

Indigenous Art of West Africa in Wood

Dr.OLAOMO.¹

¹ OSUN STATE COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY, ESA- OKE

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Abstract

Art as it has been defined severally, it has many definitions of its own, but in the context of this paper. Art will be defined as a means of self-expression with the medium which one is familiar with. Wood is one of the very important means of artistic representation which the Africans have used and are still making use of in bringing forth and producing artistic works aimed at documenting peoples way of life as well as their religious and socio- cultural values. African wood sculptures are not older than two centuries old because of the susceptible nature of wood to the destructive effect of termites and climate. Wood is the Africans most favourite material or medium for sculpture. Hard, termite-resistant woods are preferred for sculpture, Iroko wood (chlorophora excelsa), Mahogany and Ebony varieties which are suitable for extremely delicate carving. For the large masks lighter woods are chosen, which do not weigh so heavy when worn. The African traditional artist or carver doesn't just go to the forest to fell trees indiscriminately. If there is any particular tree they are interested in, in the forest, they carry out some sacrifices to find out from the tree itself if it would like to be fell or not. And if any particular tree is to be felled, they carry out some sacrifices before they touch the tree at all. I would like to make the following West African countries as my area of focus in this paper with particular references to their masks, stools and architectural designs. These countries are Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra-Leone and Mali.

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25 *Index terms—*

1 INTRODUCTION

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43 **2 II.**

44 **3 YORUBA FIGURES IN NIGERIA**

45 The Yorubas are the most prolific sculptors in Nigeria, they are noted for their wooden veranda post, ceremonial
46 masks for the Gelede, (figure2) Egungun, Epa cults, Twins figures (figure1) used in the cult of the twins, staff and
47 bowls for the worship of Shango (figure3) (the god of thunder), bowls and trays for the Ifa divination.

48 The Yorubas have some highly decorative stools, drums and lamps and also in the complicated figures
49 compositions of the elaborate pillars of temples and chiefs houses, we will see evidence of fertile imagination
50 and a great sense of architectural designs. aolaomo@yahoo.com

51 The Yoruba figure carvings show certain very distinctive characteristics. The figures are lively and shows great
52 variety, every posture is attempted, and the trunk and body no longer remain in one axis, forms are rounded, but
53 are kept clear-cut and decisive, there is the usual African tendency towards enlarged heads and great reduction
54 in the size of the legs. The form of the head is usually unmistakable; the general shape of the face is naturalistic,
55 with pointed chin and large brow; the features are strongly marked. The eyes are long and pointed at each end,
56 with the lower lip nearly as large as the upper and the pupil of the eye is gouged out. The nose is broad at both
57 root and base, with well-marked nostrils, the mouth protrudes, thick-lipped and does not narrow at the ends,
58 which are slightly upturned. The ears are set high and well back on the head, faces are cicatrized on the cheeks,
59 and sometimes on the forehead with tribal markings.

60 The most common wood figures among the Yorubas of the south-western part of Nigeria are the "Ere-Ibeji".
61 These are carved statuettes carved to commemorate the dead twins that died in their infancy. The soul of the
62 deceased is transferred to it. The wooden images are washed, dressed and fed every four-four days i.e. during
63 every market days, and then the parents may dance around in the marketplace asking for alms, she also offers
64 special prayers and rituals every week. The figures have identifiable styles that could be traced to certain regions.

65 The statuettes conform to the Yoruba aesthetics of physical proportion. The head is one third the size of the
66 body, because the head among the Yorubas is associated with a person's destiny or "Ori-Inu" that determine the
67 successes or failures in life. Emphasis is on human resemblance rather than photographic likeness facial features
68 are stylized. Generally the surface is shining and smooth.

69 **4 III.**

70 **5 AMONG THE IGBOS**

71 The Ibo figures, known as Ikenga, often consists of highly complicated carvings, they are the personal protectors
72 of the master of the house and are consulted in every family crises. Among the Igbo of Southern Nigeria, we
73 have Ikenga figures (figure7). Ancestor figures and the Ogbom figures from the headdress as a form of Igbo figures
74 connected with the Ikenga cult. The Ikenga means a alter for the power of the right hand as a team for the
75 effective force of manhood. Whenever the foundation of a house is laid such a figure is set up and destroyed
76 again at the death of the owner. It also acts

77 **6 A March 2011**

78 as the god of destroyer. It is asked for advice at any important occasion and honoured with palmwine and
79 kolanuts.

80 A typical Ikenga figure has a massive coiled ram horn with abstracted human face. A shape that looked like
81 fat letter "E" looks or is situated where the ear is supposed to be. It has the characteristic of a straight long neck
82 similar to those of Mbari figures. It carries a knife and trophy head with ringed designs around them.

83 IV.

84 **7 MASKS**

85 Masks are used majorly by masquerades to commemorate certain traditional festivals as in cult activities whose
86 activities are showed in secrecy. Notable examples are the Egungun mask, Gelede mask, Epa and Ekime masks.

87 This rather sophisticated art of naturalism is seen clearly in a type of masks common to the Egungun and
88 Gelede societies of the Yoruba. The Gelede masquerades are done to appear the "Iya" which refers to the
89 power of the women folk who are witches. They are believed to have power that can twist anybody's
90 destiny, fortune and health. The Gelede society is found among certain branches of the Yoruba, and holds
91 similar ceremonies to the Egungun society. They are made in paints and are always female, whatever the sex
92 of the deceased at which burial they are used. To this type of masks ??urray (1989) says: "Yoruba, They have
93 a large number of religious cults Whose members belong to them by right of birth or who have joined them
94 on account of advice conveyed to them by divination. These societies have celebrations at yearly festivals and
95 funerals???. among these is Egungun which usually associated with the foundation of the town and is therefore
96 performed to precipitate the ancestors and to promote its prosperity during the festival the chief of the town does
97 homage to the head Egungun who in return blesses him and the whole town."

98 The Gelede masks are the closest to Ife art in naturalism. The facial features are well defined and have
99 commonly three parallel markings on their cheeks. Mostly the human head is depicted with some supper

100 structure. The superstructure may be simply a bicycle rider or as complex as a ladder with as many as six
101 parrots. This superstructures function as an identity for viewers to know the character which the masquerade is
102 portraying. This is more of the conventional and more contemporary use as entertainment masquerade.

103 There are some other types of masks like the Epa mask(figure6) of the Ora people, the Epa mask are made
104 in the Ekiti area of the north-east Yoruba land and are used in cults to honour their heroes, heroines and their
105 ancestors. The Epa masks are big masks or headdress that could be as high as six feet. The face is stylized
106 and with a slit at the mouth to allow the weaver to see. The mask could carry about twenty figures of kings on
107 horsebacks, leopards, traditional doctors, women and children. The images are repainted yearly with traditional
108 earth colours, before performances festivities and dancing taken place in front of their sacred grove. The ceremony
109 in which the masks are used takes place once or twice in a year. In some places however, the ceremony is in
110 honour of Ogun,” the god of iron and war and at times usually marks the cutting of new yams.

111 Among the Igbo of the Eastern part of Nigeria are different masks, the Ekpo Njawhaw society of the Igbo and
112 Ibibio has been quoted as an example of the more pleasant forms of Secret Society in Eastern Nigeria. The Most
113 noticeable general characteristics of the mask of the Ibo is their extreme refinement and delicacy, compared with
114 so much of the work of other African tribes. A large number of these masks are said to represent maiden Spirit or
115 beautiful girls, these are often set in contrast with other ugly elephant spirits, or mischievous he goat who chase
116 small boys, and so on. Many of the marks used by the Ibo Mmo Society are of this maiden spirit type. They are
117 of two Types. The Larger ones has a thin High crest, running from back to front of the head; this crest, running
118 form back to front of the head; this crest in highly ornamented with fretted carvings. The top of the mask is
119 carved as a cap shape , to fit over the head; While the face is long and triangular. The face is whitened and has
120 black or bluelined brows, eyes and lips. The second kind of masks representing the maiden spirits in the dance
121 of the Mmo society is much smaller.

122 Talbot ??1974), writing of the uses of these masks among the Ibo says: ”The Images are entirely covered by
123 voluminous clothes the upper part often composed of some knitted materials, occasionally a sort of kilt is worn,
124 but the legs are always hidden by cloth or knitted trousers. A Wooden masks is used, which is at times placed on
125 top of the man’s head so as to give him increased height, while he himself looks out through narrow slits below.
126 Nearly all masks are painted white, like the clay statues of ancestors in the Mbari houses, and some are of very
127 great interest and display undoubted Egyptian traits”.

128 In one of the Ibo dance within their society called ”Ayolugbe” Murray says; ”Three to seven white faced
129 masks are used; they represent the spirit of the maidens with their mother, and have dignity and beauty. The
130 masks are ”made to measure”, and with them is worn a tight-fitting costume of gorgeous colour decorated with
131 appliqué work in which red and yellow predominate. These masks of small size are sewn to the costume and are
132 superstructure”.

133 There are several other masks among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria such as the masks of the Igojiji society or
134 Iko Okochi of Afikpo, Ehi masks of Ogoni tribe.

135 V.

136 8 STOOLS

137 The stools among the Igbos is regarded as an item to show their wealth and social status. The stools symbolises
138 the owner’s wealth and status. The stool became more elaborate as the social status or ladder is climbed.
139 However, There are simple stools for ordinary people(figure4).

140 9 VI.

141 10 BOWLS

142 Among the Yorubas, respect for elders and visitors is very much emphasized. Children and women compulsorily
143 kneel to present gifts especially Kola, to elders and the bowls that are often used are elaborately decorated wooden
144 bowls. Designs for these bowls Vary from simple designs of geometrical, stylized Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic
145 designs to figures carrying bowls on their head. The figures are sometimes females or even males and equestrian
146 figures too. Most of the designs are caryatids.

147 Wooden bowls with decorative face of Esu are used to hold the Opele (Ifa divination seeds). They are also
148 made into board with decorative edges and powdered or sprinkled with ”Iyefun Ife” which the Ifa priest draws
149 symbolic lines with his fingers.(figure3) Among the Igbos, there are kola bowls also like that of the Yorubas.
150 Decorative bowls are used to present kola to visitors as among the Yorubas and also show a symbol of hospitality.

151 11 VII.

152 12 ARCHITECTURAL DECORATIONS

153 Wooden architectural decorations are in the forms of panel doors and posts.

154 The Igbo have decorative panels. Some have representations of kings and their wives. Their style is
155 predominantly abstract. There are also stories of marriages ceremonies and chieftaincy festivals. Also images of
156 fortune-tellers. Usually there is an entrance door panel and there are others set against the wall covering the

157 wall of the compound. The Igbos love curves, dynamic forms and bright colours, these could be seen in all their
158 works. Abstracted figure alternate with other of starting realism. Other panels have holes through which the
159 ancestors overlook the compound. They use linear and basic designs especially concentric circles.

160 Among the Yoruba-speaking people of Nigeria are carved doors decorated with animals motifs like snakes,
161 stylised reptiles and some human figures. Generally they depict historical records or occurrences. Their wooden
162 veranda posts depicts the quality of the works and it equally shows the type of occupation of the people of the
163 area. (figure9) VIII.

164 13 THE DOGON OF MALI

165 The Dogon, lives in the northern Mali and they are called Habbe which means the unbelievers by the Fulani,
166 because they resisted Islam when it was introduced to them.

167 Their carving is of great variety and interest, the sculptures refers to ancient myths, the creator god Amma
168 and as incantations of life force. It was also the Nommo who became men. The smith, the Nommo who had
169 become the seventh man came down to earth either on horseback or in an ark, bringing with him important
170 cultural materials and techniques.

171 The myths also tell of the most of Duyu seru and Yasigi, a sin which upset the great cosmic order and was
172 atoned for by the sacrifice of one of the Nommo. A remarkable fun, discovered in bidden caves in the rock, were
173 the bundles of figures joined together with iron chairs, often in a naturalistic style and made of wood as hard as
174 stone, encrusted with a red grey covering made of ashes, animals, blood and millet bear. There is no doubt that
175 these figures are centuries old; a carbon dating places them in the thirteenth century. The genuine Dogon style is
176 very far from naturalistic. It is symmetrical and firm in outline, built up of clearly defined sterometric elements.
177 The slim, length bodies, in which the free trunk can still be detected, from the very arch type of the pole style.
178 The arrangement of the hair is such that it continues the line of the profile in a semi circle running back in the
179 center of the head. The breasts are balance by the heavy shoulder blades; in this style, the basic requisite is
180 balance, the face is completely unrealistic, with a nose like a straight arrowhead, a short horizontal chin, and the
181 ears drawn as a semi-circle. The large hands often lie on the thighs or the knees. The dogon statues with their
182 through going simplication, produce a solemn and monumental effect.

183 Abstract to the ultimate degree, and reduced as it were to a sign, these figures are found on cult objects, doors,
184 doors locks, butler dishes, loom handle pulleys and other tools. These themes, refers to the event of mythology
185 and to the laws of life and growth. Thus are found the smith as the seventh Nommo and the first Dogon, with
186 a ribbed cap and a beard, or as a rider. Figures set upon the other recall Aru, the cumming unburper of the
187 country, and his brother we see Yasigi who committed incest, or Dyngu Seiu, who hides his face from shame.
188 Raised arms signify entreaty for the protection of the mythical creative force, or an invocation to the ram clouds
189 to pour ram upon the dry land. The original ancestor couple, the androgynous ancestor on the pedestal, and
190 stool with the four pairs of figures of the eight Nommo, as well as the other rarer compositions with several heads,
191 are a symbol of the universe and manifest the eternally valid order of the cosmos to which man must subject
192 himself.

193 Masks are not made by the smith but by the novices of the men's secret society and the wood used is the
194 lightwood of the kapok tree. They have the same cubic structure as the statues; always starkly rectangular,
195 sometimes shaped into a point at the top, with eyes, carved out as triangles or rectangles, lying in deep vertical
196 grooves beside the sharp arrowhead ridge of the narrow nose. The nose may also be broken by Zigzag marks.
197 The mouth is shown in abstract form. This basic form is painted in various ways, adored with horns, animal ears
198 and other features, to show what kind of creature is meant, and whether a Nommo, a human being or an animal
199 is represented.

200 Each type of mask has its own distinctive dance step. The Kanaga mask, called "the hand of god", with its
201 headdress in the form of a cross of lorrame, indicates a bird in flight, while others interpret it as crocodile. All
202 these various types of mask more than a hundred in number are derived from the great imina-na mother mask,
203 which is conceived in the form of a snake. It is ten yards long, and is therefore much too large to be worn.

204 The ancestors' figures of the Dogon are the most impressive figure in wood, their carvings consist in certain
205 very old and very rare statues of single or pairs of figures of the placed by the bodies of the dead at burial
206 ceremonies.

207 In addition to the ancestor figures there are female fertility figure, which confirm to the general schema, but
208 are far less impressive than the burial carvings. The Dogon masks have about then something of the same statues
209 give, impersonal quality as their cult figures, for many of them are architectural rather than representational in
210 from.

211 14 IX.

212 15 THE BAMBARA OF MALI

213 The Bambara of Mali lives very close to the Bani river and on both sides of the upper Niger, are an important
214 Mande speaking tribe, almost a million in number. They are the hairs of two kingdoms. Segu (1600-1881) and
215 Kaarta (1670-1851) they were predominantly farmers.

216 The Bambara believe in the great light and creator god FARO, a kind of redeemer and organiser of the universe,
217 who is enthroned in the seventh heaven and sends the rain which brings fertility. His scared colour is white.

218 According to myth Faro bestowed upon men, their conscience, order and purity, as well as their sense of
219 responsibility. He brought them corn and taught them how to work. Faro also regarded as bringing good fortune.

220 The carvings of Bambara present a great number of types and varieties and are in general of a several
221 monumental but elegant style. The figures are composed of cubist forms, with this pillar like bodies. The
222 arms hang down at the sides. The Bambara, for instance, concentrate on building up wonderfully balanced
223 pieces of three dimensional designs carved in to a flowing decorative pattern in the their antelopes crests.

224 The female has a transverse hairstyle, based on the short ringlets that project sharply sideways on the heads
225 of female figures which are used on fertility cult and are also found on door latches. Figures also decorate the
226 bowls in which she butter is kept.

227 The statues can be divided in to three main groups of styles Viz;

228 1. The figures of the northern Segu which is characterised by a prominent hooked nose, protruding eyes,
229 breasts placed high on the body, large hands like paddles and large, stable feet. 2. the southern style, found
230 round Bamako, figures have a straight profile, the breasts are often placed low; 3. the third group, from the
231 region between Buql and Diollo, have soffer lines and sensitive features, they are crowned by a tell cap with
232 bands folling away at each side and they are shown standing, riding or seated on a chair. The surface of the
233 figure is considerably decayed throughout.

234 The people of Bambara have also become world famous because of their Chiwara headdresses for the antelope
235 dance which is amongst the most beautiful and indigenous works of African Sculptures. There are also the male
236 and female antelopes which always form a pair and the great spirit would kill anyone who tried to separate them.

237 The Chi Wara headdresses are made as numerous brilliant variations, differing according to place and time
238 and never alike. Three main groups of Chi Wara can be distinguished.

239 1. The "Segu-Minianka type of the eastern Bambara Design, between Sikasso, Kutiala, including the Minianka,
240 an enclave of the Senufo in the Bambara region. The structure is venfical above a small body rises a powerful
241 curved neck with a broad name of decorative openwork, a firm narrow head and slightly curved horns beaming
242 spiral curves, leaps across horizontally formed as two parts, which are joined together at the neck with a mental
243 ring. The "Suguru type' found in the village around Buguni in the south-western Bambara region. It's a
244 vertical abstract type, interplay of forms between the Zig-Zag patterns, to a point and the strange bodies, is
245 extraordinarily attractive and imaginative. The dance for which the Suguni type is used is more wild than in the
246 case of other types.

247 The most important group of masks is used by the More society. The masks are worn when the water spent
248 has to be called upon for rain and growth. The form of the Kore masks is unrealistic, so much that the animal
249 they represent is the type of animal that is almost unrecognizable. They are mainly hyenas, monkeys, lions,
250 antelopes and horses.

251 X.

252 16 GHANA STOOLS

253 The Ashantis of Ghana do not represents their gods in sculptures like the rest do but gain contact with the
254 supernatural by means of the gold. Legend tells us that the stool fall from heaven during a storm around the
255 year 1700, right on the knee of the great king Oseitutu, who founded the kingdom. The throne became not
256 merely the symbol of the state, but also the altar on which sacrifice was offered to the invisible gods. The
257 Ashante regarded it as the seat of the soul of their people and as a guarantee of health and prosperity.

258 The stools are simple and rectangular and are put in charge of the king, queen mother, lineage heads, town
259 and chiefs. Each person is supposed to have a stool. It is only the king who can have a tiger or an elephant
260 representation in his stool. Some stools are covered with the king having monopoly of gold, therefore the natural
261 stool is in gold.

262 17 XI.

263 18 FIGURES

264 Among the Akan of Ghana, have also statuettes commonly called "Akuaba". The figure is supposed to induce
265 pregnancy and bring a beautiful lady at birth. After being blessed by a priest, a woman carries the statuettes
266 around it with beautiful beads, nurses it and puts it to bed. The statuettes illustrates Ashantes concept of a
267 beautiful child; a high oral, flattened forehead (achieved by massaging the infant, soft skull at birth) a small
268 mouth, a neck ringed with creases of subcutaneous fat indicating good living and healthy living of the child.
269 Most Akuaba dolls or statuettes depict females since among the Ashante Matrilineul descent is practised.

270 **19 XII.**

271 **20 SIERRA LEONE**

272 The Mendes whose Language is Made, entered Sierra Leone in the sixteenth century, conquered the existing
273 kingdoms and divided the Kissi from the Bullom. The Mendes are outstanding for their wood carvings in Africa
274 they produce mainly for their Women's societies, and particularly for the Bundu Society (The S ande society
275 among is the Vais of Liberia) Which undertakes the education of the girls. Their training in the camp in the bush
276 is a hard one. These Girls learn everything they need for their future life as wives and mothers, which includes
277 singing and dancing.

278 Characteristics: hair is arranged in heavy crests; there is a high forehead over a small delicate face with lowered
279 eyelids, and a broad spiral bulges of fat on the neck as an expression of prosperity and the idea of beauty. The
280 hair is highly imaginative.

281 The Mende people also make statuettes which they call Minsere(figure ??). The heads of these Minseare
282 display the same features as the Bundu masks, a high forehead, a small face and a ringed neck. The body is slim,
283 naturalistic and with smooth lines. The Minsere are used by the yaisi society of prophetesses.

284 **21 XIII. THE TOMA**

285 A mande-speaking tribe in the region of Guinea around Macenta , north-western Liberia and northeastern Sierra
286 Leone. They carve their hand a mask following the strict Sudanic style. They achieve the utmost cubic simplicity
287 and concentration of form. A board like face with a featureless crocodile shape jaw and a straight nose under
288 an arched forehead is the way the Toma represent the mighty Poro bush spirit. When the abstract face of wood
289 stares out of the tangled costumes of leaves and skin, the effect is weird and unreal. The masks in Sierra Leone
290 among the Mende people are of Toro types. The Poro and Sande. The Poro is for male initiation while the Sande
291 is for female initiations, and it represents female with elaborate hairdo. The Sande masks are usually anointed
292 with oil which ladies use to rub themselves.

293 XIV.

294 **22 DAN-NGERE**

295 This region is known for their masks. The Dan and the related groups are savannah tribes, speaking the Mande
296 tongue, who came from the north about three hundred years ago. In all the secrete societies the function of the
297 masks is of outstanding importance.

298 They help men to control the environment and life, they support the chief in his tasks of ruling the land.
299 Each mask represents a bush divinity, having its own spirit and name. Everyone wearing a mask is accompanied
300 by musicians and assistants who even include a translator for the twittering of the secret language. The most
301 important masks, of highest rank represent a powerful bush spirit and act as judges, lawgivers and peacemakers.
302 They make the choice between war and peace, no one dares to lie in their presence, and they are a neutral court
303 of appeal recognized by everyone.

304 Today these masks are regularly fed with the blood of cocks, palm oil and kolanuts. Figure ?? YORUBA,
305 STOOL 1, 19": Yoruba stools, like those of the Luba, related to kings and important chiefs, who defined their
306 power by the display of prestige objects during important ceremonies. Stools were among the most important
307 of these objects. The leader was literally as well as figuratively supported by a male or female caryatid figure,
308 which also symbolizes the continuity of power.

309 Figure ?? YORUBA, SHANGO DANCE WAND 13, 16.5": In special festivals and processions, followers of
310 Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder, carry dance wands, oshe shango, depicting a female devotee with Shango's
311 symbol, the double-headed axe. Shango is thought to control the great powers of nature as one of the orisha, or
312 gods.

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Figure 1:



Figure 2: Figure 1 The



Figure 3: Figure 2 GELEDE



Figure 4:

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