

TRENDS IN OWO TRADITIONAL SCULPTURES: 1995 – 2010

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Abstract

This study probes into the origin, style and patronage of the traditional sculptures in Owo kingdom between 1950 and 2010. It examines comparatively the sculpture of the people and its affinity with Benin and Ife before and during the period in question with a view to predicting the future of the sculptural arts of the people in the next few decades. Investigations of the study rely mainly on both oral and written history, observation, interviews and photographic recordings of visuals, visitations to traditional houses and Owo museum, oral interview of some artists and traditionalists among others. Oral data were also employed through unstructured interviews which bothered on analysis, morphology, formalism, elements and features of the forms, techniques and styles of Owo traditional sculptures, their resemblances and relationship with Benin and Ife artefacts which were traced back to the reigns of both Olowo Ojugbelu 1019 AD to Olowo Oshogboye, the Olowo of Owo between 1600 – 1684 AD, who as a prince, lived and was brought up by the Oba of Benin. He cleverly adopted some of Benin's sculptural and historical culture and artefacts including carvings, bronze work, metal work, regalia, bead work, drums and some craftsmen with him on his return to Owo to reign. He later fought the Benin and defeated them after studying their culture and war tactics for so many years (The Royal Gazette magazine). The study later reveals that despite diverse problems ranging from both internal and external influences, the trend of the traditional sculptures continues unabated with some modifications as affected by both western religion and education.

Introduction

Africa is a large continent with various nationalities and potentials for creativity varying from place to place. Some parts are noted for carving of wooden masks and quarts stools for decoration of their royal palaces as in Shebro of Sierra Leone, Nupe, Benin, Ijaw, Ebara and Yoruba of Nigeria also among some Nigerian cultures like Ife, Benin, and Nok. Ogunmola, M.O (2004). In this study, trends in Owo traditional sculptures, 1950-2010 are discussed, the artistry and materials used are analysed. The socio-religious, educational, political and economic significance and characteristics of the sculpture within the period in scope are examined. Perhaps, the reign of Olowo Oshogboye coupled with his love and flair for art and subsequent introduction and injection of Benin culture into Owo traditional system in areas of chieftaincy titles, socials, cults, street names, music, dance and royal costumes etcetera propelled, rekindled and influenced the love of the people for the arts and artefacts in no small measure beside the ones they brought from Ife. After the renowned traditional homes of arts and artefacts such as Nok, Ife, Benin and Igbo Ukwu, Owo comes next. The various terra cottas excavated and other artefacts found and kept in the National museum archives in Owo and other museums all over the world especially, the masks of various sizes, shapes and designs dated back to the 14th AD are living testimonies of Owo cultural heritage. Calabash decorations and masquerade's masks in sub-Saharan Africa possess the most visible evidence of ancient sculptural tradition in Africa. These depict African creativity, styles and sources of development (Ogunmola 2004).

Owo in History

Owo is situated approximately mid-way between Ile-Ife and Benin south west of Nigeria and one of the largest indigenous towns in the present Ondo State of Nigeria with a population of about a quarter of a million people according to 2006 National Census. It is about 48 km to Akure the state capital. Visona *et al*, (2008) state that "in centuries past, Owo was a powerful city whose influence extended over a broad area". They also asserted that "the kingdom was founded from Ife and that the first ruler/Oba/Olowo was the youngest son of Oduduwa". Oduduwa traditionally is believed to be the progenitor of the Yoruba race.



Oba David Folagbade Olateru Olagbegi III “the Olowo of Owo” 1999-date. Photo extracted from the Olowo’s Palace Owo

Location: the palace of Olowo of Owo.

Photo: Aseniserare Omololu, 2015.



Deji, listening to the palace's custodians of Owo Oral traditional History.

Photo: Omololu Aseniserare, 2015.

Location: Olowo's palace, Owo

Oral interview with Madam Apogun (102 years) and the palace's custodian of Owo oral traditional history stated that Ojugbelu was the youngest of the sixteen children of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yorubas. His other brothers divided their father's properties and went to found other kingdoms, while Ojugbelu was out on hunting expedition in the woods. On his return, he had learnt about his brothers' plot, he took what was left of his father's properties in hand and accompanied by some chiefs, headed eastward to found Owo. He later became the first Olowo. During their sojourn through the forest, Ojugbelu and his retinue navigated smoothly with the aid of some monkeys, which led them to their final destination. The monkeys' assistance did not go unrewarded as, till date, they are totem animals that remain food taboo for many members of the royal family and the Iloros (chiefs) who were in his company. Since their arrival in the 12th century, Owo people have developed an exquisite genre of art works executed in wood, terracotta, ivory, coral, textile, bronze and other media'. These artefacts are used in the museum exhibition to remind people of the great traditions embodied in Owo art. However, the vegetational location of Owo aided its massive production of both food and cash crops like yam, maize, cassava, coffee palm tree etc. and abundant availability of some carveable woods such as iroko (*chlorophora excels*) erinmado (*riconidenoronapricanum*) omon (*cordiamillinii*) and many others. These trees are very good for various types of carving such as veranda posts, doors, pillars, bowl, ifa tray and religious objects for worship and so on.

The Owo people have preserved and promoted their material and non-material cultural heritage which has reinforced their sense of identity. Some of their craft works includes pendants, bracelets, necklaces, bangles, beads, and the popular costume – Orufanran, which is

one of the mementoes brought from Benin by prince Osogboye, the favorite son of Olowo Omaro and heir apparent to the throne who was assigned to Benin to understudy the Benin military organization and tap from her rich cultural heritage in order to boost his artistic desires in 1554 under the tutelage of Oba Ewuare Abiodun, R.

Ife – Owo- Benin Affinity

Owo traditional art like most other traditional cultures was informed and influenced by some other factors or civilizations. The excavation expedition carried out at “Igbo’ laja; Owo in 1969 by Ekpo Eyo, who was the Director of the Federal Department of Antiquities, where his team unearthed mainly terra –cotta objects showed the evidence of external influence. The finds demonstrated close links with the Ife terra cottas and bronzes as well as the Benin bronzes and wood carvings. The Igbolaja finds were dated to 15th century A.D and they provided concrete evidence of the dual influence of Ife and Benin on Owo art.



The excavation expedition carried out at “Igbo’ laja; Owo in 1969 by late Professor Ekpo Eyo, former Director of the Federal Department of Antiquities.

Source: extracted from the National Museum Owo archive.

Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015.

Most of the Igbo laja’ objects relate to the theme of sacrifice, which was connected to the appeasement and appeal for assistance to Oronsen and the Igogo festival. Abiodun revealed that, Oronsen was the beautiful, influential and powerful Queen of Olowo Rerengenjen who, according to oral tradition forbade some taboos, left the palace in anger after a confrontation with her co-wives who performed those Taboos in order to eject her from the palace because of her overweening pride over her mates. She sojourned to a place which coincides with igbo’ laja location where she disappeared into the earth.

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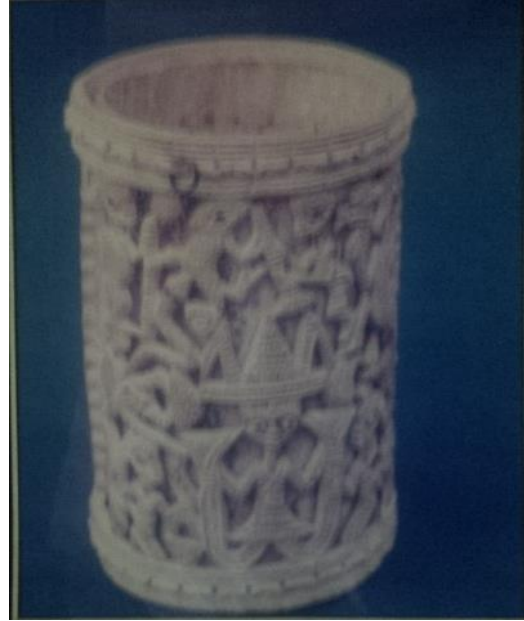
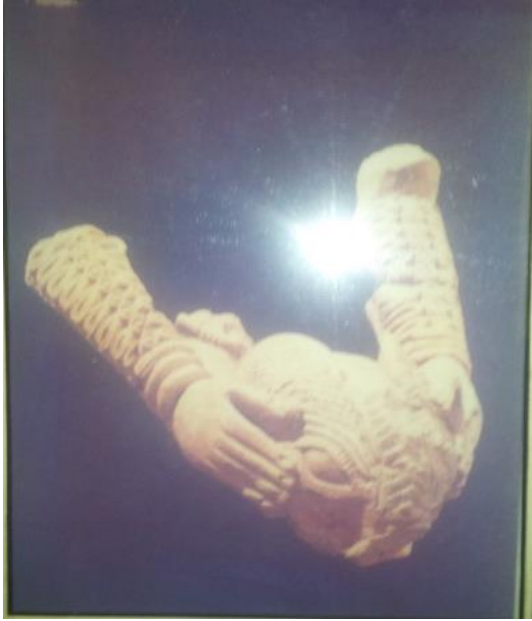


Some of the Igbo'laja excavated objects.

Photo extracted from the National Museum Owo archive.

Photo: Aseniserare Omololu, 2015

Members of the search party from the palace caught up with her at Igbo'laja and tried to force her back to the palace. The Queen rebuffed their appeals and disappeared, leaving her head gear (Oja) with them as a sign, hence the place was called Igbo'laja" the grove of oja." Abiodun R.; (1989:101) The excavated objects from this grove reveal similarity in style between Owo arts and that of Ife and Benin; many theories have been developed to explain this phenomenon and some scholars are of the view that the source of the naturalistic phase in Owo art is Ife. Abiodun opines that some of these objects must have been originally brought from Ife, However, Owo history records another possible source of the affinity between Owo and Benin objects.



Object showing similarity in style between Owo and Benin sculptural pieces.

Source: extracted from the National Museum Owo archive,

Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015.

According to an oral interview with Madam Apogun 102 years, ‘tradition had it that during the reign of Olowo Omaro, the king appreciated the need to study Benin’s unique military organization which resulted in the wonderful victory and enhanced the rapid expansion of their empire across the south- south and part of south western part of Nigeria. The desire to tap from her rich cultural heritage in order to boost his aristocratic desires in 1554, led him to send his favorite and articulate son and a heir apparent to the throne, prince Osogboye to Benin to understudy Benin under the tutelage of Oba Ewuare. After a period of tutelage, even though the Oba refused to allow him back as scheduled to rule after the demise of his late father, the crown prince found his way back to Owo by all means with a lot of Benin cultural materials and the skill of their production’.

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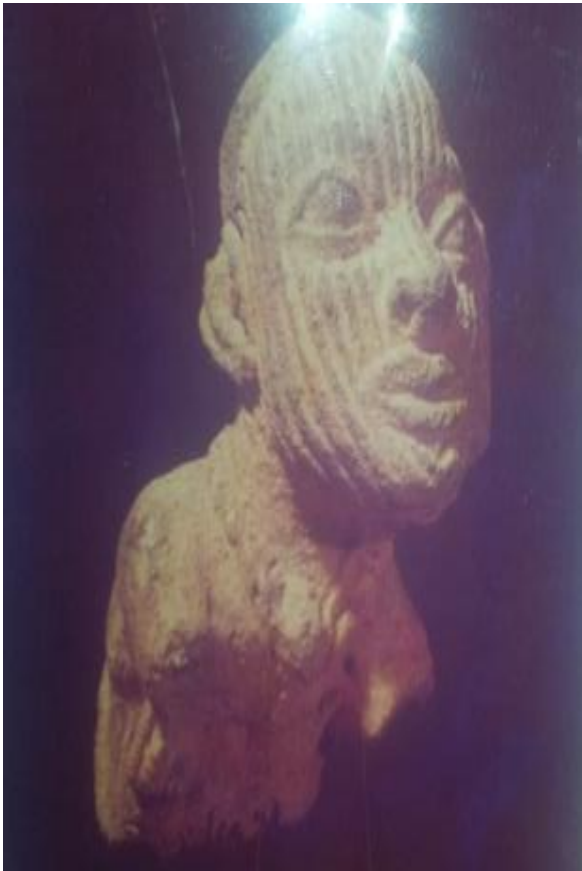


Affinity in Benin and Owo royal costume.

Source: extracted from the National Museum Owo archive,

Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015

This theory of contact and common ancestry has shed more light on the affinity characterizing Ife, Benin and Owo art forms. For instance, Ife facial striations can be found on some Owo objects, while an Owo terra cotta head bearing Benin facial keloids was found among the Igbo'laja materials.



Ife facial striations found on some Owo terra cotta,
Source: extracted from the National Museum Owo archive,
Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015

In addition, similar concepts woven around the ram head, divination tapper, door panels and ceremonial swords, as well as some items of personal adornment are present in the art works of the three communities.



Some items of personal adornment present in the art work of the three communities.

Source: extracted from the National Museum Owo archive,

Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015

Phases of Sculptural Trends

1. Traditional Phase:

The word ‘traditional’ is defined by Oxford Advance Dictionary as “being part of beliefs, customs or ways of life of a long time. It is by following older methods and ideas rather than modern or different ones”. Traditional art therefore means the use of a medium or a combination of media for expression in a way that reflects the people’s culture and belief. Traditional African artists are those who are engaged in art works with expressions based on the tenets of African culture. He himself lives within his tribe, follows the styles and concepts which he might have learnt from older generations. On this note, Leuzinger (1976) described traditional African artists as “having always a close link with his community and is never in opposition to it or in reaction against it. Its customs and images are also his own, for he has grown up with them, and they have trained him”.

Before 1950, Owo sculpture was basically for traditional religions and domestic purposes. The artists produced art forms for the use of traditional religious worship in various shrines and temples using wood and modelling media, leaving the priests as their major patron. The palace equally patronized the artists following the introduction of Benin system of socio – political administration into Owo culture by Olowo Osogboye in 1600 AD, but not as elaborate as it was in Benin Kingdom. Apart from these, art works such as traditional woven cloths (Seghosen, Olorimeji, Iketa), among others, meant for the use of the Oba, chiefs and the nobles were in vogue, while others like basket, mats, clay pot of different sizes and shapes used for different purposes such as cooking, fetching and storage of water for consumption, masks of various shape, sizes and designs for different masquerades in Owo kingdom thrive in the market. The traditional carvers equally enjoyed the patronage of the public through the production of some crafts and local technologies such as farming, hunting and fishing tools and implements for little cash or in exchange for food.



Some traditional artefacts and ancestral worshipping gods (Egungun) in Owo.
Source: Extracted from the National Museum Owo archive,
Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015

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Traditional door panel and house post

Location: Oba's palace, Owo

Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015

Nevertheless, the amalgamation of Benin artistic system introduced by Prince Osogboye, and the one brought by the Olowo Ojugbelu from Ife with the ones on ground which were in practiced by the Elefenes whom Ojugbelu met on his arrival from Ile – Ife boosted the Owo art and cultural heritage. It equally emphasized and confirmed the Ife – Owo – Benin affinity, hence making Owo art especially the sculpture, the hybrid of Ife and Benin art. The period under review passed through the three phases. The traditional phase of the period under review 1950 – 2010 falls between 1950 – to date, 60s when the formal art schools and workshop began to surface. There were two major ways by which the traditional carvers of the period passed on knowledge to the new generation of carvers under this phase;

1. Through voluntary apprenticeship system, and,
2. Through involuntary apprenticeship.

The former was a system whereby any member of the family voluntarily releases himself to learn the art from a master for some specific periods of time. While the latter was a system whereby a close member of the family chooses to stay with either his father or uncle who was a carver after the day's work from the farm in the evening and by so doing, started to help him either to hold the wood or to smoothen the carved objects gradually until he begins to work on some simple carving objects which the master would start to correct or assist to put finishing touches until he becomes perfect to pick up the trade unconsciously.

However, basically all the sculptural work rendered under this phase were made of wood medium using very crude carving tools like “Osese” carving axe, cutlass with either stone or sand paper leaf (ewe upen) as smoothing material instead of sand paper of various degree of coarse surface.

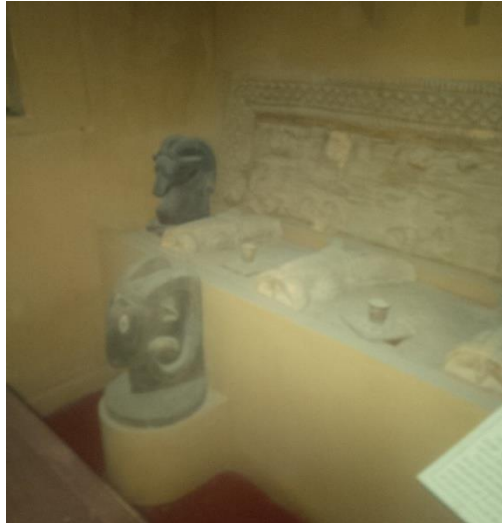
Oloro revealed that, their patrons remain the palace to whom the carvers produced the court art similar to that of Benin, the traditional religion priests who also commissioned the carvers to produce different types of carved images for traditional worship part of which were discovered at Asobe shrine at Iloro quarters and Chief Oludasa’s shrine at Oludasa Street, all at Owo. Others are mask carved in various shapes and designs for the use of various masquerades such as Aladoko, Efon, Agbodogin etc.

The sculptors under this period were prominent in the production of “ere ibeji” Twin carved figures and Ako the carved image of a late king or noble for second burial, the former was used to replace the demise of one of the twin while the latter was used to immortalize a departed influential member of the society as the figure of the departed would be carved to resemblance or near resemblance and dressed in the popular attire of the departed, placed in an open place in his house.

However, this phase terminated with the advent of Chief J.D. Akeredolu, an international renown carver’s emergence in the art of carving in the mid-60s.



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Some Owo ancestral shrines.

Location: Olowo's palace, Oludasa's traditional house and the National Museum, Owo

Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015



Pillars and lintels of Oludasa' sancenstral shrine adorned and decorated with different motifs

Location: High Chief Oludasa Palace, Owo

Photo: Deji Aseniserare



Some traditional drums for various festivals carved by the traditional carvers in Owo kingdom

Location: The Olowo palace

Photo: Deji Aseniserare

2. **Transitional Phase**

This is a period of interregnum, a period of confusion and a phase that brought a very rapid change to the artistic landscape of Owo kingdom through two major events viz. The advent of western education and the introduction of foreign religions, Islam and Christianity to Africa which in effect had a very significant change over Owo art and culture.

Before the 9th century almost everything about Africa was seriously misinterpreted by the west. It is also pathetic that these misinterpretations and misrepresentations of traditional African art and culture are yet to be put into proper place of recognition in the world art in general. It is on this basis that the Europeans introduced the foreign religion to fight our traditional religion led by the traditional priests who were the major patrons of the traditional art. However, the advent of western Education later paved ways to some young artists to join their contemporaries in the school then which gave them the opportunity and insight to other western system and styles of art. Prolific artists like late Chief Lasekan, sculptor and painter, Chief J.O. Akeredolu carver, Professor Abiodun, painter and art critic among others were the pioneer of Western Education in art which placed Owo kingdom on the artistic world map.

The formal Education and the establishment of some art institutions such as Yaba College of Art and Science, now Yaba College of Technology (TabaTech), Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Ife, Ile –Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University Ile –Ife among numerous art institutions dotted all over the country today. Owo before this time engaged in the informal mean of training her young artists. Some families are known with some artistic trade. They go ahead to allow their children to understudy them while children from other families were disallowed. But the advent of western education put a halt to such a selfish act and throw open the learning of any branch of art to all and sundry.

These group of men formed the early contemporary artists in Owo, they introduced Western styles and media of sculpture to replace the hitherto traditional systems of wood carving, their patrons and commissions changed drastically from the usual traditional religious

priests and their commissioned art works such as mask, for various masquerade, (OponIfa) divination tray, (ere Ibeji and ako) carved image of the twin and the deceased meant for the second burial in Owo changed to the Christian religion priests with the commission of the churches' need such as carved pulpits, door panels narrating Bible stories etc to the beautification objects for the palace, chiefs and nobles in their palaces and houses to exhibit their affluence and wealth. According to Adejemilua (2011) "Eventually the western education introduced thus served to alienate its beneficiaries from their cultural milieu and in the process making them cultural hybrids." Buttressing this submission, Beier (1968) enunciates

The School with new Christianity thrown in also brought new jobs, money, power, new form of enjoyment. On the whole the (African) exchange his service tradition for a sense of 'Highlife' for an indulgence in the unlimited possibilities that the culture contact offered.

Apart from the emergence of the various art schools during the period in question, various art workshops started to spring up in various part of the country such as;

1. Mbari Mbayo Art Workshop, Osogbo (1961)
2. The AgbarhaOtor Harmattan Workshops, AgbarhaOtor, Delta State around(1965)
3. Abayomi Barber Art Workshop/School, Lagos
4. Oye Ekiti Workshop, Oye, Ekiti State (1947)
5. Ori Olokun Workshop, Ile-Ife (1969)

This was the period Chief J.D. Akeredolu introduced his carving workshop in Owo where many carvers got trained. Some of the products of this workshop are Ale Joseph, Olulaja Akeredolu, Samuel Olokun, Oloye Fajana among others who later took up various commission works in Owo and its environ between 1965–1995. Some of their works are; St. Patrick's Anglican Church, Ijebu Owo's door panels, St. Andrew's Cathedral Church, Imola Street, Owo and Christ's Apostolic Church, Owo's door panels showing various Bible stories among other wooden carved objects such as pulpit, priests' chairs' Olowo's stool, Palace doors and some wooden pillars and posts in the Palace's court yard. They also have majority of the Chiefs and nobles as their patrons. This phase equally bred healthy rivalry among the carvers while others started the use of modern tools and application of enamel or wood polish on the surfaces of their work, unlike the era of the traditional phase as submitted by Adejemilua (2011)

Gradually, European standards represented the pinnacle to which the Nigerian aspired. Acquisition of western education and the use of foreign goods eventually became prestige and honor symbols. As a result in Nigeria, artists in the pre-independence era such as Aina Onabolu (1882-1963), Justus Akeredolu (Owo) (1915-1983) and Akinola Lasekan (Owo) (1916-1972), prided themselves in the representation of western formalistic tendencies that were not geared towards anything reminiscent of the traditional arts.

3. **Modern /Contemporary Period/ Phase:**

Contemporary Owo artists like their counterparts all over Nigeria in particular and Africa at large are equally influenced by the new materials, tools, patrons etc. This is the period that gave birth to the new generation artists through the formal system of Education, while some traditional artists that love change and wish to improve on their area of specialization employed the opportunity to upgrade themselves and metamorphosed from traditional artists to modern and contemporary artists after they passed through series of academic courses in the art institutions, a good example of these were Chiefs Akinola Lasekan and J. Akeredolu who thereafter, carried out both solo and joint art exhibitions within and outside Nigeria such as the United Kingdom and United State of America (USA) The contemporary artists now changed their style, medium and patrons to suit the need of their modern communities. Instead of working for the priests in the shrine, the Christian Priests now engaged the Sculptors in some commissioned sculptural work in their churches, for example, the Pew, carved panel doors, altar, images of Jesus and his disciples, Mary the mother of Jesus and so on in replacement of the carved objects of worship in the traditional shrines. They now render their works in modern styles, medium or mixed media such fiber glass, [P.O.P] plaster of Paris, stained glass, mortal etc for their patrons, they sometimes paint or polish their products which were never done in the traditional period.

There are now diversification of styles, medium and functionality of the traditional art. Patronage system has changed today, they are no longer limited or confined to the palace or religious patrons alone, but others are inform of architectural beautification for anyone who could afford it.



Some modern sculptural works, painted for the churches and patrons relaying Bible stories.

Source: St. Andrew's Cathedral Church, Owo.

Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015.



Some sculptural door panels for the church relaying Bible stories.
Source: St. Andrew's Cathedral Church, Owo.

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Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015.

Apart from these, the contemporary Owo modern artists like their counterparts in other areas ignored the tradition and social limitations imposed on them by their masters and customs to produce aesthetic sculptural pieces such as flower planters, water fountain, burst and other sculptural pieces rendered in various media for decorations and other aesthetic purposes of their patrons. The artists also go as far as to modern wall, pillar and ceiling decoration among others.



Some modern sculptural beautification items.

Source: Aseniserare's residence

Photo: Deji Aseniserare, 2015.

Conclusion

The paper has traced the Owo art genealogy and established a genealogical affinity with Ife and Benin. The paper noted that the development of Owo traditional art was marked by three different periods namely, traditional period being before the 1950s and also a period when the artists produced art forms for the use of traditional religious worship in various shrines and temples using wood and modelling media, leaving the priests as their major patron, Transitional period being a period of gradual incursion in western artistic repertoire; Contemporary period being when the younger generation have fully embraced the opportunities afforded by late global capitalism. The trends in Owo traditional sculpture goes on unabated from strength to strength, delivering the purposes for which they were being produced for their patrons. While the artists keep making their money, their patrons have value for their money.

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