

Divinity, Creativity and Humanity in Yoruba Aesthetics

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Art features prominently in all aspects of life in indigenous African cultures partly because of its ontological significance and partly because of its aesthetic, social, political and religious functions. Its ontological significance derives from a widespread creation myth that identifies the human body as a piece of sculpture fabricated by a Supreme Divinity or an artist deity.¹ The sculpture becomes animate after receiving a life-force or soul. One is alive so long as the soul remains in one's body. Death occurs when the soul leaves that body to continue its existence in the hereafter. In short, this myth not only relates divinity, creativity and humanity in African thought, it makes the capacity to create and appreciate art an integral part of human nature, accounting for the aesthetic impulse in all aspects of life—from body adornment and architecture to the decoration of household/ceremonial objects and the use of sculptures and masks to embody and communicate ideas. Space limitations will not allow a detailed discussion of this phenomenon in different African cultures.² Rather, I will concentrate on the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin in West Africa among whom I have conducted field research since the 1960s.

1. The Yoruba

Numbering over 25 million people, the Yoruba inhabit present-day republics of Nigeria, Benin and Togo. Most of them live in southwestern Nigeria. They have two traditions of origin, the mythological and historical. The mythological tradition claims that the Yoruba have occupied their present habitat since creation. The historical tradition, on the other hand, holds that they (or some of them) were immigrants

from the “Northeast” led by one *Oduduwa*. After subjugating the aboriginal population of Ile-Ife (the town now regarded as the cradle of Yoruba culture) during the first millennium of the Christian era, the immigrants reportedly settled there, establishing a ruling dynasty whose powers later spread to other parts of present-day Yorubaland.³

2. *Worldview, Religion, Ethics and Aesthetics*

Like many other African peoples, the Yoruba trace the origin of the world to a Supreme Divinity called *OLODUMARE*—the Eternal One, *ELEDA*—the Creator of All that Exists and *ALASE*—the source of *ase*, the enabling power that transforms, creating something out of nothing, changing materials from one state to another, imparting motion to the motionless, and life to the lifeless. However, unlike the Supreme Divinity of other African cultures, *OLODUMARE* seldom not create directly, but acts through a host of lesser deities or nature forces known as the *orisa*. Each *orisa* personifies an *ase* associated with a natural or cultural phenomenon. Thus *Obatala* exemplifies creativity; *Orunmila*, wisdom and clairvoyance; *Oduduwa*, divine kingship; *Osanyin*, curative medicine; *Sopona*, diseases, especially smallpox; *Ogun*, tools, weapons and warfare; *Yemoja*, water and motherhood; *Orisa Oko*, agriculture; *Sango*, thunderstorm and social justice; *Oya*, tornado; *Osun*, fertility and beauty; *Osumare*, rainbow; and so on. The deity *Esu* occupies a special position among the *orisa* by virtue of his being the divine messenger and distributor of *ase*. Yoruba religion focuses on the veneration of the *orisa*, since they act as intermediaries between humanity and *OLODUMARE*. It is to them that shrines are built and sacrifices offered.

According to Yoruba cosmology, only the primeval waters existed below the sky in the beginning. Later *OLODUMARE* gave *Oduduwa* a chicken and bag of sand with which to transform some portion of the waters into habitable land. *Oduduwa* descended from the heavens with a chain, poured the sand on the waters and released the chicken. The latter scattered the sand in all directions, eventually creating the earth and the rivers within it.⁴

The Yoruba word for art is *ona*, meaning “design,” “representation” or “ornamentation.” It began when *OLODUMARE* commissioned the artist deity *Obatala* to mold the first human image (*ere eniyan*) from clay. After completing the image, *Obatala* gave it to *Ogun*, the *orisa* of tools and weapons, who put the finishing touches to the form, clarifying and delineating the principal features, especially the face. The image turned into a living human (*eniyan*) when the *OLODUMARE* infused it with a soul (*emi*)—a form of *ase*. Since then, every image thus produced has been placed inside the womb of a woman and left to develop from an embryonic form into a normal baby.⁵ The following praise-poem (*oriki*) to the artist deity *Obatala* commemorates this archetypal event:

Obatala

He created the child and its mother
 After doing good to the father,
 He sent for the child to come and collect its own good...
 He molded the inner surface of the hand called the palm
 He molded the underside of the foot called the sole
 He molded the massive part of the body called the chest
 He created the refractive water ball called the eyes
 He molded the small pot called the skull...
 The-Orisa-has-made-a-work-of-art, Owner-of-choice-clay...

Yoruba text:

Obatala
 O da'mo, da'ya
 O se baba lo ore tan,
 O ranse si omo ko wa gba ore...
 Oun lo da pete owo,
 Oun lo da pete ese
 Oun la da aya j'anka, ti a npe ni igba aya
 Oun lo da omi lojolojo, ti a npe loju
 Oun lo da oru rebete, ti a npe ni Atari...
 Oosona, Alamorere...⁶

From the Yoruba perspective, the variation in human appearance is due to *Obatala's* unpredictable artistic temperament, earning him the epithet: “*A da ni b’o ti ri*” (He who creates us as he wishes).⁷ Besides, he is known for his occasional drinking bouts during which he creates cripples, hunchbacks, albinos and people with deformities. Thus it is customary for the Yoruba to greet pregnant women with the prayer: “*Ki Orisa ya ona ire ko ni*” (May the *Orisa* [*Obatala*] fashion for us a good work of art).⁸ The implication here is that, in spite of its biological aspect, procreation has an artistic dimension as well. The human body (*ara*), the handiwork of *Obatala*, is much more than blood and flesh. It is a kinetic sculpture, activated by *ase*, the vital force, concealing and revealing the soul in the physical world, enabling an individual to have *iwa* (physical existence). *Iwa* denotes both the fact of being and the distinctive quality or character of a person.⁹ Its preeminence in Yoruba aesthetics is clear from the following poem often recited by Yoruba elders to educate the younger generation:

If a child is beautiful but has no character,
 He is no more than a wooden doll
 Good character is the beauty of a person
 A woman can be as beautiful as the Egbara, if she has no character
 She is no more than a wooden doll
 A man may be very, very handsome, like a fish in the water
 If he has no character
 He is no more than a wooden doll.

Yoruba text:

Omo t’o dara tiko n’iwa
 Omolangidi ni i
 Iwa rere l’eso eniyan
 B’obirin dara bi Egbara, bi ko n’iwa
 Omolangidi ni i
 B’okunrin suwon, suwon, bi eja inu omi
 Bi ko n’iwa rere
 Omolangidi ni i.¹⁰

In other words, the Yoruba idea of beauty (*ewa*) has two realities, namely, *ewa ode* (external beauty or visual appeal) and *ewa inu* (inner beauty or intrinsic worth). In human beings, inner beauty is assessed through *iwa* (character or moral worthiness) and, in artifacts, through *wizwulo* (functional utility or effectiveness). The reason for the stress on intrinsic worth is self-evident: physical beauty (*ewa ode*) is a natural endowment and depends, for the most part, on the whims and caprices of *Obatala* who, as mentioned earlier, “creates us as he wishes.” To over-emphasize *ewa ode* is tantamount to penalizing the physically unattractive for a biological fact they could not have personally prevented. The premium placed on *iwa* (character), as in popular sayings such as “*Iwa rere l’eso eniyan*” (Good character beautifies a person) and *Iwa l’ewa* (Character determines beauty), therefore, affords everyone an equal chance of living up to a moral ideal in order to be fully admired. Conversely, a physically attractive person with a bad character runs the risk of being categorized as an *awobowwa*, that is “the outwardly beautiful, but inwardly ugly.” For even when the physical beauty of an *awobowwa* attracts attention, the initial admiration will disappear as the inner ugliness of that individual manifests itself like smoke.¹¹ On the other hand, a pleasant disposition has the potential of transforming the physically disadvantaged into a likeable person, or into what the Yoruba call an *omoluwabi*, that is, a role model or “the good-natured and internally beautiful person.”¹² Self-discipline thus becomes the key to social mobility, enabling an individual to make up for a physical deficiency or maximize the potentials of a natural endowment. As one Yoruba aphorism puts it: “*Iwa l’orisa—bi a ba ti hu si ni i fi i gbe ni*” (Good character is like an *orisa*—the more we cultivate it, the more it favors us).¹³ Simply put, *ewa* (beauty) in Yoruba culture is synonymous with “goodness” (*dara, rere*). It is not restricted to physical attractiveness, but can also be cultivated through refined behavior (*iwa rere*). Needless to say, ornamentation (*oso*) can enhance one’s *iwa andewa*. This is the gist of following song:

Take care of your character
 Character is clothing, character is dress
 If we live long, long, long on earth
 And we become too old to walk
 The day we die, it is character that remains

Yoruba Text:

Toju iwa re
 Iwa laso, iwa lewu
 Nitori bi a ba pe l'aye pe pe pe
 Bi a ba dagbadagba t'a o le rin mo
 Ijo ti a ba ku, iwa ni ku.¹⁴

However, as I have pointed out elsewhere,¹⁵ while good character determines beauty in human life, it does not apply to the *orisa*. This is because the very fact of their divinity elevates the *orisa* above the concept of morality, the rules of conduct among mortals. Indeed, many of the *orisa* are noted for their idiosyncrasies. It will be recalled that the drinking habits of *Obatala* led him to create deformed persons. *Esu*, the divine messenger and agent provocateur is famous for his mischief. For instance, he delights in making enemies of close friends and even causing misunderstanding among fellow *orisa*, if only to create an opportunity for himself to serve as a mediator.¹⁶ Also, *Sango*, the thunder-deity and guardian of social justice, “establishes a farm near the main road in order to foment trouble with passersby.”¹⁷ Yet the Yoruba accept the freakishness of the *orisa* with a kind of fatalistic resignation, while at the same time, using the lessons derived from it to regulate their own conduct.¹⁸ The popular belief is that the cosmos is an unfathomable mystery (*Aditu*) and there may be much more behind the actions of the *orisa* than ordinary mortals can ever comprehend.

3. *Reenacting Creation through Art Making*

Given the association of creativity with the sublime, art making in indigenous Africa involves much more than manipulating tools to give form to an idea. It is also a ritual process, reenacting the archetypal act of divine creation, linking the physical to the metaphysical and the human to the divine. In some African cultures, such as the Baule of Cote d'Ivoire, the Gola of Liberia and Kalabari Ijo of Nigeria), the traditionally-trained artist, particularly the carver, often seeks spiritual guidance before embarking on a work that would be used in a religious

context. Trances are common. Not only that, the artist often takes certain ritual precautions both to ensure successful completion of a given work and to neutralize the harm that might result from close contact with extraterrestrial forces.¹⁹

This is also the case among the Yoruba. One becomes a professional artist (*onise ona*) after a period of apprenticeship. Training has two aspects, the cultural and technical. The cultural aspect introduces the apprentice to Yoruba cosmology, the rituals associated with the creative process, taboos and the significance of popular iconographic motifs. The technical aspect, on the other hand, familiarizes the apprentice with the properties of various materials, elements of design and how to execute them with tools. An apprentice learns by observing a master at work, gradually assimilating the time honored Yoruba style in a given medium as well as the iconographic conventions (*asa*).²⁰ The fact that much of Yoruba art functions in a religious context has stabilized these conventions, imposing some limitation on the extent of change within the canon, but still allowing for creativity, innovation and the incorporation of new elements in time and place. An apprentice graduates after demonstrating enough *imò* (mastery of time-honored conventions), *imòóse* (technical proficiency) and *oju ona* (lit. "artistic eye") to practice as a professional. *Oju ona* can be defined as "design consciousness"²¹ or the visual cognition that enables an artist to select and process images from daily experience into schemata or templates (determined by the Yoruba style) which are then stored in pictorial memory to be retrieved and modified when needed to express a particular idea. As a result, a well-trained artist does not need a life model or a preparatory sketch to represent a particular subject.

The process of creating an image is called *onàyíyá*, which can be etymologized as *onà* = art; *yíyá* = creation/making. *Yíyá* derives from the root verb *yá*, meaning "to create, fashion or make." The same verb (*yá*) is implicated in "*yá*," the Yoruba word for "mother" and in the aforementioned prayer for a pregnant woman. The fact that the female body mediates *Obatala's* creation has led some to interpret the Yoruba word for mother as "someone from which another life is fashioned" or the body "from which we are created."²² This metaphor may very well be (partly) responsible for the taboo in the past that a woman should not engage in sculpture because it might interfere with her procreative

power. Consequently, only postmenopausal women were allowed to do figurative pottery.²³

In any event, the generic term for all artistic representations (in two or three dimensions) is *aworan*. A contraction of *a* (that which), *wo* (to look at), and *ranti* (to recall, that is, the subject), *aworan* is mnemonic in nature, identifying a work of art as a construct specially crafted to appeal to the eyes, relate a representation to its subject, while at the same time, conveying messages that may have aesthetic, social or spiritual import. The word *ere* generally refers to sculpture in the round, while *ara* denotes an intricate design or pattern, although *ara* is also used to describe a tour de force manifested in the visual and performing arts. By and large, an artist, especially the carver, works under the guidance of three deities, namely Obatala (creativity deity) who provides the imaginative power, Ogun (the *orisa* of tools and weapons), the tools for transforming the material, and Esu (divine messenger), the vision and *ase* (enabling power) that facilitate execution.²⁴

A naturalistic representation is called *àyájora*, a contraction of *à* = act of; *yá* = create; *jo* = to resemble; *ara* = physical body of the subject. In the past, many Yoruba treated a naturalistic portraiture with mixed emotions for two main reasons. One derives from the myth, still current, that every living person has a spirit partner (a look-alike) in heaven called *enikeji* (heavenly double) who offers spiritual protection to its earthly counterpart. The creation of a human-made look-alike in art may therefore endanger this relationship, causing the heavenly double to withdraw its spiritual protection. The second reason hinges on the popular belief that through sympathetic magic, a naturalistic portrait could be transformed into a surrogate for the human body and then manipulated for positive or negative ends.²⁵ As a result, most of the naturalistic representations in Yoruba art function in funeral ceremonies called *ako*, *ipade* or *ajeje*. Some time after the burial of the corpse, a portrait of the deceased would be commissioned, dressed in his/her best clothes and displayed indoors or in the open to allow friends, relations and well-wishers to pay their last respects. Marking the last physical appearance of the deceased on earth, the portrait is treated as if it were alive. In some cases, it is carried in a public procession round the town, accompanied by survivors, all singing and wishing the deceased a happy retirement in the hereafter. At the end of the ceremony, the

image is buried like a corpse or abandoned in the forest. Because it is costly, the ceremony is normally performed for an important person to allow him/her to carry over to the land of the dead the high status achieved on earth.²⁶ Failure of the children to do so, it is believed, may cause the soul to haunt them in the form of a ghost.

A conceptual representation, on the other hand, is called *àròyá* (a contraction of *à* = act of; *rò* = to think/imagine; and *yá* = to create).²⁷ It is either a prototype (like *Obatala*'s creation) or an abstraction of a recognizable subject rendered in such a way as to make it look different while still communicating the essence of the subject. The literary equivalent of *àròyá* (conceptual imagery) is *àròfò* (oral poetry)—a shortened form of *à* = act of; *rò* = to think/imagine; and *fò* = to chant/utter. Most of the images in this category are usually placed on altars to harness the powers of supernatural forces or to honor and communicate with the dead. The stylized form of a typical altar sculpture hints at the otherness of the sublime. The motif of a mother and child may be intended to remind the spirit/soul of a female ancestor of her maternal responsibilities to the living, while a lance-holding or an equestrian warrior figure may be aimed at obliging a male ancestor to play the role of a protector, and so on. Images with similar implications abound on altars dedicated to the *orisa*, who are themselves addressed as super-humans. Each *orisa* has a symbol or iconographic motif for characterizing its essence and for relating humanity to divinity.

A piece of sculpture (*ere* or *aworan*) is assessed on the basis of many aesthetic criteria. These include the degree to which the piece looks Yoruba (both facially and stylistically), good composition and symmetry (*didogba*), clarity of mass (*ifarahon*), relative straightness of posture (*gigun*), meticulous delineation (*finfin*), relative luminosity and delicacy (*didon*) and how well the work has succeeded in capturing the essence of its subject.²⁸ Because of its impact on the eyes (*oju*), art is often described as *ounje oju* (food for the eyes). Thus a masterpiece may be said to *fa oju mora* (magnetize the eyes), *ba oju mu* (fit the eyes), becoming *awowo-tun-wo* (that which compels repeated gaze) or *awomaleelo* (that which moors the gaze). An image is called *awoyanu* (literally, “that which causes the viewer to gape”) if it manifests such an incredibly high artistic skill as to suggest the use of occult powers.²⁹ The high regard for art in Yoruba culture reverberates not only in popular

names such as *Onawunmi* (Art fascinates me), *Onayemi* (Art befits me) and *Onaniyi* (Art generates honor and respect), but also in body adornment, textiles, embroidery, architectural decoration, pottery and household objects ornamented drums and gongs, insignia of leadership and ritual/ceremonial objects. In this context, art enriches life. It enhances and reinforces the visible self, conveying taste, social/economic status or political power. However, to the Yoruba, the ideal work of art should combine external with inner beauty. In other words, it is not enough for a carved stool to look artistic, it must be strong and comfortable to sit on—just as good character determines or adds to the beauty of an individual.

4. *Divinity, Creativity and Humanity*

According to Yoruba cosmology, the decision of *OLODUMARE* (the Supreme Divinity) to create humans was prompted by a desire to transform the primeval waters below the heavens into an orderly estate. Human beings are called *eniyan* (“the specially selected”) because they are the ones ordained “to convey goodness” to the wilderness below the sky.³⁰ For the human body—a “masterpiece” by Obatala—localizes a special *ase* (enabling power), that generates life, simultaneously inspiring and sustaining the creativity reflected in the visual and performing arts and enabling the Yoruba to continually redesign their environment. It is therefore not surprising that some of the *orisa* allegedly assumed human forms in order to accompany the first humans to the earth. This makes it difficult to differentiate the primordial deities from mortals, given the Yoruba tendency in the past to deify culture heroes on the grounds that they were divinities temporally manifesting in human bodies. *Ogun*, the iron deity and one of these culture heroes, reportedly led the other *orisa* when they first arrived on earth, using his machete to cut a path through the primeval jungle, laying the foundation for Yoruba civilization.³¹ The popular name, *Ogunlana* (“*Ogun* paves the way”) commemorates this archetypal event, emphasizing the importance (first) of stone and (later) of iron tools in agriculture, urban planning, lumbering, architecture, warfare, and art.³² Yet the same *Ogun* is often identified as one of the children of *Oduduwa* and the warrior-king of the ancient town called Ire.

Since *Obatala*, the creativity *orisa*, also assumed a human form in order to accompany the first mortals to the earth, was the archetypal human image a self-portrait? Or, was *Obatala* originally a mortal who was subsequently deified for his phenomenal creative endowment? Or is he a figment of the imagination and a self-reflexion of the Yoruba artist? That *Obatala* was a deified culture hero, if not a self-reflexion of the Yoruba artist, is evident in the popular Yoruba saying: *Bi eniyan ko si, orisa ko si* (No humanity, no divinity).³³ In other words, the worshipped depends on the worshipper for its existence; divinities are human constructs.³⁴ Put differently, it is *eniyan* (humanity) who visualized and anthropomorphized the *orisa* (divinity), simultaneously inverting the process to rationalize its own creation and creativity. This act of self-reflexion not only constitutes the *orisa* into a sort of superhuman Other, an extension of the metaphysical self, but also provides a basis for involving them in the ethics, aesthetics, poetics and politics of human existence.³⁵

Because of their belief in life after death, the Yoruba regard a child born after the death of a parent or grandparent as a reincarnation of the soul of the deceased, returning to the same family to start a new life in a new body. Such children are usually called *Babajide* (Father has resurrected) or *Babatunde* (Father returns), if born after the death of a male parent or *Yejide* (Mother has resurrected) or *Yetunde* (Mother returns), if born after the death of a female parent. Thus, to the Yoruba, life is an eternal cycle of living, dying and being reborn on earth to start all over gain. The body, as a work of art, mediates the cycle, exemplifying the interconnectedness of divinity, creativity and humanity in Yoruba culture and aesthetics.

NOTES

- 1 Although the Supreme Divinity bears many names in different parts of Africa, some of these names categorically declare this creator being as an artist. For example: *Amma* (the originator) among the Dogon (Mali); *Daya* (the fashioner) among the Gola (Liberia); *Borebore* (the carver) among the Asante of Ghana; *Njambi* (the inventor) among the Lele (Republic of Congo); and *Imana* (the potter) among the *Banyarwanda* (Rwanda); *Musikavanhu* (maker of persons) among the Shona (Zimbabwe) and *Mwatuangi* (the shaper) among the Akamba (Kenya).

- 2 For details, see Ulli Beier (ed.), *The Origin of Life and Death: African Creation Myths* (London: Heinemann, 1966); Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Mythology* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1967), pp. 19-36; John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Second Edition (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), pp. 39-45; Jan Vansina, *Art and History in Africa* (London and New York: Longman, 1984), pp. 136-38 and Rosalind I. J. Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa* (London and New York: Cassell, 1996), pp. 23-42.
- 3 For more on the Yoruba, see Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (Lagos, Nigeria: CMS Bookshops, 1921); G. J. Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis* (London: University of London Press, 1967) and Robert S. Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).
- 4 For more details, see E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962), pp. 19-20 and Peter Morton-Williams, "An Outline of the Cosmology and Cult Organization of the Oyo Yoruba," in *Africa*, 34.2 (1964): pp. 243-64.
- 5 For more details, see Babatunde Lawal, "Aworan: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art," *The Art Bulletin*, 83.3 (September 2001): pp. 499-500.
- 6 Personal communications with Awotola Ojo (diviner and herbalist), Gbogban, near Ile-Ife, Nigeria, May, 1981. See also Babatunde Lawal, "The Role of Art in Orisa Worship among the Yoruba," in *Proceedings of the First World Conference on Orisa Tradition*, in Wande Abimbola (ed.) (Ile-Ife, Nigeria Department of African Languages and Literatures, University of Ife), pp. 319-21.
- 7 Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 72.
- 8 Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 72. According to one myth, *OLODUMARE* first commissioned *Obatala* to create the earth. Unfortunately, he got drunk after receiving the sacred instruments of his commission and fell asleep by the roadside. *Oduduwa* then stole the sacred instruments, descended from the sky and created the earth at Ile-Ife. When *Obatala* woke up and discovered what had happened, he challenged *Oduduwa* and a fierce fight ensued. *OLODUMARE* later intervened and gave *Obatala* another commission—to mold the image of the first human.
- 9 See also Rowland Abiodun, "Identity and Artistic Process in the Yoruba Aesthetic Concept of Iwa," in *Journal of Culture and Ideas*, 1.1 (1983): pp. 13-30.
- 10 A Fajana, "Some Aspects of Yoruba Traditional Education," *Odu, University of Ife Journal of African Studies*, 3.1 (1966): p. 25.
- 11 Hence the popular Yoruba saying "*Eefin ni iwa*" (One's character is like smoke and cannot be concealed with body adornment).
- 12 For more details, see Lawal, "Some Aspects of Yoruba Aesthetics," in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 15.3 (1974): pp. 239-240 and Barry Allen, *The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yoruba Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 113-38.
- 13 J. O. Ajibola, *Owe Yoruba* (Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press Limited, 1979), p. 23.

- 14 S. A. Adewale, *The Religion of the Yoruba: A Phenomenological Analysis*. (Ibadan, Nigeria: Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 1988), p. 113.
- 15 Lawal, "Some Aspects," pp. 242-3.
- 16 John Pemberton, "Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster God," *African Arts*, 9.1 (1975): pp. 20-27, 66-70, 90-91 and Babatunde Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996), p. 23.
- 17 George E. Simpson, *Yoruba Religion and Medicine in Ibadan*. (Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1980), p. 22.
- 18 See Lawal, "Some Aspects," pp. 242-3.
- 19 See Robin Horton, *Kalabari Sculpture* (Nigeria: Department of Antiquities, 1965), pp. 15-21; Warren D'Azevedo (ed.), *The Traditional Artist in African Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), pp. 101-27, 282-340, Rosalind I. J. Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa* (London and New York: Cassell, 1996), pp. 24-34, 40-42, and Philip L. Ravenhill, *Dreams and Reverie: Images of Otherworldly Mates among the Baule, West Africa* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), p. 7.
- 20 For more details, see Peter Lloyd, "Craft Organizations in Yoruba Towns," in *Africa*, 23 (1953): pp. 30-44 and Rowland Abiodun, Henry J. Drewal and John Pemberton (eds.), *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Approaches to the Study of African Art* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).
- 21 See also Rowland Abiodun, "The Future of African Art Studies: An African Perspective," in *African Studies: The State of the Discipline*. Symposium organized by the National Museum of African Art, Washington, D. C., pp. 76-77.
- 22 Ulli Beier, *Yoruba Poetry: An Anthology of Traditional Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 19-20. Another Yoruba word for mother is "yeye" or "iye," which means, according to several field informants, "the one who laid me (ye) like an egg."
- 23 While this taboo is still strong in rural Yorubaland, it is no longer honored by the Western-educated Yoruba in the urban areas, who now allow their daughters to specialize in sculpture in art school. Some Yoruba males now train as ceramists, whereas only females were potters in the past.
- 24 I am especially grateful to indigenous carvers such as George Bamidele of Osi-Ekiti, Ibuke of Oyo and Ganiyu Sekoni Doga of Imeko for their hospitality during my fieldwork. For more information on *ase*, see Pierre Verger, "The Yoruba High God: A Review of the Sources," *Odu, University of Ife Journal of African Studies*, 2.2, (1966): pp. 19-40 and Rowland Abiodun, "Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics: The Concept of *Ase*," *African Arts*, 27.3, (1994): pp. 68-78, 102-3.
- 25 See also Lawal, "Aworan," pp. 503-504 and Norma H. Wolff, "The Use of Human Images in Yoruba Medicines," *Ethnology*, 39.3 (2000): p. 209.
- 26 For details, see Lawal, "Aworan," p. 503 and n.43. It has been suggested that some of the naturalistic terracotta and brass portraits excavated at Ife

and dated between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries might have functioned in a similar context. See Justine Cordwell, "Naturalism and Stylization in Yoruba Art," in *Magazine of Art*, 46 (1953): pp. 20-5 and Frank Willet, *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture* (New York: McGraw-Hill), pp. 23, 26-7.

- 27 The carver Ganiyu Sekoni Doga of Imeko drew my attention to a cognate term is *arogbe* (a contraction of *a* = act of; *ro* = to think/imagine; and *gbe* = to carve).
- 28 For more details, see Robert Farris Thompson, "Yoruba Artistic Criticism," in D'Axevedo, *The Traditional Artist*, pp. 19-61.
- 29 See also Lawal, "*Aworan*," pp. 516-518.
- 30 Cited in Akinsola Akiwowo, *Ajobi and Ajogbe: Variations on the Theme of Sociation*, (Ile-Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife Press, 1983), p. 11. See also Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle.*, pp. 23-4.
- 31 See, for instance, Idowu, *Olodumare*, pp. 84-5.
- 32 Lawal, "*Aworan*," p. 515. Polished stone axes and iron tools are sacred to Ogun, suggesting that the one preceded the other in his iconography.
- 33 Idowu, *Olodumare.*, p. 60, and Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 10.
- 34 For details, see Karin Barber, "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes towards the Orisa," in *Africa*, 51.3, (1981): pp. 724-45.
- 35 See also Lawal, "*Aworan*," p. 515.