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### **Art, Symbol and Royalty: A Case Study of the Yoruba Speakers in Nigeria**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper set out to examine the relationship and importance of Art, Symbol and Royalty amongst the Yoruba speakers in Nigeria. While studies have been done in different areas of this topic, yet this area remains unattended to despite its importance in art history. The aim of this paper is to bring awareness and fill the existing gap. The methodology of research employed is qualitative, through observation, non-observation, intrinsic/contextual analyses. Yoruba culture follows the general patterns of traditions in African societies. The traditional leaders are seen and revered as intermediaries to God; the Yoruba traditional heads are custodians of history, religion, tradition, myths, norms and values. Their subjects see them as deities; to wade off the ills within individuals and communities at large. The paper revealed that art; symbol and royalty are inextricably tied together. The unknown artists are still the machines that create the art, symbol and royalty traditionally, amongst the Yoruba speakers.

**Key Word:** Ade, Are, Oba, Oduduwa, and Ooni, art, regalia, beed

## Introduction

The Yoruba of Nigeria are from the south west namely Ogun, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Oyo, Lagos, Kwara and Kogi states with fragments in Edo and Delta States (Oduduwa Books of Records, 2014). Yoruba is one of the oldest and largest cultural groups in Africa. The ethnographic composition of the Yoruba speakers has been established way back before the discovery of their art works. Yoruba is one of the most populous single ethnic group in Nigeria with a population figure of over fifty [50] million people (Oduduwa Books of Records, 2014). The Yoruba speakers interacted with each other for long, so they have common historical experiences, avenues of trade, cultural interactions which reflected in their cultural affiliations. These commercial prowess and genius in their religion, food, costumes, dance, music, extinct Ife arts and other crafts, architecture and traditions are evident even in their present day cultural affiliation. The Yoruba speakers have a highly organized cultural and political institution ever before contact with the Europeans. Art right from traditional to contemporary times in the Yoruba culture has always played a significant role. The Yoruba royal monarchs are known and addressed by their titles, for example: Ooni Ife, Alaafin Oyo, Alake Egba, Olubadan, Ado Ekiti, Olowo, Owa Obokun, and so on.

## Concepts Clarifications

### Art

Art, according to the researcher, can be described as the ‘sum total of a man’; art can be seen in language, costume, arts, food, myths, norms, beliefs, values, architecture, dance and music, musical instrument, our physiques, religion, even in our geographical locations. Art is also a language of expression and a means of communication; it requires inventiveness, method, mastery, imagination, knowledge, creativity and skill. Art can be imitative when it describes events, it can be formalistic when it involves artistic experiments, and it can be functional and emotional also. Art emphasizes mood, it can be significantly beautiful, ugly, pitiable or sorrowful. Art is the intentional communication of an experience as an end in itself. Art is the machine that brings the cultural manifestation of the people to reality. The aims and objectives of the Yoruba speakers culturally are brought alive through creative art, without which performance would have failed. Thus, it is not an over statement to say art, symbol and royalty amongst the Yoruba speakers in Nigeria is inseparable. In Africa one can extrapolate information from extinct anthropological finds that traditional arts and crafts were practiced solely for three major reasons; prestige immortalization and worship.

### Symbol

A symbol can be defined as any shape or designed object or ceremonial outfits or regalia associated with or made for a particular office or position. It can two or three dimensional in shape, made from materials ranging from wood, sculpture, straws,

ivory, fabrics, bronze, buildings, traditional or modern architectural buildings for palaces, shrines and its paraphernalia. Politically, spiritually and traditionally, Yoruba inspired art works amongst the speakers was done mainly for the nobles in traditional era; Obas and their households, because of their position, power and influence in the society. Art plays a major role politically and spiritually in the Yoruba kingdoms. In the 21st century art symbols still play prominent roles in the day to day affairs or smooth running of the monarchical kingdoms of the Yoruba people. The traditional rulers are believed to have divine power amongst the Yoruba speakers, they serve as their intermediaries be it social, political, or spiritual. In the 21st century, art, symbol and prestige took a new dimension.

All the metropolitan cities Obas in Yoruba land wears white attires, first and second class Obas heading kingdoms and semi urban areas are not necessarily in white attires. Major festivals like Olojo in Ile Ife, the Ooni will wear his ceremonial outfit and puts on the traditional “Are” Crown which must be worn once in a year after coronation. The word Oba in Yoruba language means kingship (Monuments, 2015 Vol 2 No1). There is a visual artistic expression common within the Yoruba speaking communities when it comes to regalia. The traditional trumpet called “Kakaki” is associated with the nobles in the northern and western part of Nigeria, blown or sounded on the rising up of Ooni of Ife [Monarch of Ile-Ife] a three-dimensional musical bronze piece that has become or associated with royalty. All the distinguished day to day accessories used by nobles/Obas in the Yoruba land as a mark of honor are art works, before been symbolized as paraphernalia for nobles. According to (Robert, 1851-1861) he observed that the beautiful ‘Eyo’ festival was first staged in 1854 to commemorate the life of Oba Akitoye of Lagos. This was on account of a performance he witnessed in Lagos in 1854. Eyo festival is normally done to honour or escort a dead King/Chief. Their attire, movement, dance, language used by them during the festival, expressive artistic display of Eyo masquerades are an act of art.

Three dimensional sculptural figures adorn traditional Yoruba unusual shrines and Monarch’s palaces as commemorative documentation of spiritual beliefs, norms, values, myths associated with traditions and creations. Oduduwa is regarded as the progenitor of the Yoruba race. Oduduwa is depicted with the chain believed he descended on from Heaven to create the earth and a bird figure in his hand to spread the sand on earth in Ile-Ife, believed to be the cradle of the Yoruba people (Oduduwa Books of Records, 2014). “Moremi” sculpture is another three-dimensional symbolic representation in the Ooni’s palace [Ife monarch]. All religious, traditional and monarchical paraphernalia are first and foremost art works of two or three dimensional in nature before been symbolized or dedicated for traditional royalty use/purpose.

The two sculptural, gigantic environment pieces, represents **Oduduwa** the progenitor of the Yoruba race. The first picture to the left [fig.1: 2016] was taken at **Oduduwa grove**, the second one to the right [fig. 2: 2016] was taken few meters from the **Ooni’s**

**palace.** Both statues depict representations of birds, staff of office and the chain believed Oduduwa descended from Heaven on. The symbolic representation has the past as his basis, depicts beliefs, its traditional, the content is stressed over process, theme is Yoruba, current is naturalistic. Art, religion, and royalty are inseparable; it has rich artistic tradition. The sculptural art works are now sacred representations because of the traditional myths of creation attached to it from inception.



**Fig 1:** Oduduwa Statue in his Shrine Ooni's palace



**Fig 2:** Oduduwa Statue, few meters from

(All pictures slots from Excursion Album 'Artists on Tour' taken with my students from the University, 31st March, 1st, 2nd & 3rd April, 2016. Nigeria)



**Figure 3:** Ooni's Coronation Nigeria [2015] [October 2016]



**Fig 4:** Olojo festival, Nigeria.

Figure 3, see (Monuments, 2015 Vol 2 No1) shows the coronation of the 51st Ooni of Ife. Note the heavily beaded “Are” crown with the “Iboju” [veil] attached to the rims. [Figure 4: 2016] shows the Ooni Ife in the just concluded Olojo festival of 2016 Nigeria wearing the most important, prestigious cultural crown called “Are” in the Yoruba land, this crown must be worn once in a year after coronation. Heavily beaded with intricate designs repeated severally to form a pattern, good colour combination, balanced and artistic, it’s an artistic expression consecrated symbolically for monarchical use.

### Royal Crown

Royal Crown known as an ‘Ade’ in Yoruba language is made by men in the craft as a profession and at times the skill runs in the family lineage. There are two types of crown, the not every day use type [uncommon] normally for coronation; some are worn once a year during special occasions, has a beaded veil called ‘Iboju’ attached to the rim of the crown. A typical example is the one worn for coronation by the 51st Ooni Ife, His Imperial Majesty Alayeluwa, Oba Babatunde Enitan Adeyeye Ogunwusi, Ojaja II [in figs 3 & 4]. The coronation crown is believed to possess magical powers that the ruler never looks inside or great disaster will befall him. The Ooni is the only one that wears the ‘ARE’ crown, ancient, conical in shape, heavily beaded, covers the face. After coronation, it must be worn once a year and it is forbidden not to wear it once in a year. This type of crown is placed on the head of the king from behind or sideways. The Ooni wears the crown during the ‘Olojo’ festival too.

Thompson Robert (1972) observed that the effective visual effects of the beaded veil in ritual context are as follow: The vaguely perceived outlines of the face of the ruler match, in a sense, the generalized qualities of the frontal faces on the crown. Veiling diminishes the wearer’s individuality so that he too becomes a generalized entity. Balance between the present and the past emerge. No longer an individual, the king become a dynasty. The second type is the day to day crown created by individual Oba’s according to the preferred style. The ‘Ade [crown] is believed by the Yoruba speakers to be an Orissa[deity], when the “Ade” [crown] is placed upon the King’s head his ‘Ori uni [inner head] becomes one in unity with those who have reigned before him, who are also considered as ‘Orisas’. Colours play significant roles in selection of use; colours like green, brown, bronze, golden are associated with healing and the jungle, blue, silver, gold-yellow are connected with the Osun, goddess of the life bringing water. Yellow and green are associated with fortune teller Ifa; all these colours are taken into consideration when beading a crown. Different types of beads are used like; glass beads, pound beads, most of the beads are imported now. Tools needed in beading a crown includes; tapes for measurement, scissors, needles of various sizes, threads to thread beads into place, knives, sharpening instruments.



**Fig. 5: Kakaki Trumpet**

Figure 5 is a three-dimensional art work, made of bronze, quite long, balanced, and conical in shape narrows towards the mouth. A symbol, trumpet, made in Nigeria called ‘**Kakaki**’ is associated with royalty in the south west and even in the northern part of Nigeria. The sound is quite loud and uncommon and can be heard from a distance, yet pleasant to the ears. The palace guide informed the students and writer that this **Kakaki** is blown to herald the rising up of the Ooni. The trumpet is a symbol of royalty and authority associated with the traditional rulers, this trumpet is not blown for non-royals.



**Fig. 6: Yoruba Musical Assemblage (2016)**

Figure 6, Musical assemblage, music and royalty cannot be separated amongst the Yoruba speakers. Music is used to herald the coming in and going out of the nobles in the palaces. Musical instruments and the sounds made are artistic creations, songs composed falls under art also. The Yoruba talking drum plays a prominent role in passing messages across even in the Oba's court.

### **Beads**

Beads are known as 'ileke' amongst the Yoruba speakers in Nigeria. Beads as used by Yoruba extinct nobles and the present 21st century nobles signify a symbol of authority and royalty; from the Ooni Ife to the Olubadan, to Alake Egba, to Oloowo, to Alaafin Oyo, to Oba Eko. The style and manner in which it is worn depends on the monarch, but it must be on their necks either with or without pendants and on the wrists in most cases. Traditional activities and festivals also dictate the style and colour of beads to be used at times. Colourful beads are considered by some people as charms, beads process and art have multiple meanings; red and white beads signify Sango; the god of thunder. How it is beaded is also taken into consideration, in the olden days, people who made royal beads were formed into guilds and are not allowed to work for any other persons; but nowadays, there are no restrictions in some places. Adornment of beads, pendants, tassels, charms in the late, early and present century is very much part of the Yoruba symbol of authority amongst the nobles, beads shows status in the society. The types of beads a person wears in Yoruba land stratifies the class they belong. The wife of Oduduwa; Olokun is the progenitor of bead workers. A saying goes thus' abami eyan l'owo ileke' translates to; it is an unusual person that puts on beads of the palace type.

### **Staff of Office**

Staff of office is called 'Opa ase' this is another symbol of authority associated with royalty. Staffs of office are made in wood, bronze, ivory embellished with ethnic motifs and the meanings or interpretations can be understandable or abstruse. Traditional staff for coronation to office is always heavily beaded, with intricate motifs formed into rich patterns. The staff of office is an important aspect of the royal costume; the relevance denotes the class or statues of the monarch. Right from onset, the Yoruba royal monarchs have always carried a staff of office; 21st century is only witnessing an evolved design since no culture is static. The design, length and material used also depicts hierarchy, some art, symbols used for uncommon ceremonies relating to royalties are not to be displayed publicly for every body's views. Secrecy, oat taking, membership of a particular cult might be a criterion before one is admitted or allowed to view such art works used as symbols of initiation. Spiritually some of the art symbols have been charged up to represent or perform duties that it is designed for. No two traditional titles in Yoruba land coupled with staff of offices looks alike. The traditional royal staffs are functional; it's used as a walking stick, used as a blessing wand and as a symbol of status, authority and royalty.

### Regalia

Regalia of the Yoruba traditional rulers have evolved in the 21st century Nigeria but still retaining its cultural significance and Nigerian. The 51st Ooni Ife, Oba Babatunde Enitan Adeyeye Ogunwusi Ojaja II, always in white attire, white crown or princely uncommon cap, with protruding design on cap with long strands of two layered beads or more in white and at times colored, with a staff of office that has four finger like end. While most of the Obas in the big metropolitan Yoruba states also wear white, the first and second class Obas wear colored attires and their court yards and royal retinues are not as large. Royal chairs for the throne are either commissioned or imported, with intricate elaborate designs, colors can be gold, brownish bronze and maroon.

### Divination Utensils

Divination amongst the traditional rulers in Yoruba land is still active as it was in the beginning; a traditional ruler cannot do without consultation. Nomination and coronation of an Oba whether first class, second class in category entails a lot of consultation with Ifa deity. The paraphernalia used include; Opele, Ikin Ifa, Odu Ifa, all are artistic symbols, created by artists. The Obatala worshippers, priests and priestesses use, white ornaments, white attires, the temple is painted in white, emblems are kept in white containers, white signifies a symbol of purity. Obatanla is usually represented with the symbolic art work of a 'Horse man with a spear', with serpent, fish, tortoise, leopard in composition. During all major and minor festivals in Yoruba land like the Osun Oshogbo, Oranmiyan festival, Shango festival all instruments used are first art, before becoming sacred symbols used by royalties, priests and priestesses.



**Fig 7:** Obatala World Wide Headquarters, Ile-Ife, 2016



**Fig. 8:** Devotees at Obatala Shrine [Ile-Ife]

Figure 7 shows some of my students in front of the Obatala Shrine building, while Figure 8 are some of the devotees at the temple of Obatala. Obatala is the Yoruba god of purity and the greatest of all the Orisa [deities] in Ile – Ife [Yoruba race], the Ooni has to be anointed and initiated into some cults and to take oath at the shrine.

Worshippers are not allowed to drink palm wine because of the story of creation. Symbolically white is used for everything, from their attires, to ornaments, emblems, containers, utensils of divination and the paintings on the temple. All these objects of use were made by artists before consecrated for spiritual and religious use. The priests and priestesses and worshippers are always in white. White kola called 'Orogbo' is used for sacrifice instead of the red one. Obatala as the progenitor of the town gates is also represented symbolically as a 'Horse Man with a Spear' with serpent, fish, tortoise and leopard in the composition.

Royal motifs are used in decorating the royal palaces, court yards and traditional uncommon shrines. Ceremonial drums for traditional festivals are also heavily decorated with ethnic motifs. So many Yoruba rulers still traced their origin to Ile Ife, so the similarities like staff of office, royal caps or crowns, use of beads, princely shoes, festivals and masquerades' celebrations are still common.

According to Chief Ifaloba Ifarotimi, (Oduduwa Books of Records, 2014) the priest of Oduduwa shrine and the head of Isoro chiefs, records that: out of 365 days of the year, only one day is free from ritual ceremonies, the day is not known to anyone except the Ooni, Ooni is regarded as the only living deity. The paraphernalia's associated with these uncommon celebrations in Yoruba land are art works created by artists or crafts men, symbolized for use after performance of rites, these symbols are induced with power traditionally for performance. Ile -Ife as the religious headquarters of Yoruba is still the stronghold of indigenous worships.

The famous '**Oranmiyan' Staff** is situated at Mopa, Ile-Ife, the most spectacular antiquity in Ile-Ife, Nigeria measuring 18feet [5.5cm] in height, 4ft square at the base. Made with granite, believed to be the longest stone sculpture south of the Sahara. Several iron nails were driven into the obelisk, these nails look like the beads that adorn the Are crown worn by Ooni and also suggestive of ancient form of writing (Oduduwa Books of Records, 2014). (All pictures slots from Excursion Album 'Artists on Tour' taken with my students from the university, 31st March/1st, 2nd & 3rd of April 2016, Nigeria.)



**Fig. 9: Oranmiyan staff at Mopa, Ile-Ife**

An important three-dimensional sculptural piece of the legendary '**Moremi**' painted in white, with red beads on the neck, wrist and round the traditional 'Suku' coiffure style of the Yoruba. The current is naturalistic, creative, expressive and essentially traditional. The artist borrowed from tradition. An artistic expression, a sculpture symbol depicting the significant role played by Moremi in quelling marauders advancement, at a great price of giving up her only son Oluorogbo is erected as a symbol of remembrance in the Ooni's palace. The 'Edi' festival is used to celebrate Moremi's heroism amongst the descendants. The statue is in front of the Ooni's palace and regarded highly traditionally.



**Fig. 10: Moremi Statue, inside Ooni's Palace**

#### **Ceremonial Royal Dance**

Ceremonial dance is done mainly by the nobles or title holders in the community. The 'Bata' dance is used mainly for this purpose. A title holder dances gracefully to 'Bata' music. The royals dance three times round a particular spot, majestically, with graceful feet movements swerving left and right to the 'Bata' music. The ceremonial royal dance steps are done to mark festivals, coronation of an Oba. The majestic movements of 'Bata' dance can be seen in the way the legs, arms and body is coordinated in a round or semi-roundabout movement during royal festivals. This symbolic dance steps and the Music is art, associated with royalty

#### **Palaces**

Palaces are always large structures of wide expanse of land with a lot of court yards and shrines, public rooms, museum, historical sites, to mention a few. This is the front gate of the 51<sup>st</sup> Ife royal monarch's palace [2016]. Inside we were privileged to see one

of the most revered shrines called “Ile Ase” [Oat taking Shrine] pictures and recordings were not allowed. “Ile Ase” is an oat shrine, culprits don’t last seven days if guilty and goes ahead to take oat. Palaces are art edifice with symbolic artistic structures infused with traditional powers not seen or known to ordinary people to perform certain roles/functions.



**Fig. 11: ILE- OODUA [Ooni Ife’s Palace]**

**ARUGBA’S HUT**



**Fig. 12: Arugba’s Hut Oshogbo grove**

This is a symbolic art edifice use during annual **Osun Oshogbo festival**, it is the architectural building used for entry by the **Arugba [virgin girl]**. **The Arugba** carrying the calabash enters into this building through the back door and comes out through the front door. The Arugba must be from the royal household, from age nine and above and must do the assignment for five years after which another takes over. The building is symbolically important during and after the annual festival. The gigantic sculptural pieces were also constructed by Yoruba traditional artists with the Australian born initiate of Obatala, late Susanne Wenger (Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove, (n.d), pp. 3,4,11)



**Figures 13&14: Gigantic environment three-dimensional sculptures in the Osun Oshogbo Grove, Nigeria (2016)**

(All pictures slots from Excursion Album 'Artists on Tour' taken with my students from the university, 31st March/1st,2nd & 3rd of April 2016.Nigeria.)

Gigantic symbolic art works, in the sacred Osun Oshogbo grove, most of these sculptures were done by the combined efforts of the Ataoja of Oshogbo, late Susanne Wenger an Australian in collaboration with Nigerian traditional artists. Late Susanne Wenger popularly known as Adunni Olorisa in Nigeria had been initiated into Obatala Cult (Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove, no year of publication,pgs 3,4,11). Sculptures had the past as basis, rich in artistic traditions, depicts mythology, beliefs, norms, values; ethnic motifs were used for designs. Artists that worked borrowed from Yoruba tradition. Art, religion, symbol, royalty fused into one body

### **Ilari**

**The Ilari** is associated with royalty in the Yoruba land. They are male messengers and guards with half shaved heads, always in White simplified native uniforms in side

traditional palaces, Ilari means half shaved headed person. They also serve as a tour guide in the traditional Yoruba palaces. They serve in the palace once enlisted for life.

### **Oriki**

‘Oriki of a noble/Oba is rendered by a learned traditional praise singer that knows the history of the lineage and their accomplishments. Oriki are words put together composed to praise, extol, and worship nobles and their offices. Though every Yoruba person noble or not have Oriki in the native dialect. Oriki is an act of art. It is Art in the sense that, no two compositions are alike, it requires creativity, and it’s expressive, humorous, traditional, and meaningful, sounds beautiful to the hearers.

### **Royalty**

Royalty is the reputation, influence, dignity accorded to the nobles, because of the position they occupy, be it hereditary or acquired. Art plays a vital role in society, prestige and royalty. Prestige in art expresses; the ostentation, glorification, immortalization, temporal and spiritual importance of the nobles in the society. This type of art works includes commissioned sculptural works like the ancient Ife bronze works dated 12th to 15th century A.D, statuettes of nobles, veranda posts and carved relief panel doors. Materials used then and now for executions are mainly none easily perishable, expensive and durable materials.

### **Conclusion**

The implication of this paper is that, art is important in every society. Art, symbol and royalty amongst the Yoruba is netted together, it’s inseparable. Art is the machine that creates the intangible aspects of culture into tangibility. Artists enable shrines to perform their roles through the creation of two / three-dimensional art works. Art works becomes sacred after consecration, inducement of power, and traditional dedication. To this end, it is worth noting that some unique artists that executed /created these art works, will never be documented or known due to the myths, oaths or sacredness attached to these art works in use. The researcher coined these artists as the, ‘Silent Artists’ or ‘Unknown Artists’. Finally, the researcher observes that, “Artist is the machine that creates art, symbol and royalty amongst the Yoruba speakers”. Without art, how can culture be made tangible and without a culture, people/race is nobody.

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