

## **The Post-Colonial Dilemma, Impact and Implications on African Art Culture: Functional Shift in Lineage Woodcarving Art in Iseyin, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

A critical observation of post-colonial societies in Africa shows significant changes that have taken place in traditional communities, which have greatly affected, modified and re-invented the artistic and socio-cultural practices. The Yoruba traditional societies in Nigeria have also experienced this paradigm shifts. Iseyin, the case study of this article, is an important Yoruba town in the upper Ogun River, in Oyo State of southwestern Nigeria. Among the Yoruba, like most other African ethnic groups, artistic practices are lineage based and pass from generation to generation. In Iseyin, there is a lineage woodcarving tradition which had thrived well in the town for centuries. The objects that were carved functioned for purposes that were spiritual, religious, decorative, architectural and utilitarian and also provided socio-economic sustenance for the town. In contemporary times, there is a functional shift resulting from post-colonialism, which has impacted the lineage woodcarving art in the town and by extension its artistic culture. There is a dilemma in heredity, stylistic direction and patronage. The art practice is threatened by extinction. This paper, through qualitative field investigation examines the lineage woodcarving in Iseyin and the shift in practice and patronage against the backdrop of shifts in the traditional art culture of post-colonial African

societies. Internal and external factors such as western education, religion and technology are found to be responsible for the shifts. The effects are analyzed. The paper concludes by recommending several approaches for the revitalization of traditional art practices in contemporary times for sustainable artistic heritage and development in Africa.

**Keywords:** Art, Function, Iseyin, Lineage, Post-Colonial, Woodcarving, Southwestern Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

Iseyin is a Yoruba town in Southwestern Nigeria. It is in Oyo State, one of the six Yoruba States, namely, Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti and Lagos. Other states that the Yoruba can be found in Nigeria are Kwara, Kogi, Edo and Delta States. Historically, *Oduduwa* was believed to be the ancestor of Yoruba people. He is believed to have given birth to sons who founded various Yoruba sub-groups and famous ancient city-states. *Oranyan*, one of *Oduduwa's* descendants was said to be the progenitor of the major towns in the upper and some lower parts of Ogun River. Some important towns among these are Iseyin, Iberekodo, Eruwa, Iwawu and Erin (Egonwa, 2011, p. 47; Oladepo, 2005, p. 11). Iseyin is one of the major towns in the upper part of Oke-Ogun in Oyo State. The ancient town is located between latitude 759<sup>0</sup> north of the equator and latitude 34<sup>0</sup> east of the Greenwich Meridian. It is 72 kilometers north of the city of Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State and also about 44 kilometers northwest of Oyo, an ancient Yoruba kingdom. The population of Iseyin town was estimated to be around 300,000 in 2015. (Olaniyi, 2015, pp.239-252). Iseyin, like other Yoruba towns is rich in artistic culture. This art tradition had been of interest to many scholars such as Dodwell (1955), Bray (1968, 1969), Eicher (1976), Kalilu (1992), Adepegba (1995), Gbolagade (1998), Aremu (2001) and Babalola (2002). The interest of these scholars have been on woodcarving, body decoration, cloth weaving, pottery, blacksmithing, brass casting, aluminum casting, traditional tie and dye, cloth embroidery, leatherworks and other minor crafts such as gourd engraving (Babalola, 2002, p. 2). Like most traditional towns in Africa, particularly the Yoruba, art practices have been lineage based. Skills, practice and the entrepreneurship of specific arts have been transferred linearly from generation to generation for many centuries.

(Ife Yoruba art is dated for ca.900 AD). In Iseyin, as in other Yoruba groups, the right to carving is hereditary. The existing woodcarving lineages in Iseyin are Pete, Atena, Latula, Olumole, Agbanija, Agbaale, Ogbena, Oluwo, Jagun-Erin, Obadirere and Ogbena-Isalu.

Several studies previously done on the lineages of woodcarvers in Yorubaland reveal that among the Oyo-Yoruba, there is a name which is associated with the woodcarving lineages. The name is Abogunde. The name is reflected in the woodcarving lineages in Oyo, Ogbomoso, Iwo and Ede. The Abogunde lineage must have been renowned or famous woodcarvers among the Oyo-Yoruba. Adepegba (1995, p.48) mentioned that the Abogunde lineage's reputation for carving is hereditary. Aremu (2001, pp. 1-77) examined the Abogunde carving lineages among the Oyo-Yoruba and documented the Abogunde lineage in Oyo comprising of *Alaase*, *Ona Ibuke*, *Otun Ibuke* and *Arakende* as carving lineages associated with Arelagbayi of Old Oyo and lineages in Iseyin, Okeho and Ilero. *Arelagbayi* is mentioned in the documentation of the journal of the Akangbe family of Yoruba woodcarvers in West Africa by Akangbe-Ogun (2010, pp. 1-5). It confirmed that the practice of woodcarving is hereditary. Adekunle Akangbe-Ogun (2010) stated that his father Kasali Akangbe-Ogun came from a long line of Yoruba woodcarvers in Osogbo area of Osun State and Adekunle Akangbe-Ogun, a traditional woodcarver and contemporary sculptor, learned the art of carving from his father who was a master woodcarver. Akangbe-Ogun (2010, pp. 14) recorded that in the Yoruba culture, the lineage of woodcarvers are known as Arelagbayi and is similar to a guild or group of ancestral woodcarvers. He provided the information that in the handing down of the craft, the next generation learns practically and orally from the hands and mouths of revered parents physically and from the ancestors spiritually.

Kalilu (1992, pp. 78-88) in his study on the old Oyo empire in West African art, noted that the lineages still practicing woodcarving are in Oyo, Ede, Iwo, Okeho and Ogbomoso. He traced the origin of the woodcarving lineages of some of these carvers to old Oyo metropolis while some were not from old Oyo. The study serves as a basis for confirmation that woodcarving art is still being practiced in lineages in Yorubaland. Another study by Aremu and Akande (2008, pp. 22-27) attempted through the oral history tradition to trace the history of three lineages of woodcarvers in the present

Oyo town. Their works gave insights to this paper on the progression of woodcarving lineages in contemporary times. In the same vein, Adesanya's (1999, pp. 1-145) scholastic work on the famous Fakeye family and contemporary Yoruba wood carving tradition, documented the lineage origin and established the impact of lineage art system in the biographies of the outstanding carvers in the different generations of the lineage such as Fakeye Akobi-Ogun, Adewuyi Fakeye, Adeosun Fakeye, Lamidi Fakeye, Joseph Fakeye, Gani Fakeye, Akinlabi Fakeye, Bisi Fakeye and Akeem Fakeye. Further work on the Fakeye dynasty by Adepegba (2007, pp. 28-70) studied Bisi Fakeye as the sixth generation of the woodcarvers lineage.

Bisi Fakeye is of Inurin Compound and as the sixth generation of Fakeye family of carvers traces the history of the Fakeyes in the art of woodcarving to the mid-eighteen century. Stylistic pollination also occurred within lineages because of migration. Ojekunle (2005, pp. 19-31) in his work on Yoruba woodcarving tradition in Iwajowa Local Government Area of Oyo State identified four lineages practicing woodcarving in the area. His work revealed that Ayelan lineage of Owodo compound of Balogun quarters in Iganna migrated from Imala in Ogun State to settle at Iganna to practise wood carving. The Olawumi carvers of Elekokan inherited the art from their grandfather who was from old Oyo. Ewe lineage carvers of Iwere-Ile town have their own history that they migrated from Iganna and finally settled in Iwere-Ile to practice the art. Gbenagbena woodcarvers of Ijio-Meso town have their art inherited from the head of their lineage. Ojekunle's work brought into limelight that some woodcarvers' lineage are traceable to places different from their present locations. This can also affect the types of the art produced. These scholars focused on few lineages out of the numerous ones in several communities in the Yorubaland. However, common to the studies is the fact that the new generations have been confronted with changes that have redeveloped the woodcarving art stylistically, functionally, economically and spiritually. There are attendant changes in the lineage woodcarving practices. This paper's concern is the post-colonial shift in the practice and subsequently the function of the lineage art practice of woodcarving. The factors responsible for the shift, the impact and consequences are also documented. It is also about how the lineage art practice can be redirected in contemporary times to still achieve

sustainable human, cultural and artistic development in post-colonial Africa.

### **Methodology**

The methodology employed for this study is the art-historical approach. This is a qualitative method of field investigation that comprises oral interviews, direct observation of the artists while at work, critical study and analysis of carved objects and photographic documentation of art objects that were of interest and relevance to this research. Efforts were made to see antiquated and sacred works that were available in the lineage collections. Some ritual objects that were used only by initiates were not allowed to be seen or photographed by the woodcarvers and so oral descriptions of such carved works provided by the carvers sufficed. Review of related literature and archival records also contributed to this paper. The internet was searched for additional information.

### **Lineage Woodcarving in Iseyin: Aesthetics, Practice and Spirituality**

In Iseyin it is a common thing to carve wood when it is fresh and wet. The reason is that in that state the wood can easily be manipulated to achieve various shapes, patterns and designs. Wood can still be carved when dried, but it has to be soaked in water so as to maintain wetness and easy penetration of tools. The whole process of carving starts with the felling of a tree and cutting it into logs or other sizes depending on the object to be carved. Some common trees used in Iseyin are *Omo* (*Cordia Mileni*), one of the hardwoods in the area used for large drums and house posts because of durability and *Aayan* (*Afromesia Laxifora*), the tree that is used specifically for carving a ritual staff (*Ose Sango*). Other types of trees for carving are *Arere* (*Triplochiton Scleroxylon*), *Ire* (*Funtumia-Africana*), *Agano* (*Mahogany*), *Iroko* (*Chloraphoraexcelsa*), *Apa* (*Afezelia Species*), *Koleagbe*, *Idigbo*, *Gedu*, *Sipo* and *Oro* (Babalola, 2002, pp. 32-33). The types of objects that are carved in Iseyin can be categorized into three groups, namely, religious, architectural (decorative and ornamental) and utilitarian.

#### **(i) Religious Woodcarving**

Among the objects carved for religious uses are principal

representations of deities, gods and ancestral spirits. Some of them are free standing sculptures while some others are in the form of containers or high, bas and sunken reliefs. The images are humanoids (male and female), anthropomorphic and zoomorphic. Examples are *Ose Sango* (Figure 2), *Iroke Ifa* (Figure 3), *Ere Ibeji* (Twins Figure), *Esu* Figure (Figure 1), *Egungun* Head and Face Mask (Figure 4).

**(ii) Architectural (Decorative and Ornamental) Woodcarving**

This type of carving is used for the embellishment of the interior and exterior of buildings. Such are house posts and pillars (Figure 5), door panels, stools and other furniture (Figure 6). Others are prestigious, ornamental Staffs of office for the royalty, traditional priesthood and nobility in the town (Figure 11).



**Figure 1:** *Esu* Figure from Oluwo Oba



**Figure 2:** *Ose Sango* from Ayelade Woodcarving Lineage in Ekunle, Iseyin Woodcarving Lineage, Iseyin

Photograph: Babalola, S.A. (2018) Photograph; Babalola, S.A. (2018)



**Figure 3:** *Iroke Ifa* from Oluwo Oba



**Figure 4:** *Face Mask* from Ayelade Woodcarving Lineage, Iseyin Woodcarving Lineage, Iseyin

Photograph: Babalola, S.A. (2018) Photograph; Babalola, S.A. (2018)



**Figure 5:** *House Post* from Olona



**Figure 6:** *Door Panel* from Olona  
Woodcarving lineage Iserin, Iseyin  
Woodcarving lineage Iserin, Iseyin

*Photograph:* Babalola, S.A. (2018) *Photograph;* Babalola, S.A. (2018)

### **(iii) Utilitarian Woodcarvings**

These are objects carved for household use in everyday activities such as cooking utensils, relaxation games, musical instruments, dance equipment, tools and accessories for entertainment (Figures 7, 8, 9, 10).



**Figure 7:** *Oko Aso* (Cloth-weaving Shuttle)



**Figure 8:** Mortar from Pete  
from Atena Woodcarving Lineage,  
Iseyin Woodcarving Lineage, Iseyin

*Photograph:* Babalola, S.A. (2018) *Photograph;* Babalola, S.A. (2018)



**Figure 9:** A set of carved drum frames from Ayelade Woodcarving Lineage, Ekunle, Iseyin  
*Photograph: Babalola, S.A. (2018)*



**Figure 10:** *Carved Wooden Spoon*



**Figure 11:** *Carved Decorated Staff* from Ayelade Woodcarving Lineage, Iseyin Sango priest from Ayelade Lineage, Iseyin

*Photograph: Babalola, S.A. (2018) Photograph; Babalola, S.A. (2018)*

The process of woodcarving in Iseyin is both physical and spiritual. Physically, the method is subtractive, which means that unwanted parts of the log are gradually removed until the desired image or shape emerges or is revealed. It is after then that other



finishing is done. The woodcarver's tools are fashioned out by a blacksmith as the woodcarvers require them. Up till recently the carvers do not use imported power tools. Their tools are adzes, cutlasses and axes of different sizes with handles for cutting and surface carving. There are also other tools used for inner surface carving, smoothening, hollowing and grooving. Chisels and knives are used for design, detailing as well as smooth finishing. Each of those tools mentioned can be used for different purposes. For the Iseyin woodcarver, the spirituality of carving wood is a vital aspect that must not be left out. The first stage to be considered before setting out to carve is the imagination or conceiving of an idea of the object to be carved. This is done with the "inner eye" which the Yoruba call *Oju Inu*. This helps the woodcarver to know the log of wood needed, either big or small, tall or thin. It is this that makes the carver know the approach or the plan of action. According to Akangbe-Ogun (2010), "my Yoruba ancestors have walked for centuries in the forests ... searching for the wood which speaks to us, that will become a religious object for use in our traditions and rituals." Many of the woodcarvers claim that they communicate with the wood concerning the shape, type of object and function it should be worked into.

Ashiyebi (2007, p. 59) identified five main stages in Yoruba woodcarving. The first is *ona bubu*, which is blocking-out the forms on the log of wood. The second stage is *ona lile*, which is the initial carving-out to bring the shapes or the rough figure of the desired object. The third stage is called *ale tunle*, which is the shaping-out of all the features of the object. The fourth stage is *didan*, which has to do with surface smoothening. The fifth stage is *finfin*, which is the inscription of design. In confirmation, Adepegba (2007, p. 20) also outlined similar five stages of woodcarving in Yorubaland. According to him, stage one *issisa*, cutting out; stage two is *ona lile*, defining forms; stage three is *aletunle*, sharpening while stage four is *didan*, smoothening and the fifth stage is *finfin*, the inscription or incising the details. Akande (2015, p. 83) in his own study of Yoruba woodcarving also mentioned *ona lile* or *ona bubu* as roughing out; *alatunle* as redefining of forms into recognizable shapes; *didan* to mean the polishing of surfaces and lastly *finfin* which is the cutting of sharp details on the surface for design. In Iseyin, the observation showed that all these technical processes were meticulously followed.

Aesthetically, the Iseyin woodcarvings are typically Yoruba. Central to Yoruba aesthetics are the concepts of balance and strength; figuratively, morally and spiritually. Hence the forms are symmetrical and dignified with many negative spaces. There is clarity of content, form and function of objects. The human forms are often stylized with elongated necks and faces and elaborate coiffures. The faces are characterized with large bulging eyes, protruding lips and a head that is proportionately larger to the body (Figures 1, 2). The objects are embellished with geometric designs commonly made up of zigzag, straight, circular and spiral lines. (Figures 5, 6). Sometimes the objects are painted or stained with dye or blood depending on the function (Figure 11) ([www.tribalnow.wordpress.com](http://www.tribalnow.wordpress.com)).

### **Paradigm Shift in Artistic Culture and Lineage Woodcarving in Iseyin and Its Implications**

There is a paradigm shift in the socio-cultural and artistic spheres of Iseyin, which has affected the lineage woodcarving culture tremendously. The changes are observable in the practice of the carvers, the types of objects that are carved and the level of patronage. Wahab, Odunsi, and Ajiboye (2012, pp. 1-7) claim that the causes and consequences of the fast wearing-away of cultural values in traditional societies are attributed to the social relationship with colonialism, alien cultural patterns and practices plus impacts of western civilization. The position of Etukudoh, Oyeoku and Ezemokwe (2018, pp. 25-33) is that continuity and change in most African societies are linked with independent innovative inventions, diffusion, modernization and urbanization. The scholastic work of Cochrane (1996, pp. 1-31) entitled "Woodcarving in Aburi: A Change in Tradition" reveal that the formidable factors of changes in woodcarving in Africa are religion, education, social institutions and functionality of the objects being carved. The influence of the lifestyle of the carver on the object carved also causes significant changes. In the last one century tremendous changes have occurred in African traditional societies. Factors responsible for these are both external and internal. Since culture is not static, it succumbs to changes. This is what happened to the lineage woodcarving art in Iseyin. Adepegba (1995, p. 79) is of the opinion that traditional African life was influenced and a lot of changes took place as a result of uncontrolled

exposure to alien culture. During the 19th and 20th centuries, there was inroad into Yorubaland through the western coast of Nigeria by the Europeans. This was the time the slave trade ended, the British and Portuguese that came in contact with the Yoruba introduced their own culture which in turn created a new cross-culture, thereby impacting the tradition of woodcarving. Also from northern Nigeria through the trans-Sahara trade, external influences encroached.

One overwhelming external influence is western education. Education is not alien to Yoruba people since there had been traditional education. The introduction of western education with the establishment of formal schools did no little change to traditional art. The books used in those schools were heavily illustrated with western art. Also, there was the introduction of posters, billboards, etc., that promoted western aesthetics and formalism. These had effects on traditional artistic idioms and concepts. The resultant effect was the entrance of new artistic culture. The teachers of art in those days were from Europe such as Kenneth Murray who taught art in Lagos in 1927. New modern artists like the Yoruba painter Aina Onabolu, who was a self-trained artist, also started practicing the new arts. According to Aluko (2007, p. 111), free education that was introduced in the Yoruba-dominated southwestern region of Nigeria in the 1960s made a large population have the opportunity to acquire western education. Many of such educated members of the lineage who could have been apprentices to the master woodcarvers were no more available and gradually the lineage started to dwindle.

Religion is another strong factor responsible for the changes in art in Yorubaland of which Iseyin is inclusive. Before the introduction of Christianity into Yorubaland, there had been a system of purely traditional woodcarving that was in line with the traditional religion of the people in the community. The conversion of many carvers from traditional religion to Christianity made the content of art to give way for new styles and functions. The establishment of art workshops at Oye-Ekiti in 1947, mentioned by Adepegba (1995, p. 81); Ayodele (2010); and Ayodele and Adediran (2017, pp. 11-17) and similar art centres in southwestern Nigeria greatly influenced the paradigm shift in no small way. The centres encouraged aesthetic and stylistic continuity but changed the functions to serve the Christian ideology. Oye-Ekiti experiment specifically featured only

Christian themes. Carving techniques were also modified with western tools. These brought about new functions which were alien to Yoruba art and culture. Islamic religion also contributed a lot to the shift in art in Iseyin because Islam does not accept or encourage figural sculpture.

At present, some carvers in Iseyin who are devoted to their new faith do not carve figural sculpture. All that they carve are utilitarian objects such as spoons, shuttles, mortars, pestles, wooden trays and plates. Some Muslim carvers simply abandoned their crafts for other vocations. All these and other accumulated effects made the people develop a new attitude to traditional woodcarving and the lineage system suffered. There was an emergence of a new genre of woodcarving art that did not function for ritual, spiritual or cult purposes. The new functions were tourism, graphical symbolism and consumer items. The introduction of modern technologies and other innovations gradually gave woodcarving tradition a new face. Ojuade (2005, p. 23) examined the transition from manual tools to mechanical and power tools with the use of simple machines for multiple tasks such as carving, cutting, incising and smoothening surfaces which gave way from the labourious manual methods inherited traditionally. There are lathe machines that can turn the wood, and do other things by just simple manipulation by one person. Door panels and posts can easily be produced within a short period. The finishing of the mechanically carved objects compared to the traditionally produced ones show a great difference in clarity, precision, accuracy and smooth surface finishing.

Cultural and lifestyle changes are inevitable in the face of cultural dynamism. Artists often depict the changing world and traditions also tend to follow the trends in society. For example, there were times when the people smoked tobacco using carved wooden pipes but not anymore. Such pipes have been replaced by cigarettes. Such changes are very impactful because culture and tradition cannot be separated. Culture is the custom or arts and habits that characterize any particular society while the tradition is a part of culture which is passed from generation to generation. Jegede (2003, p. 42) noted that tastes, fashion and recreations have had gross effect on woodcarving. Almost all the objects that were previously carved in wood are now replaced with either metal, plastic and concrete or other modern materials which are more sophisticated and durable.

Examples of such are metal doors, roofing sheets, concrete pillars, and metal cutlery. The Yoruba lineage and communal compound called *Ago Ile* with a rectangular courtyard gave way for blocks of flats, duplexes and self-contained rooms. The aftermath of this is a new way of life in the society which is less communal and the diminishing of the cherished lineage transfer of skills, vocations and art. This has also affected the patronage. In the search for sustainable livelihood, many woodcarvers have completely changed their occupations from fulltime woodcarving to part-time, while others left for other sustainable jobs to provide for the family. In Iseyin it was observed that some members of carving lineages have turned to trading in wood.

The urban centres in Yorubaland have fully embraced the post-colonial changes but this research in Iseyin shows that the traditional communities are in dilemma of struggling to maintain the status quo under the overwhelming pressure from the forces of change. A dwindling number of woodcarvers in the lineages are still practicing within the ancient borders. Their forms, styles and content of work may vary according to their exposure and individual ingenuity, but the carvings remain within the fundamental influence of ritual, myth, historical patterns and traditional conceptual perspectives. Patronage of this art has fallen so low that the few carvers also engage in vocations such as farming, trading and teaching. This lineage woodcarving art in Iseyin is under the threat of extinction.

### **Conclusion**

The type of woodcarving in Iseyin will remain local and may not be recognized in the international market unless it is reassessed and repositioned for new values. Rather than leaving the lineage art tradition, contemporary educated youth in Africa should expand the borders of functionality of such arts to revitalize and re-empower the arts. The subject matter of portraying ancestors, gods, heroes and kings may have become obsolete and new subject matters that are contemporarily topical can be pursued. Contents such as racism, crime, gender wars, modern professionalism and politics will help the inclusion of such arts into the global art dialogue. A syncretism of antiquarian forms, styles, modern tools and contemporary content will create a new identity for African traditional art and boost international patronage. Culture is dynamic and so post-colonial

African societies must develop and not be static or backward because they want to maintain cultural, spiritual and traditional status quo. If modern technology provides better, easier and more efficient tools and equipment for art production, then the communities should embrace such technology for efficiency and modernization.

The lineage art system can be sustained with modern managerial approaches. According to Akangbe-Ogun (2010), Adekunle Akangbe-Ogun a scion of a famous Yoruba woodcarving lineage has become a contemporary artist. He learned from the preservation of his family's lineage hunting, craftsmanship, tool-making and construction. By learning the art of woodcarving from his forbear, there was a foundation for his contemporary style of neo-traditional artworks that have been sold worldwide. The uniqueness of individual lineage artistic trademark can be adapted for craftsmanship, stylistic idioms and representation by professionals and construction developers in public art, urban planning, architecture, community development, cultural and urban landscaping and interior design. By extension, this will help sustainable art training/education, cultural education and integration, tourism, ancestral heritage in the development of human inclusion, rights and identity. With such direction, there will be hope for the sustenance and development of traditional artistic systems in Africa.

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