

Textile-like Patterns on Yoruba Carvings

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Yoruba tribes gain satisfaction in the decoration of their environment through fabric and carving embellishment. It is by means of the traditional expressions of their art-form, *Ona ara aso* and *Ona ara ere*, that they keep alive the belief that *ewa*, beauty, is very important. They always relate this to the adage *iwa l'ewa*, which means good character is embedded in beauty. In actual fact to be able to judge and appreciate the carving designs one has to recognise the unusual shapes, the oval, linear, spotted designs, what they stand for and why they are being used in carvings as patterns. Most of the common shapes in their carvings are copies from traditional fabric design. As it is for the textile designers so it is for carvers, that emptiness is something very frightening and something has to occupy the spaces. To beautify the carvings as well as other useful home-made utensils is one of their greatest concerns: “. . . no bench without its carved reliefs, no handle of a hoe without its patterns . . . Everything which could possibly be carved was embellished by figures.”¹

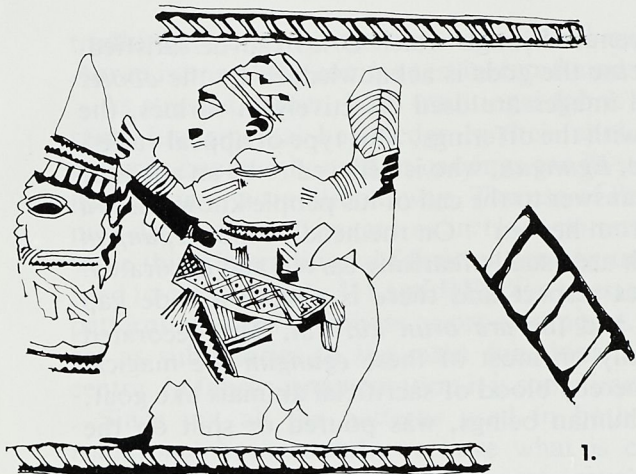
THE CARVERS

Sixty and seventy years ago carvers used to be acknowledged professional men. They were looked upon as naturally religious men for the simple fact that they carved and decorated carvings that were worshipped as *Orisa*, god of the ancestors. These are regarded as the pathfinder—*olu to ona*. The carvers always worked hand in hand with *abore*, the chief priest who stands as the audible voice of the ancestors. He is first to know the likes and dislikes of a specific *Orisa*. He does the commissioning of images for gods and the carved images were used for religious purposes.

Carvers acquired their training after a long and varied period of apprenticeship. A carver could specialize in mask carving and decoration; he does this alone, so that the notion of calling these carvers untutored does not hold. These carvers were completely restricted by the traditionalism of their training. To them, to do new things means forsaking the ancestors, spirits and their cultural heritage. The shapes and the fundamental patterns like *ibo*, *iru-eku*, rat's tail, *aayan*, cockroach, *oju-eiyele*, pigeon's eye, *eegun-ejo*, snake's bone, were traditionally fixed. “This should be taken as an appropriate way of doing things, for every pattern has its name function—there can hardly be any drastic change in carving ornamentation,” Lamidi Fakeye, a traditional carver, stressed.

FUNCTION OF THE CARVINGS AND DECORATIONS

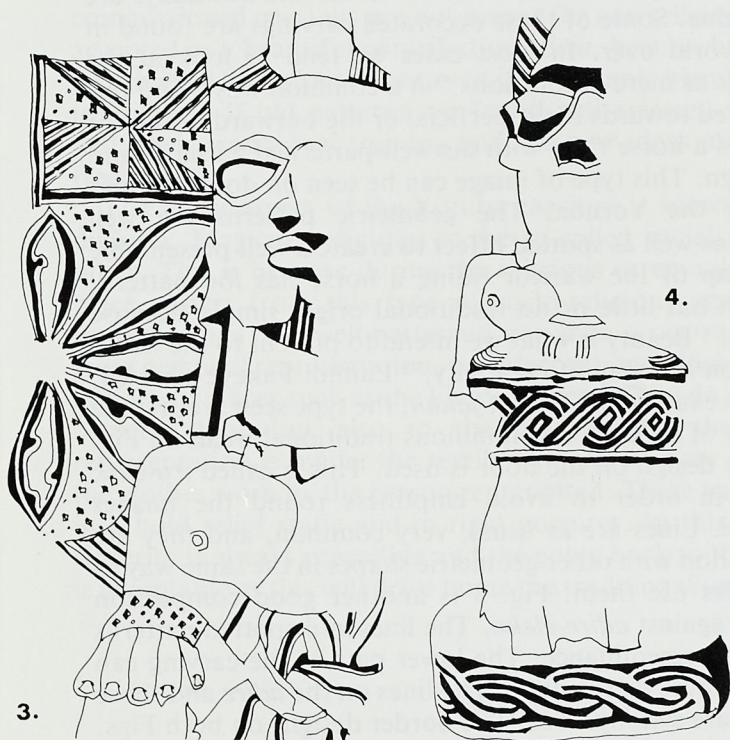
In order to prevent natural happenings such as *iku ojiji*, a sudden death, *ila olode* or *ile-gbona*, small-pox or chicken-pox and other infections, carvings to represent *Orisa* are commissioned and used in shrines where rituals are performed. These commissioned images are always with beautiful



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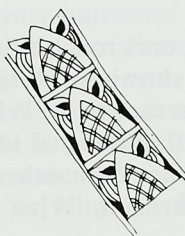
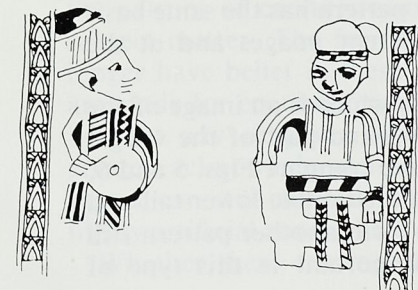
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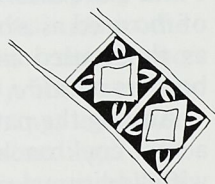
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decorations. This is another avenue through which *Orias* can be satisfied. Straightforward beauty to appease the gods is acknowledged by the *abore*. When beautiful, well-patterned images are used effectively in shrines, the spirits are satisfied and pleased with the offerings. This type of appeal varies. In the display of the masquerade, *Egungun*, who is believed to be an ancestor from heaven. He is on Earth to answer to the call of his people known as *ara orun kin kin*, that is, "who is from heaven". On the head of most *egungun* are carved wooden figures which are usually fearfully carved and decorated. The artistic contribution creates respect and there is always a wide gap created between the adherents and the *ara orun kin kin*. The decorated patterns and the images generally on most of these *egungun* are magical through rituals and sacrifices whereby blood of sacrificial animals like goat, ram, cock and in the past of human beings, was poured or spilt on the images.

Carvings produced by nearly all Yoruba traditional carvers nowadays are generally for aesthetic value. Some of these decorated carvings are found in private collections the world over. In most cases we tend to look at the patterns on these carvings as mere decorations "in a common way" and our attention is usually directed towards the superficial or the outward beauty of the patterns. Fig. 1 shows a horse rider with his well-patterned garment and cap with *ibo* type of design. This type of image can be seen on door carvings—very common among the Yoruba. The geometric patterns are well combined with the linear as well as spotted effect to create a well presentable piece of artwork. The cap of the warrior riding a horse has *ibo* pattern, interwoven pattern which has little or no traditional origin simply because modification is identified. "Beauty is what we intend to present to the world at large, little modification is a way of creativity," Lamidi Fakeye stressed. This type of pattern looks exactly like that of *jakan*, the type seen around the neck and the frontal view of *agbada*, a voluminous traditional wear. In Fig. 2, another type of border design on the door is used. This is called *iru-eku*, rat's tail. This is used in order to avoid emptiness round the images represented in the middle. Lines are as usual, very common, and they are used perfectly in combination with other geometric shapes in the same way as traditional fabric designers use them. Fig. 3 is another good comparison whereby a carving is seen against *adire-eleko*. The lines and spotted patterns are well controlled to show resemblance. The lower part of the carving can go hand in hand with the leaves on the *adire*. The lines on the *adire* and those on the head of the image are synonymous. The border designs on both Figs. 1 and 2 are also used to decorate base of carvings. Fig. 4 is another example of *ibo* used as a base decoration for an image. This pattern has the same basis as those used in fabric decoration, dividing different images and at the borders of *adire*.

Among the patterns is *aayan*, cockroach (Fig. 5), which is an image of the actual cockroach cut into half showing the tail-end and part of the wings, with additional patterns to fill in the space. When we compare Figs. 5 and 6, we can see innovation in form of additional ideas, the double lower tail-end of the *aayan* has been used to face each other to form another pattern still retaining its name *aayan*, cockroach. What is important in this type of

traditional pattern is the representational message derived from the work. *Ayan* is one of the commonest insects found with a beautiful appearance.

As stressed earlier, both traditional fabric designers and carvers have the same fundamental knowledge in their choice and usage of patterns. The patterns commonly used in carvings are in stencil form and used for fabric patterning in a traditional way. The use of lizards and other animals are for part-decoration of images as in cloth patterning. "They do and mean the same thing in traditional fabric patterning or traditional carvings—they are used to create beauty," Lamidi Fakeye stressed. As in fabric decorations, the patterns are used mainly as a sort of support, they do not stand alone. They act as subsidiaries to the main functional images usually depicted in the centre. In fabric ornamentation it is sometimes the reverse.

Since not all the patterns used in both carvings and fabrics have a traditional background, we have what is called self-initiated motifs. To modern designers there is nothing against this. Since most of the recently commissioned carvings are not meant for any religious purpose, they can be accepted as a beautiful contribution. *Ewa*, beauty, has no limitations. It can be achieved in various forms even if it warrants blending the old and the new techniques. If old patterns are found and assessed and found to be in line with their traditional training and the new ideas and application, they are freely used.

The social aspect of the Yoruba carvings is sometimes without a definite division. Magical, religious or the so-called social aspect weave into each other. This is because during the religious ceremonies, social activities take place. Apart from this type of socio-religious aspect we have the social proper, when the well-patterned carvings serve various purposes ranging from personal representation, wall decorations, door carvings or sculpture in important places such as the king's palaces. They do not give prestige to their owners alone but also to the carvers and the visitors. If personal representation is made, the textile-like patterns are always predominant on the clothes worn by the person represented. These patterns are always shown in a bold relief static and in rigid postures. In this type of ornamentation sincerity is always prevailing and the going back to the old way of patterning is acceptable as this will drive home the traditional undertone of the message.

CONCLUSION

The Yoruba art of carving and its decorations has dwindled rapidly and the patrons of carvings also changed due to their change in attitude in the subject matter. The former *abore*, the chief priests of various deities, no longer have belief in these recently-patterned carvings simply because they are made for economic reasons. Most of these decorated carvings are made without any religious or magical purposes. This notwithstanding, "the greatest acknowledgement of the aesthetic power of a work of art generally is that it can still move us when it is presented totally out of context in the highly artificial atmosphere of a museum".²

Whether these carvings are for religious purposes or used as "Airport

art", those who understand the various levels at which they function will look at them with the same strength of purpose. The introduction of the so-called international religions, Christianity and Islam, changed the cultural patterns and because of this the art of pattern-making among the Yoruba degenerated. The most adorned and worshipped sculptural pieces are no longer in the making simply because the former belief has changed and has given way to the economic point of view. Sincerity that prevailed no longer holds the spiritual outlook. It disappeared because of the introduction of spontaneous patterns that are always striving towards the achievement of the outward beauty to please the living and not the *alenu ma soro*, that which has mouth but can't talk—the deities. As it is for these carvers and their patterns so it is for the traditional fabric designers. Their understanding of the cultural and traditional expressions sprang from the same roots. This can be identified in their usage of imagery and their supporting decorative patterns. Whatever the changes, these people still lean backwards for a sort of support from their beliefs and their traditional training.

However, the patterned carvings of the Yoruba will ever remain one of the greatest Black African artistic achievements and will forever testify to how firm and vital a role this type of art can play in the life of man.

REFERENCES

- ¹E. L. R. Meyerowitz, *Wood Carving in the Yoruba Country*, Africa, Vol. XIV, No. 2, 1943.
²Carol F. Jopling, *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies*, E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York, 1971, p. 127.

Notes on Crabs from the Niger Delta

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INTRODUCTION

Little is known about the crabs of the Niger Delta of Nigeria, though some of them are highly prized by the indigenous population. A survey of the shrimp resources of the area (Bayagbona *et al* 1971) showed that out of the four species caught, *Penaeus duorarum* was commercially the most important.

Specimens for this study were collected from the mangrove swamps and creeks surrounding Okrika, about ten to twenty nautical miles from Port Harcourt, along the Bonny River (Figs. 1 and 2), and their native Okrika Ijaw names are recorded. This preliminary investigation has shown that the most abundant crab species belong to seven genera and five families. These genera are taxonomically described and are found to resemble those from other mangrove environments, notably the Caribbean (Hartnoll, 1965; Abele,