensional arts and two dimensional arts.

### **Yoruba Three Dimensional Arts**

Three dimensional arts among the Yoruba are sculpture and architecture. The sculptural arts are woodcarving, gourd carving, and pottery. Their sculptural works are produced in wood, stone, metal, clay, and gourd.

The Yoruba are prolific carvers. The list of identified carvers whose personal style could be established in British and Nigerian Museums are well over a hundred, with the great majority of them being of Yoruba race.<sup>33</sup> The people have also produced many sculptural objects in clay, in stone, in ivories, in bone, in bronze, in brass, and different other metals, and in contemporary times cement, plaster of Paris and so on. Sculpture in wood among the people are of two types; sculpture in the round and sculpture in relief. These comprise of carved wooden veranda house posts, shrine figures and figurines in different media, carved wooden door panels, found in palaces and house of nobles, carved masks such as those of *Epa*, *Gelede*, and *Egungun*, and many others used in veneration of deities like *Ose Sango* for *Sango*, the *Ifa* divination bowls (*Agere Ifa*), tray (*Opon Ifa*) and tapper (Iroke Ifa) for *Ifa* worship, the *Ibeji* figures for appeasement of deceased twins. It is however on the carved veranda posts and on the carved door panels that these motifs are more pronounced.

Gourd carving is not as widespread as carving in other media and is according to Kalilu, essentially an Oyo arts<sup>34</sup> with towns such as Ede, Ilorin, Osogbo, Iwo and Ogbomoso where gourd carving is found laying claim to Old Oyo as their origin. This is reflected in their *oriki*, the cognomen that identifies them as *Oko irese*, *omo woyira*, which is the same as that of Oyo royalty. Themes in gourd carving include both geometric and zoomorphic motifs which are the same set of motifs peculiar to the Yoruba artistic culture and many African cultures.<sup>35</sup> The geometric motifs in the contemporary time include letters of the alphabet and numbers. It is now possible to obtain gourds with decorations depicting signs of the horoscope, souvenirs with wedding, chieftaincy, birthday, and send forth congratulatory messages and many other contemporary decorative themes. (Plates 1 and 2)

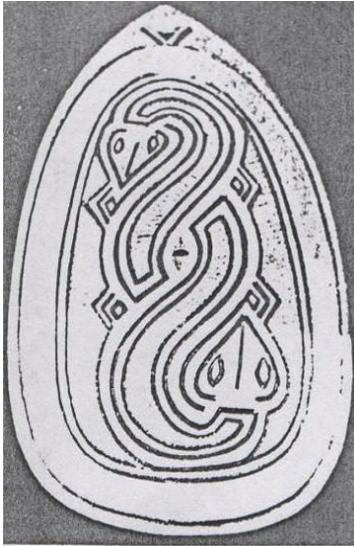


Plate 1: Traditional snake motif on carved gourd. (Kalilu 1992)



Plate 2: Carved gourd with contemporary letters of the alphabet. Photograph by Seyi Otunaiya, 2011

One major factor that has contributed to the dynamism seen in the decorative motifs of Yoruba carving is the usage to which the objects are put in traditional and later in contemporary times. Other factors are exposure to foreign education, materials, and religions. While the bulk of sculptural objects in traditional settings were commissioned and used for traditional indigenous religious purposes, with a few featuring in household furnishings, as architectural embellishments and as objects of status symbol; most contemporary sculptural works are either commissioned by government parastatals, individuals, corporate, and Christian religious bodies to meet utilitarian, functional or aesthetic needs. These art works are often times decorative, combining old motifs with new ones (Plates 3 and 4 ).



Plate 3: Carved Door with traditional motifs. Oyelola P. 2010



Plate 4: Carved door panel with Christian contemporary photograph by Gbemi Aro, 2009

Pottery, a basic utilitarian need and a female art tradition among the Yoruba is practiced in many towns such as Ipetumodu, Ekiti, Iseyin Ilobu, Igboho, Igbeti, Esie, Egbado, Modakeke and Ilorin, a town noted for its black burnished cooking pot, known as *Isaasun* or *Ikoko Ilorin*. The artistry of these wares comprising of; cooking pots, dye pots, ritual pots, water pots, storage pots, funerary pots, colander, palm oil lamps & medicinal pots of all shapes and sizes, can be seen in the decorative elements employed on these pots.

Traditionally, ritual pots which are produced for religious purposes depict motifs that are related to the deities for whose veneration they are being made. Because the people are aesthetically aware, even utilitarian pottery among the people is not devoid of decorations, and these decorations are

similar to those found on objects of other Yoruba art traditions. Decorations on some pots are determined by their eventual function and usage, for instance, a colander, *Ajere* is usually covered all over with perforations because of the prospective sieving job it would perform.

Factors that have led to changes in the motifs now prevalent in contemporary pottery are; introduction of new materials, foreign religions usage, and western education. Many indigo dyers believe that giant indigo dyeing pots are not being produced again because there are not many traditional dyers again using them, and so no demand for them. And while decorating the pots the traditional potters in contemporary times would rather use only geometric motifs which are times saving. Ritual pots according to Madam Ayinke, 36 are rarely made and as in the past, their production is still strictly on demand which is very low in contemporary times. Also western education, the introduction and knowledge of new materials and technology have changed the form and themes of decoration of pottery among the Yoruba (Plates 5, 6 and 7).



Plate 5: A traditional ritual pot with traditional motifs (National Museum Ibadan)



Plate 6: Ilorin black cooking pot with traditional motifs  
(Photograph by Gbemi Areo. 2010)



Plate 7: Contemporary ceramic ware with traditional motif painted in Acrylic (Photograph by Gbemi Areo)

Architecture among the Yoruba was built traditionally to meet the needs of the people and was structured after a communally accepted pattern which had been passed down for generations. Houses were built through communal effort and a deviation from the accepted norm was frowned at. The houses were built with walls made of puddle mud and the roof which is covered with thatched palm leaves rest on pillars. The residence of the ruler or *Oba* called *Afin* was usually built after the same pattern but usually on a grander scale and with more elaborate features. The pillar supporting the roof of the *Afin* and the house of some chiefs were elaborately carved. The palace is not only inhabited by the king but is also the seat of the people's government<sup>37</sup> the motifs in relation to the people's architecture are discussed under their sculptural tradition, and on their mural decoration

## Two Dimensional Art

### Painting and Drawing

Painting and drawing among the Yoruba can be grouped into two; mural paintings on walls of special places such as shrines and the *Oba's* palaces, and painting and drawing on human skins both temporary and permanent.

#### *Mural painting*

Painting, though less prominent than other art traditions, is not alien to the Yoruba. Mural paintings are found on special places such as the entrance walls of shrines, *Ile Orisa*, of deities; *Oluorogbo*, *Obatala* and *Orisaikire* in Ile-Ife. Shrine painting is found also in many other towns all over Yoruba land where *Obatala* is known by other names such as *Orisa popo* (Ogbomoso), *Orisa Ogiyan* (Ejigbo), *Orisaikire* (Ikire), *Orisa Olufon* (Ifon), *Orisa Funfun* (Iragbiji), *Irele* (Ikirun) and *Orisanla*. (Ila). Shrines of other deities such as *Oya* in Jebba and *Osun* in Osogbo are painted. Some *Igbale* (meeting grounds), dedicated to *Egungun* and *Gelede* in Ota, and *Eyo* - masquerade of the *Aworis* in Lagos are also adorned.

The painting of these shrines is mainly the duty of women<sup>38</sup> and the iconography, which is both anthropomorphic and Zoomorphic, are not merely decorative, but are communicative symbols of the people's culture. Murals when found on palace walls and houses of chiefs sometimes serve as historical records of events and activities in the life of the *Oba* (king).<sup>39</sup>

In contemporary times, mural paintings are commissioned mainly for aesthetic purposes to decorate personal, corporate, or public places. These new set of paintings have no gender barrier as they are executed by artists of both sexes with formal and informal training in art. The themes and motifs of these murals are determined by the function for which the place is being used and at times by dictates of whoever is commissioning it, or the creative ingenuity of the artist himself.

### ***Body painting / Decorations***

Traditionally, body painting or decoration as an art among the Yoruba is of two types; temporary and permanent types. The temporary ones are used to decorate the body during many of the socio – cultural events found among the people such as initiation ceremony, celebration of certain rites of passage such as marriage as observed in Ilorin, and festivals in veneration of certain deities such as Ogun, Ifa, and Obatala to mention a few. This type of decoration only lasts for the period of the ceremony for which they are created. (Plate 8)

The permanent type of body decoration are either for aesthetic purpose to beautify the body as in the case of the *Kolo* or are to distinguish the wearer's ethnic or familial affinity. While the familial markings *ila* comprise mainly of lines of different configurations and directions, it is in some of the temporary ceremonial and the permanent aesthetic body markings that the people's traditional patterns are most expressed.

Though the temporary body decorations are still being used during some of the traditional ceremonies, the permanent traditional facial marking has almost died out completely with Nigerian government even enacted a law banning it and female genital mutilation. There is presently an evolution of the traditional aesthetic body markings, *Kolo* among the youths, in the art of tattoo, a variation of the *Kolo* but with a Western origin and foreign motifs.

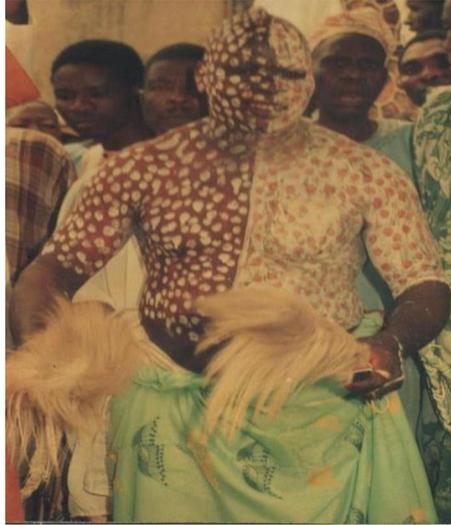


Plate 8: An Ifa priest with temporary body painting of dots (Photograph by Gbemi Areo 1988)

### **Leatherwork**

Leatherwork is a decorative art practised in many Yoruba towns, it is however limited to minor repair works of bellows, slippers, riding saddles and so on, except in Ilorin and Oyo towns, where this tradition is carried to an artistic level. Kalilu<sup>40</sup> mentioned seven extant centres that lay claim to Old Oyo for the craft's origin from where they claim to have migrated to Oyo with Alaafin Atiba. The cultural and socioeconomic importance of leatherwork particularly in Oyo town where they are known as *Isona* cannot be overemphasized as they are responsible for all forms of sewing (excluding garment making), embroidery, appliquéing, carrying of the kings umbrella, taking care of the Alaafin's wardrobe and select wares, keeping of palace ornaments, decoration of the palace every last Friday of the month, and other palace assignments. Their leather products are often embellished with decorative symbols from Yoruba culture<sup>41</sup> and interlace pattern commonly found in Hausa embroidery which is a common motif in West African and Islamic cultures.<sup>42</sup> They are also responsible for the production of religious cults objects like *Ile Ori*, the cowry embroidered "house" for the spirit of the

head, and the *laba shango*, the flat, red leather wallet or bag carried by *Sango* priests. The symbols used in embellishing this bag correspond directly to its ritual meaning and usage.<sup>43</sup> Leatherwork, to a lesser extent, is found also in Ede. In contemporary times however, motifs found on leather products are usually geometric shapes as these leather items serve mainly aesthetic purposes.

### **Textile Decorations**

Cloth in Schneider and Weiner's<sup>44</sup> view functions at different levels. It is the receptacle for prized fibers, dyes, dedicated human labour, skilled artistry, with competitive aesthetic supremacy and dynamism. Textile surface decorations such as appliqué, embroidery, patchwork, and weaving are also traditionally found to a more or lesser extent among the people. While some of these decorations are for aesthetic purposes, some are for reasons of modesty, for example appliqué and patchwork are used to mend torn portions of an aging personal garment. In contemporary times, applique has however been used to an artistic level in the fashion designing works of Gbemi Areo and others with formal art training with contemporary motifs.

#### *Adire*

The Yoruba are renowned for their artistry in patterned dyed cloths known as *Adire*, from which they have evolved various resist techniques. It is however in the starch resist technique, *Adire Eleko* that the people's artistry in motif representations is best revealed. This technique is of two types; freehand which is the older of the two, and Stencil Eleko. The Freehand Eleko is the oldest of this technique. The date of its emergence is put between 1880 and 1925.<sup>45</sup> There is a repertoire of up to four hundred identifiable patterns from which the *Adire* artists draw<sup>46</sup> depending on her ability to learn fast.<sup>47</sup> These patterns are handed down from mothers to their daughters with little or no changes occurring in them over time (Plate 9).

The stencil Eleko evolved from the traditional older hand painted one out of a need to cut production time. In order to meet the great demand for *Adire* in the 1930s, men copied the hand painted motifs, and marked the entrance of males into a hitherto female art tradition. Though textile artists in contemporary times still use these traditional motifs in other mediums apart from starch, such as wax, there have however evolved many other motifs

apart from the traditional ones with many more possibilities in the stencilled Eleko (Plate 10)

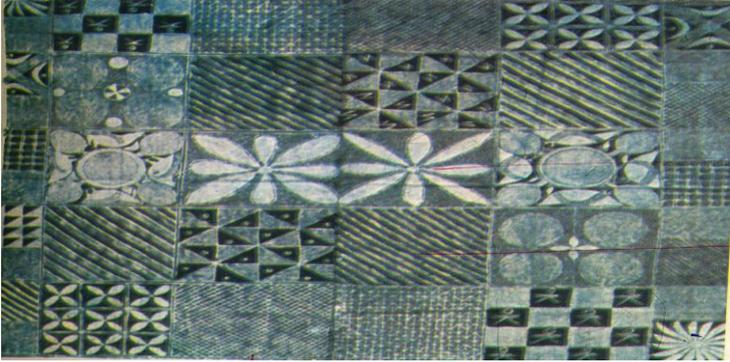


Plate 9: Starch – resist Adire Eleko fabric with Yoruba traditional motifs  
*Eicher, 1976*



Plate 10: Starch – resist Adire Eleko fabric with contemporary floral motifs  
(Photograph by Gbemi Areo)

### *Weaving*

Though traditional hand weaving on both the horizontal double heddle and vertical single heddle looms are a vibrant art tradition among the Yoruba, it is however on the specially woven fabric *Itagbe*, used for traditional religious and cult purposes that the traditional motifs of the people are represented

(Plate 11). Woven fabric used for other purposes apart from this both traditionally and in contemporary times have the geometric motifs in their embellishment (Plate 12).



Plate 11: Hand – woven fabric *Itagbe* for certain Yoruba cults with traditional lizard motifs (Photograph by Gbemi Areo 1989)



Plate 11: Hand – woven fabric with contemporary geometric motifs and printed floral motifs (Photograph by Gbemi Areo, 2009).

### ***Embroidery in thread and Beads***

The art of traditional hand embroidery employing needle and thread is found to a more or less degree among the Yoruba. There is a clear indication that the traditional embroidery patterns are of Hausa origin as the patterns are

similar to those of traditional mural decorations of Northern Nigeria. The Yoruba are however renowned for colourful and elaborate bead embroidery. Bead making as an art tradition has been long in existence in Yoruba land. Many excavated sites in Ile – Ife and studies of the town by Eluyemi<sup>27</sup> and Willet and Horton<sup>26</sup> have yielded sculptural finds bedecked with regalia representation of beads (Plate 12). The Lander brothers purchase of a lump of fused beads on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, 1830 in the Old Oyo market,<sup>28</sup> before the collapse of the town and the shift to Ilorin as commercial bead centre from this time well into the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century,<sup>29</sup> are all evidences of the value placed on beads as materials of vocational, social and spiritual significance in the cultural history of the Yoruba.

According to Eicher,<sup>47</sup> “Bead - embroidered caps, slippers and crowns are essentially distinctive marks of the Yoruba dress for special occasions and high ranking individuals”. To these have been added in contemporary times beaded staffs, walking sticks, and beaded badges of office of the *Oba* and his chiefs incorporating letters of the alphabets depicting the wearers office. It is in its usage as items of adornment for royalty that the traditional decorative motifs are expressed most.



Plate 12: Figure of a King or Chief dated between twelfth to fifteenth century showing beads usage. Bronze. Left Height 29.6cm, Right Height 26.8cm. (Ekpo Eyo, 1977, p. 83.)



Plate 13: Bead embroidered *Are* crown of the Ooni (king) of Ile – Ife.  
(Photograph by Gbemi Areo, 1989)



Plate 14: Bead embroidery on a set of contemporary objects by LAUTECH  
Art students (Photograph by Gbemi Areo, 2008)

In contemporary times beads are being used in painting by Jimoh Buraimoh of Osogbo town in Southwestern Nigeria to high artistic and international level. Also traditional bead artist now execute their beadworks on other items that can be used as souvenirs thereby extending their services beyond the palaces and shifting their decorative themes beyond the traditional. Also, different sets of students of Fine and Applied Arts Department of Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho under the tutelage of Dr. Mrs. Gbemisola Areo, have in one of their courses ‘ African Crafts Techniques’, have been exposed to traditional bead decorators and bead making and have churned out their own contemporary interpretation of this art (Plate 14).

### Conclusion

The motifs in the Yoruba arts as observed in this study cut across all their art traditions. The motifs which are also their creation have become standardized and accepted by all, as theirs and as being peculiar to them. Through the motifs, the artists express themselves and their larger society. That motifs therefore act as parables or metaphors expressing larger philosophical ideas in smaller compact packages.

Since art is an expression of the context of a people’s philosophical and religious worldview, the motifs from findings are observed to cut across all of the people’s art. These motifs which are not peculiar to any particular guild is indigenous to the people, with them being responsible for their metamorphosis, evolution, development and usage.

Furthermore, these motif still exist and in spite of incursion of other cultures, new techniques, technologies and foreign artistic influence in the Yoruba environment. Their usage is being adopted and encouraged by contemporary artist in a form of renaissance.

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