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## **Moremi Statue in Ile- Ife: A Symbol of Yoruba Aesthetics**

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### **Abstract**

*Moremi was a Yoruba heroine whose statues are in Ile-Ife as a memorial of her votive sacrifice to save her people from annihilation. The paper focuses primarily on the importance of Moremi on Ife people, which led to her been immortalized. It is also an attempt to analyse the aesthetic qualities of Moremi statue in relation to Yoruba cosmology, which emphasizes and promotes the attributes of Yoruba philosophy of beauty which is more of an inward rather than an outward issue. The study makes use of two statues of Moremi in Ile-Ife. The symbolism of the dress items is discussed so as to drive home the inherent Yoruba aesthetic terms portrayed in the statues vis-à-vis its relevance in the society. The paper also compares the two statues so as to draw attention to the different aesthetic portrayals. The Moremi statue in the Ooni of Ife palace is actually the object of interest of this study; however the other statue at Moremi hall, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife is also studied for comparative analysis. The findings among others revealed that, though Moremi is still well revered in Ile-Ife, yet, the statues are not well maintained.*

## **Introduction**

It is a revered practice in African culture that ancestors, warriors and those who lived a worthy life be celebrated and their statues are often placed in strategic places in towns and cities, such as the king's palace and city centres. This is to commemorate their exemplary contributions to the development of the community and humanity at large.

A person who lived a worthy life becomes an ancestor at death while the one who lived otherwise is not revered (Ononeme, 2000:5). Moremi is one of the heroines of Yoruba and of Ile-Ife in particular, the mythical place of origin of creation. Yoruba admire and reverence her for the exemplary role she played in saving Ile-Ife, the cradle of Yoruba from the evasion of Ugbo people of Ilaje. Perhaps what is now known and seen of Yoruba people would not have been but for her courage, love and sacrificial role, which in totality are attributes of beauty in Yoruba land.

Moremi Statue was erected at the main courtyard of the palace of *Ooni*, the paramount ruler of Ife. The statue has been shifted to the front of *Ile Nla* (modern *Akodi*) in the palace (fig I). The statue is situated at the entrance, to the right of the main building of *Ooni's* palace; it complements the beauty of the whole environment.

Moremi became a heroine of the Yoruba; having made herself a votive sacrifice to save Ile-Ife from the hands of Ugbo people who made incessant rampaging invasions on Ile-Ife. Ugbo people of Ilaje are the aboriginal settlers in Ile-Ife while Ife people were later immigrants. There was a rift between Ugbo and the people of Ife over kingship, this led to Ugbo people been driven out to a place now known as Okeigbo, in Ondo State, a distance not too far from Ile-Ife. Ugbo people later made several counter attacks on the people of Ile-Ife. On market days, they usually came and ransacked the Ife people, looted their goods and some were usually taken as slaves. On one occasion, Moremi in her determination of purpose to rescue her people, submitted herself to be captured by the rampaging Ugbo people so as to discover the secret behind their exploits. The leader of Ugbo people *Orunmakin*, the war lord, decided to marry her as a result of her natural (physical) beauty, and kept her in the palace in Ugbo homestead.

Moremi through the Yoruba attributes of *ifarabale*, (calmness), *iluti* (teachability), *imoju-mora* (sensitivity), *tito* (steadfastness), *suuru* (patience) and *iwa pele* (gentleness which she possessed), got the secrets of Ugbo people and

stealthily ran back to Ile-Ife. The people of Ile-Ife later conquered Ugbo, using fire balls, because of the knowledge that the Ugbo invaders were not spirits but human masquerades dressed in twigs and grasses. Moremi later sacrificed her only son, Oluorogbo as *ebo eje*, (votive sacrifice) for the support of the gods over her success in discovering the secret behind the rampaging Ugbo people. Moremi and her son Oluorogbo are regarded as heroine and hero respectively in Ile-Ife till today (Awolalu, 1981: 151).

### **Art and Aesthetics**

Art can be explained as any activity of man aimed at creating pleasing forms, which satisfy our sense of beauty. This sense of beauty is fulfilled when we are able to appreciate the unity of formal relationships among our senses of perception (Read, 1964:16). Delahant (2006:1) defines art as the imposition of a pattern on experience, and our aesthetic enjoyment of it, is the recognition of the pattern. Art is also viewed as the product of human creative activity in which materials are shaped or selected to convey an idea, emotion, or virtually interesting forms (Sheba, et al, 2007). Among these forms are painting, architecture, photography, decorative arts, crafts, sculptures and other visual works. Visona et al (2001:10) says that Africa as a continent has cultural riches which are distinguished by the visual power and creativity of its arts. These arts were aesthetically depicted mostly in sculptures.

Aesthetics has to do with the beautiful. It is a branch of philosophy, which concerns itself with the essence of beauty. Beauty can be described as anything that gives pleasure to the mind or that which elates the senses (Herbert Read: 19). The senses respond to pleasurable arrangements; this quality of pleasurable sensation is known as aesthetics. As a philosophical phenomenon, the definition of aesthetics could be subjective and relative; particularly, a relatively pleasing surface or appearance of a product of art or environmental design induced and interpreted by the optics of the beholder, could be considered as beauty (Sheba et al, 2007:255). Moremi statue as a sculptural form have an embodiment of varied degrees of Yoruba aesthetics. Since man is seen as inextricably woven into the fabric of the society (Filani, 2001:122), Moremi was an embodiment of the intrinsic and extrinsic values of Yoruba aesthetic judgment.

In order to understand aesthetics in its ultimate and approved form, Rand (1993:1) postulates that one must begin with it in the raw, in the events and scene that holds the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and

affording him pleasurable enjoyment as he looks and listens. An ugly thing according to Nwoko (1979:4), cannot give valid aesthetic pleasure. This attitude has given rise to highly dynamic form of culture, which resulted in the growth of forms, shapes, and colours that are displayed in the streets and in great architecture. Thus, there is a general African characteristic in the display of form.

### **Yoruba Aesthetics**

The Yoruba concept of beauty is found explicitly in their philosophy, which affects virtually every aspect of their lives, including their art. Yoruba believe that any work of art must be thoroughly executed; otherwise, it is not a work of art. Since their artworks are produced for peculiar purposes, they are done to specification. This is why the artist is required to follow the acceptable Yoruba canons of artistic excellence before the art works can be adjudged to be good. In Yoruba standard of judging the beautiful, there are some attributes, which are preferred. Their concept of beauty expects a man to manifest some characteristics, which portray some goodness and are pleasurable to the eyes and mind. According to Lawal (1974:309-310), these attributes are *ewa* and *iwa* (Beauty and character): a beautiful person is admired but *ewa* (the physical beauty) is nothing without *iwa*. *Iwa* , according to Abiodun (1983: 14), is presented by Ifa literary corpus as an extremely beautiful woman who lacked good behavior and has many dirty habits.

Iwa lewa

Omo lesò ile

Omo- eni- la a- kesi

Omo- eni- ni- ifi- wa- j'oni

Oun Bi eeyan- dara ti ko ni wa

Igi oko ni ka aa fi we

.....

*Iwa* constitutes beauty,

Children are the fitting

Adornment of a home.

It is one's offspring that one

Aan send- on errands,  
Along with No- matter-the extent-of-a  
Person's physical attractiveness,  
-if devoid of-*iwa*, that-one-should-be  
Likened-to-a-piece-of-wood-in-the-forest  
..... (Abiodun, R. 1983: 16)

*Ewa* is the expression of the physically well made, while *iwa* is good character. Thus the saying that *b'obirin ba dara ti ko ni iwa asan lo je* (a woman with outward beauty without good character is vain). Whereas *b'obirin ba n'iwa tiko l'ewa mo le fi egberun fee* (a woman with good character without outward beauty is priceless).

Therefore, a good sculptural piece must include relative straightness (*gigun*), good composition and symmetry (*didogba*), clarity of mass (*ifarahan*), clarity of line (*fifin*), and relative luminosity and delicacy (*didan*), which are the attributes of the two sculptural representation of Moremi. Lawal (1974:313), concluded that a sculptural work that does not meet these standards is unacceptable to the community or the client. These qualities of the beautiful also apply to human life, including *ewa ode* and *ewa inu*, (surface quality and intrinsic worth). The person must be tall (*gun*), well built (*singbonle*) and moderate (*iwontuwonsi*). However these qualities are amplified by sanity and good health (*ilera*), wisdom (*ogbon*) and strength (*agbara*), (Lawal 1974:309 & 310).

Virtually all Yoruba artworks are embedded in one type of aesthetic value or the other. Often the intension of most artists is to produce a beautiful work of art in order to infuse in the admirer a kind of pleasurable feeling through the values that the art object produces. However, the images are not to be assessed only on the surface level, because they are out-growth from Yoruba traditions, thriving on parables, symbols and folklores. If Yoruba art is to be fully analysed and appreciated, it is very important to understand the Yoruba position on certain philosophical issues, which influence the people's aesthetic considerations. Art can be genuinely appreciated when we consider the how and why a work of art is created (Filani, 2001:123). It is in the light of these that Moremi statue is discussed.

### **Moremi as an Epitome of Yoruba Concept of Beauty**

Moremi, as a wife of Ooni, (*Olori*), was physically beautiful (*o lewa*). She had well-built figure which was moderately fat and of good height (Fig 3). Everything about her; height, skin colour, dressing, etc was moderate, *iwontuwonsi*. She was a wise and very courageous woman. Her love and commitment to the course of her people was exemplary. These are qualities of good character, *omoluwabi*. For a woman to be so dedicated is appreciable and quite commendable, this is why Ife people cherish her so much to be the most conspicuous memorial figure in the Ooni's palace, in Ile-Ife and to be referred to as the mother of the world (an ancestor per excellence). This is perhaps why Lawal (1974:315) notes that the beauty of an ancestor in the mind of the appreciator depends on the extent to which the ancestor seems to have met his needs, that is, his quest for happiness. Whenever a thing is considered to be beautiful, there must have been a realized objective or desire accomplished. Nwoko (1979:5) opines that when the realization of a wish is positive then a pleasant aesthetic experience is achieved. In most art works, there is a source of valid permanent aesthetic experience; this is what Moremi statue represents.

The sculptural piece of the *Olori*, (wife of the Ooni), was dressed in royal attire with the traditional coiffure and ornamentations, all of which added to her beauty and made her to be conformed to the Yoruba standard of beauty.

### **Moremi Statue Dress Insignia and Yoruba Aesthetics**

Moremi, been an *Olori*, has some badges that depict her office, added to her beauty. The statue was wrapped up with a wrapper to cover from her chest downward, as it is customary of titled women in Yoruba land (Fig1). On her right hand was her staff of office as the women leader (Fig 2). Tied to her waist is her headgear. The statue also has a lot of body decorations that are symbolic of her office. As earlier mentioned, Yoruba do not just produce art objects for art sake, there are symbolic meanings usually attached to their art works and accoutrements. It is in these contexts, that aesthetic qualities of Moremi statue are discussed.

### **Clothing**

Moremi is clad in traditional woven cloth, tied as wrapper over her body. This tradition is often associated with *Oloris*. She is seen as an epitome of beauty whose top blouse is mainly of coral beads placed round her neck, falling on her breasts, thereby amplifying her beauty (Fig 1).

### **Beads**

There is the use of heavy and elaborate coral beads to decorate her body. The hair, neck, hands and legs are decked with beads (Fig 1). In the traditional time, beautification with beads was associated with wealth, status and rank in the society. The use of beads among the traditionalists is an important means of expressing humanity's most basic cultural, religious and aesthetic values (Ijisakin, 2004:88). Coral beads are essential elements of identifying royalty among the Yoruba. Aremu, (157) observes that within the traditional context of the Yoruba, the use of beads and royal beaded objects help to distinguish in most cases, titled persons from non-titled persons.

### **Waistband**

There is a waistband of hand woven cloth worn on the statue. This is probably the headgear or shoulder cloth, *iborun*. The band of cloth looks very thick; this could have been made of traditional cloth, called *Kijipa*, among the Yoruba. A Yoruba woman dressing for an occasion is not complete without the headgear as well as the shoulder cloth known as *iborun*. However, when either of these is tied to the waist the way it is on the statue, it portrays a readiness for action (Fig 1). The headgear or shoulder band is usually tied to the waist to make the wearer smart and fit for the ensuing battle or struggle. Moremi is depicted smartly, ready for her struggle against the oppression of her people.

Moremi is also portrayed lifting up a staff in her right hand (Fig 2) The raised staff depicts her as traditional title holder. Staffs, which are often carved wood or decorated metal, add aesthetic appeal to the wearer. Staff of office is often embellished with materials like beads of different colours. The essence is to further beautify the wearer and identify her as a leader in the society. Some staffs of office are in form of carved walking sticks, decorated swords, hand fan etc. These are elegant designs that complement the dressing of the owner.

These dress insignia, though are the costume for royalty, they emphasize the importance of her inward and outward beauty. The staff of office is a symbol of authority conferred on her as *Olori* and the raised staff is a symbol of victory, which her right hand brought. The raised right hand is an emblem of true deity, which she is.

### **Hairdo**

The hair of women is given much attention in dressing. Yoruba believe that the head is the power source of man's success. Much attention is therefore

given to the dressing of the hair. Different styles are made for different age groups and for different occasions, such as graduation from an age group to the other, wedding ceremony, and naming of first child, bereavement, royalty and what have you. Negri (1976:15) affirms that various symbolic coiffures are demonstrated by Africans, and the whole of a woman's life might be exposed in the style of her coiffure. Moremi statue is a display of intricate hairdo tucked with beads that portray her status as *Olori* and heroine (fig 3).

### **Posture**

The posture of a man in public activity has a symbolic meaning among Yoruba. A man may take a particular posture either for balance or for symbolic meaning. Moremi is seen standing symbolically, with the left leg tilted forward while the right hand is raised up as a sign of victory. The stride is a proclamation of victory over the enemies. Moremi is an embodiment of respect for womanhood and freedom for all.

### **Analysis of the Symbolic and Aesthetic Values in Moremi Statue**

Nwoko, (1979:3), observes that the criteria for measuring beauty and ugliness of an art i.e. the justification, can only be based on the truth of African culture. Yoruba culture for example, regards every good thing that gives pleasurable feelings to the soul to be beautiful. Among the Yoruba, a physically beautiful woman is good, but she must add *iwa*, good character, by her comportment among friends, hospitality to her husband's relations and to the community at large. Thus the saying *iwa lewa* (good character is beauty). Nwoko (1979:4) also observes that in spite of the overwhelming ugliness in suffering and the displeasure which war carries, man will still enact it, to head towards a better, more peaceful and a more beautiful world. For Moremi to have decided to risk her life for the cause of her community is an appreciable thing among the Yoruba. This could be likened to what Esther did in the Bible to save her people from extermination, and till today she is a reference point among the Jews and the Christians (Holy Bible). Love is a propelling force in man in trying to defend his father land, which involves bravery and selflessness. It is this kind of selfless bravely that made Moremi to be victorious. This is a commendable trait among Yoruba that such a woman is usually regarded as *Obirin takun takun*, (strong and brave woman), *Obirin bi Okunrin*, (a woman of man's strength), *Omoluwabi*, (well behaved), *Ogbori ekun*, (warrior) etc. The comparative analysis of a woman with a man makes the woman to be beautiful. These qualities that Yoruba admire are what Moremi epitomized.



Yoruba sculptures can be recognized by their realistic details, such as the hairdo (Fig 5), the headdress (Fig 6), scarification of the body (Fig 7) and the facial marks (Fig 8). All these are for the beautification of the body, but anything short of these are derided in Yoruba culture. These decorative elements take considerable time to be built by Yoruba women, even though it's just for the gratification of goodness, which beauty entails.

Yoruba regard clothing as something, which adds to a person's beauty, thus, the saying that *aso buyi kun eniyan*, (cloth is added value to man), (Lawal 1974: 14). The appearance of man is an important aspect of Yoruba aesthetics, thus the maxim *iri ni si ni iso ni lo'jo*, (a man commands respect according to his outlook). Clothing is used to build-up an acceptable appearance, which is an important element of Yoruba aesthetics.

In the traditional past only titled people were allowed to put on some traditional cloths with beads. The wrapping of *aso oke* cloth by Moremi from chest downward portrayed her as a titled woman (Fig 9). This way of wrapping without a blouse is for identification of the royalty. Heavy Beads are worn instead of a blouse as a mark of status and wealth, because these materials for beautification are expensive, which ordinary persons could not easily afford.

The *Oja*, waistband, is used mainly to hold the wrapper firmly in readiness for war or a fight. The first thing a Yoruba woman would usually do whenever a fight ensues is to tie her waistband to grip her wrapper and her waist firmly. Waistband (*Oja*), is used in different ways for different aesthetic purposes, for example, to hold a baby firmly to the back (Fig, 10). Yoruba cherish the use of waistband, as a result, would go for a very beautiful one, especially when the woman is coming out to the public with a new baby, thus the saying *emi ti iya bi, t'o fi oja aran pon* (I was born and backed with a velvet or woolen fabric). This gives a great feeling of self importance among men.

The use of *Oja* has now been incorporated into modern fashion. It is either creatively tied to the front (Fig 11) or to the back for ceremonies (Fig 12), it could as well be tied to the side (Fig 13). There is no stereotyped way it must be tied. Different types of fabrics are used as waist band. These could be traditional woven fabric or other more synthetic materials, such as damask.

The beautification of the body also entails the use of decorative hairdos. Elaborate hairdo could be a revelation of the whole of a woman's life,

because there are different styles of coiffure that reveal different personalities such as spinsters, married women, barren-women, bereaved-women, and those about to have children, (Negre, 1976:15).

The heavy beads worn by Moremi on her hair, neck, (Fig 2), wrists and ankles (Fig 1) are insignia of office. Ijisakin, (2004:88) affirms that Yoruba women basically use beads in order to show their positions in the society and at times for religious purposes.

### **Moremi Burst in Moremi Hall, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife**

Moremi burst is situated in front of Moremi Hall, a female hall of residence at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife (Fig 9). This is a memorial statue in a different posture. The burst depicted Moremi as dressed for an important occasion. Though this is heavily beaded, it has a diadem, which portrays her as title holder. A fabric is placed on her shoulder to complement her dressing.

### **Comparative Analysis of Moremi Statues**

Artists often create representational figures and statues in different postures, kneeling, which is often a sign of homage or standing, a sign of straightness and gait. These are beautifully depicted as a portrayal of the Yoruba tenets of beauty.

The burst depicted Moremi as dressed for an important occasion while the one in the palace is in readiness most probably for war. This statue is different from the one at the Ooni's palace in that the one at the Moremi hall portrays a mood perhaps in readiness for an outing, while the posture of the statue at the Ooni's palace portrays victory. Both statues tied wrapper over their breast which signify the official dressing of the Yoruba title leaders or holders. Different postures and gait communicate different meaning, which all together are beautiful. A kneeling statue for example could communicate humility or obeisance during worship (Adepegba, 1983: 18). It could also mean presenting a gift, or greeting, as in the case of a Yoruba woman.

### **Yoruba Colour Symbolism**

Yoruba's use of different colours, symbolizes different things. Indigo blue is a very precious colour that people wear for different ceremonies. Indigo blue in adire or traditional woven fabric is a favourite cool colour, which signifies cool character (iwa tutu). Beads also come in multi-coloured signifying different gods and ancestors. White is associated with purity and it is dedicated to Obatala (god of creation). Red is usually used to reverence

Sango god of iron because of its fierceness. These colours have the attributes of Yoruba religious beliefs and aspirations.

### **Conclusion**

Different sculptural pieces connote different aesthetic qualities. The aesthetic feelings derived from any artwork give a right of judgment since the end product of any African art is goodness, and this in turn gives pleasure to the soul. Viewing a memorial statue like Moremi, is like watching a legendary film. The pleasure derived from this, makes it a good and warm experience to the soul. Moremi an *Olori*, shows her extrinsic and intrinsic qualities by her attitude towards her community in delivering them from the invasion of Ugbo people. She was naturally beautiful and a well built personality. These attributes are well depicted in the sculptural pieces made as her memorial. Apart from her natural beauty, she added what the Yoruba philosophical thought would call *omoluwabi*.

In Yoruba culture, a leader who has lived a good life is usually immortalized through the erecting of his or her statue or burst at important places in the community, especially, the palaces in Yoruba land. Fadamiro (1999:101) buttresses this point by adding that ‘statues placed at key points of the city proclaim the sense of value placed on the place ..... They also indicate important directions; celebrate a citizen or a noteworthy event’. These types of statues offer the eye, a point of reference and a feeling of goodness from which pleasures are derived. Moremi statue in the Ooni’s palace fulfills these as it is aesthetically displayed. However, it is observed that the statues are not well maintained, especially the one in the palace which is expected to be given more attention because of its strategic location. There are many cracks and breakages noticed on the statue, which does not give it a pleasant look. More attention should be given to the maintenance of the two statues representing an important heroine in the history of the Ife people.

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Fig 1: Moremi Statue at Ooni's Palace Staff



Fig 2: Moremi Statue (holding a staff of office)



Fig 3: Moremi Statue (back view)



Fig 4: Moremi statue showing the Hairdo (2008)



Fig 5: Yoruba hairdo (courtesy Eve de Negre)



Fig 6: Headdress (adenla)



Fig 7: Scarification of the body  
(Courtesy Eve De Negre)



Fig 8: Yoruba facial mark

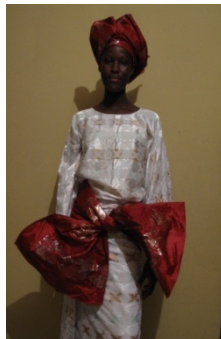


Fig 9: Moremi burst in front of O. A. U. Fig 10: Woman tying baby at the back with oja Fig 11: A Lady tying oja at the front



Fig13:A woman tying oja to the back the side (Courtesy Fashion magazine)

Fig 13: A woman tying oja to