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PART ONE

TRADITIONAL ART FORMS



THE QUESTION OF ORIGIN OF ESIE STONE IMAGES

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INTRODUCTION

The most intriguing aspect of the study of the Esie stone carvings seems to be the question of their origin. Ever since their discovery in the obscure northern Yoruba town of Esie in 1933, there has been a great interest in who, why, when and where the stone carvings were made. Their present owners are unable to give plausible answers to the thorny question of the origin of the stone carvings. Consequently, the answer to the question is found mainly in inadequate and, at times, ill-thought out conjectures.

The stone carvings have been adopted as objects of worship and the people of the town who claim their ownership actually lack any established direct ancestral links with them. The oral traditions of origin of the images which have been gathered from the town are numerous, but the most popular variant (which I shall discuss later on) has been described as an implausible origin of the images.

The images are carved in a type of soft stone called steatite. They were discovered packed together in a nearby farmland in an unorganised manner thought to be suggestive of a hurried abandonment. The way and manner in which the stones were discovered have contributed enormously to the anonymity of the carvers. Because of this, early efforts to understand the origin of the stones have not been quite fruitful.

Some scholars have, therefore, described the images as enigmatic, one of the greatest mysteries of Africa. A stylistic analyses of the stones which would have been of much help was not properly attempted at the early stage. It is only recently that analytical studies, using several approaches have started to be used. However, in these studies, the origin of the images appears to have been unduly looked for outside their area of discovery. It is these views that this paper aims at re-examining vis-a-vis the possibility of local origin for the carvings.

Milburn was the first to come out with an article on the Esie stone images. He recorded a tradition of origin which is, up till now, the most popular among their owners and scholars. The tradition explains how certain strangers, when passing through Esie, sent a message to the **Elesie** (ruler of the town) that they intended to visit the town. Therefore, neither the king nor any of his

subjects was to be absent from their homes until their arrival. But when the strangers left this instruction, there was no specific arrival date given. The **Elesie** and his subjects are reported to have waited for them for many days before, getting impatient, the **Elesie** himself decided to go and quickly tend his okra farm. But unfortunately, it was during his absence from home that the strangers arrived. The strangers actually passed by and even greeted the **Elesie** on their way into the town, without the **Elesie** recognising them at first. When he, however, did, he quickly went home but they knew that he had flouted their instruction as a tiny piece of okra clung to his beard.

The strangers, angered by the **Elesie's** disobedience, disclosed that they had come to deliver a message from God which would have brought great happiness to the town. Instead, they prayed that Esu (messenger to all gods) should put a mark on the **Elesie's** forehead as a punishment. God, however, considered that they had exceeded his instruction. He intervened by making the strangers kneel down and turning them into stones which are now the **Esie** stone images.

An absurdity which makes this tradition implausible as the true origin of the **Esie** stone images has been explained in the reverence with which the townspeople now worship the images of the strangers who had, initially, purposed to punish their community leader. The possibility of this tradition, having some hidden symbolisms cannot be ruled out completely, but if such is the case, the true meaning of this awkward explanation is yet to be properly explained. The images, themselves, do not confirm the story of the strangers turned into stone in kneeling positions. Only a few of the images were depicted kneeling or standing. Most of them are seated.

In a variant of this tradition also recorded by Milburn, the same strangers, in their anger, are said to have headed for okodo (now identified as a previous site of **Esie** and which I shall discuss later on). On getting there, they are said to have dumped the images and left. But the site in which the images are presently housed, which is also where they were originally discovered, is not the same as the abandoned okodo. Only a few stone carvings, though in related styles, have been found on the site so identified.

Milburn, bored with the traditional origins, finally chose to ignore them and opted to examine the images themselves. Looking at the terracotta and stone carvings from Ife in the work of Leo Frobenius, titled **The Voice of Africa**, and woodcarvings from Yorubaland, he concludes that although the **Esie** images are not as fine as the Ife arts, which were already popular, they are sufficiently good to have been done by the descendants of the Ife artists.

Daniel, essentially noting the work of Clarke, has also made some notable contributions. He has come up with a tradition which associates the images more strongly with Ife. The tradition reveals that 440 idols were removed from Ife by the founder of Ikole Ekiti who is closely related to the **Elesie**. However, no such large number of idols have yet been found at Ikole and the number of idols mentioned in the tradition are far less than the stone carvings in **Esie**. His suggestion has led Stevens to suggest that the reference to 'idols' in the tradition may have meant **Orisa** (gods), which are about 400 in Ife cosmology.

Like Clarke, Daniel also studied the images themselves. He noted certain features about them which led him to conclude that the images were the products of a country where various influences converge. But the features on the images which advised his conclusion are cultural

elements which are more readily diffused than stylistic elements.

From a few other unsuccessful attempts at tackling the problem of the mysterious origin of the Esie stone images, it is evident that the oral history of the present inhabitants of the town is of little help. The unusually large number of sculptures found in Esie also made them unwieldy for modest stylistic or formal analyses. The discovery of more naturalistic art works at Ife in the 1930's also diverted a lot of attention from Esie. It was not until 1959 when Fagg examined the images with a view to finding their origins that any further step was taken to study the images. Using the forms, particularly the style of a particular head which he identified as naturalistic with great affinities to some Ife stone sculptures, Fagg suggested Ife origins for the images. Similarities are pointed out between the Esie stone head and the **Ikena** and **Ore** figures of Ife. These similarities are found in the treatment of certain peculiar features such as the eye boards and ears. He substantiates these resemblances by noting an equally similar Ife figure which Bertho and Mauny illustrated in 1952. This stone figure called **Alafere** or **Moremi** is according to Fagg, representative of a degenerate form of stone sculpture that was being carried out of Ife up to early this century. He placed such degenerate forms of stone sculptures which included the Esie ones, between the classical period of Ife art and modern times. But it appears that he hurriedly concluded as no indepth stylistic analyses of Ife or Ife related stone sculptures and the Esie stone images were done.

Adepegba, whose observation is based on the facemarkings of the images and their relationship with the facemarkings on ancient Ife sculptures has also noted the history of the dispersal of people from Ife towards northern Yorubaland and finally concluded that the Esie stone images were made or carried there by early immigrants from the direction of Ife, if not from Ife itself. His main focus was not on the origin of the Esie carvings but it appears that he, like many scholars before him, succumbs to the issue of the primacy of Ife among some Yorubas and the antiquity of its arts. Also, the facemarkings on which he relies upon to conclude his paper are cultural elements which are more readily diffused than stylistic elements that may have more reliably showed the links between the arts.

However, before him, Stevens had assigned an old Oyo origin to the stone images. In Stevens' view, the images could only have come from old Oyo or some area under its immediate influence or even one of the neighbouring towns occupied by refugees from old Oyo. This view is based on the reports of Clapperton and the Landers who reported on the artistic richness of the ancient capital shortly before its fall. His conclusion on an old Oyo origin for the Esie stone images is substantiated by certain cultural similarities which he thought were exclusive to old Oyo on the stone carvings. These factors as well as the indication of the presence of soapstone in Upper Ogun in the geological map of Nigeria, appear to have led him to the conclusion.

But the bases upon which he concludes if carefully examined, raises some pertinent queries. The reports of Clapperton and the Landers on old Oyo are not specific about the use of stone in the arts to which Stevens refers. And old Oyo archaeology is yet to confirm the use of stone for similar purposes. In fact, their reports are specific about woodcarvings in old Oyo. On the issue of certain common cultural elements, it has been pointed out that such cultural elements are not common only to old Oyo. These institutions are, according to Adepegba, also common in other parts of

Yorubaland. As regards the issue of the sources of raw materials, there even appears to be some bias in Stevens part for, he does not search for materials southwards of Esie. His reason for leaving out the southerly parts is that Ife area (south of Esie), had been well investigated without traces of a large quarry from which the numerous Esie carvings could have been got. He was evidently assuming that only one large quarry should have produced the stones from which the images were carved.

Going by these reviews, it is obvious that many of the writers, except Stevens, are strongly inclined towards an Ife connection, if not an Ife origin. The question, therefore, is why such is the case in Esie, when there are no doubts about the local origin of the other arts of southwestern Nigeria, which like Esie, have been found in extant towns. Even the Tsoede bronzes which were found scattered in villages on the Niger river banks are historically connected with the Nupe who have lived in that area for a fairly long time.

Since available information on the origin of the images of Esie are unsatisfactory as their true origin, there is a need to examine the migratory history of peoples around that region and the images themselves, their formal and stylistic connections with the arts of southwestern Nigeria with a view to solving the historical question about the images. This it is hoped, will confirm or disprove the outside origins already ascribed to the carvings.

Esie and other Ancient Arts of Southwestern Nigeria

There are indications from the review in the first part of this paper, that the stone carvings of Esie are closely related to some other ancient art traditions of southwestern Nigeria. Such relationship, often cultural, tends to confirm the historical contiguity of groups and peoples within that region and indeed the whole of southwestern Nigeria. But stylistic links which are more desirable because of their reliability and validity to confirm such relationship have not been given much attention. Perhaps the dearth of information in this regard is because by their very nature, the study of traditional African art forms is hindered by their anonymity, lack of chronological records and the non-narrative or descriptive nature of the object.

Even though it is now possible to study the various art traditions of southwestern Nigeria separately, it is difficult to understand them thoroughly without a broad historical knowledge of the region which essentially explains movements of peoples and groups and even at times art objects from place to place. Most of southwestern Nigeria is inhabited by the Yoruba. All of them claim descent from Oduduwa and Ife. The traditional history of Benin links its royal dynasty closely with that of Ife. The Nupe in their own case have had numerous encounters with the Yoruba of the northern parts for a very long time. Therefore, what we find is that many of the peoples inhabiting southwestern Nigeria are in one way or another related or at least connected with the Yoruba. Until new archaeological data proves otherwise, Ife art is also the oldest in southwestern Nigeria. The arts of both Benin and Nupe are closely linked with Ife. And despite the stylistic differences among the Nupe bronzes, the biggest figure found there, the seated Tada figure, is incontrovertibly linked with Ife on a stylistic basis. The figure is even thought by some scholars to have been the model used for the production of the other bronze objects found there. Although the possibility of a direct

connection between Esie and Benin seems remote, some relationships are being brought out. When Frobenius first came across four stone heads of the Esie style in Offa, he noted that there was a relationship between the heads and Benin bronzes of the Dutch period in dressing and ornamenting the hair and in an attempt to study the headwears in Benin and Esie, I have noticed the existence of similar head dresses, although with slight modifications in Esie, Ife and Benin. Since it is widely accepted among scholars that Ife is prior to Benin and Esie, then perhaps it is not unlikely that the common form of headwear in these traditions had a common origin with Ife. This type of headwear may have been in existence even before the Europeans came to Benin. The headwears that are related in form to the Ife and Esie type are worn by certain important chiefs of the Benin court.

The Nupe bronzes numbering about ten do not belong to a single style and evidences are still lacking to prove that they were manufactured there. In some respects, especially in terms of their local origin, they are like the Esie images.

Aside from the fact that one of them, the seated Tada figure, has been both stylistically and chronologically associated with Ife bronzes of the classical period, scholars have hardly doubted their association with Tsoede, the founding father of the Nupe. An identical facemark pattern displayed by one of Nupe bronzes and an Esie head has caused some scholars to suggest that there may have also been a relationship between the bronzes and the stone images of Esie. The presence at Obo Ayegunle of ancient brasscasting has also been useful in tracing the movement path of the seated Tada figure from Ife to Nupeland. Then, Esie and Nupelands are in fact close to themselves. The facemark similarity is again a good pointer to the local origin of the stone images because it is only in Esie that similar markings are found.

The art of woodcarving is believed to have been carried out in most communities in southwestern Nigeria. Woodcarvings are indeed the most popular and numerous of the arts of the region and the rest of sub-sahara Africa. I have noted that there is a very close resemblance between the manner of production of these wood sculptures and the stone carvings of the region. But woodcarvings are not as durable and it is even thought that the most extant African wood objects are less than one hundred and fifty years old. This has led me to suggest that perhaps it is the need for permanence and the high cost of bronze, especially among an artistically conscious and prolific people, that brought about the art of stone carvings especially in areas where the raw materials were available. The origin of most woodsculptures are never in doubt because they were available almost everywhere.

Some stylistic similarities exist between the Esie stone images and Ife art, particularly its stone sculptures. I have examined the stone sculptures of Eshure, Ikirun and Igbajo (all within a hundred kilometres radius of Ife) for their stylistic relationship with the Esie stone images. My findings indicate cultural as well as few stylistic similarities but a progressive abstraction in forms as the traditions moved northwards. At Ijara and Ofaro, the northernmost occurrence of Yoruba stone sculptures, the forms of the works are even the same with Esie though a few naturalistically tendered works are known in Esie. Fagg has pointed out a particular stone head which he describes as an aberration in the Esie tradition and which he closely associates with Ife on the bases of style.

Elsewhere I have even suggested that the aberrant stone head and the few other naturalistic works in Esie perhaps provided the original images from which the others were inspired.

The cultural affinities shared by the stone carvings within the region include the use of beads, dress and face and body markings. This makes me to suggest first of all, that they at least belong to a cultural continuum. The few occurrences of stylistic affinities can be accounted for by available evidences to confirm that African artists at times copied from pre-existing images within the same cultural context and even also from outside which might have resulted in rigidity of traditions or innovation of forms.

But in African art, strictly religious forms were often typical and similar. The Ife works, seemingly portraits, did not seem to have been made for religious purposes and the Esie works, also not typically the same, appear to have been made for and by a larger community. Their number considered, they might have been made to serve specific or perhaps some emergency purposes. Although few figures appear like portraits of individuals, most of them are depicted with weapons, particularly cutlasses and bows and arrows with quivers. These weapons are traditionally more commonly associated with Northerners than with the Yoruba and the region was notorious for consistent warfares between the Nupe and the Yoruba in the past. This uniqueness in themes makes me doubt the outside origin often ascribed to the images. Then the local origins of the other Yoruba stone carvings are not in dispute. The weights of the images considered, it is doubtful that the images would have been moved over any great distance. The discovery of soapstone in and around the town also supports this.

Archeological efforts at Owo have revealed the presence of many terracotta heads which are closely related to the arts of Ife and Benin. There is a stunning resemblance between Owo and Ife arts especially in the degree of naturalism of the works. However, while Owo artists took great interest in gruesome representations or diseases, Ife art seems to have been principally meant for the glorification of its monarchy. In spite of its close relationship with Ife, Owo also shares equally close affinities with Benin in its royal culture and architecture. In fact the typical Benin forehead marking has been found on one of the Owo terracottas. Esie stylistic parallels can also be found in Owo in the way certain terracotta pieces are represented. Best exemplified by the woman holding a cock, this image and two others like it excavated by Eyo are stocky and squat. The treatment of their feet, particularly their being carved and cut out of the base and their general posture are similar to the Esie stones. These instances are vivid indications of stylistic relationships between the stone images and Yoruba arts. The closeness of Owo arts to Benin and Ife notwithstanding, its arts, particularly the terracottas, have not been ascribed any outside origin.

From the discussion, it is clear that except for the Esie stone images (and perhaps the Nupe bronzes) all other arts of southwestern Nigeria are of local origin. Esie town, where the stone images, like all other towns where traditional arts have been found in southwestern Nigeria, is extant. The major problems are the fact that the images display myriads of features and facial markings which now appear to be non-Yoruba. The area where the stones are got is known to have been occupied at various times by either the conquering Yoruba or Nupe forces until about the 18th century when the Yoruba appeared to have taken firm control of that area. The Nupe had been

driven northwards around Omu Aran. Because of this, it is even thought by other scholars that the works may have been the products of a conglomeration of different peoples. The fact that the traditional origin of the images is implausible as their true origin has also caused much doubt about their local origin.

Thermoluminescence dates got from Esie is about 11th century A.D, hence it is discountenanced. There are evidences of great waves of migration from Ife towards the whole of northern Yorubaland. The most prosperous of the Yoruba towns from about the 16th-18th century, old Oyo, is believed to have been populated by immigrants from Ife and Olowu supposedly the first heir of Oduduwa, founder of the Yoruba race is believed to have found his own kingdom in northern Yorubaland after leaving Ife. Mabogunje and Omer Cooper, in their search for the original Owu, his state, have suggested that most Yoruba towns of historic importance are situated in northern Yorubaland where the stones were found. There is, therefore, a good reason that the stone carvings were made in or around the area where they are presently found. However, much archaeological investigation remains to be done for this view to be conclusive.

Conclusion

Finally, a certain characteristic which binds all the arts of southwestern Nigeria is the manner in which the eyes of the objects are depicted. They are pronounced convexed eyeballs surrounded by articulately rendered lids. This special attention which is paid to the eyeballs binds all the arts of the region including the Esie stone carvings. The recent Yoruba woodcarvings have their eyes represented in the same manner and style. In the whole of the region, it is only in Oyo and related sculptures, particularly in terracotta and metal that there seems to be a marked difference in the representation of the eyeballs. There, the eyeballs are bulbous with horizontal slits across. Also, the symmetrical disposition and frontality common to most Yoruba arts are found on the stone carvings.

The stylistic and cultural connection between Esie and other Yoruba arts suggest that all the arts of the area must have derived from a common source. The similarity in the themes used also suggest a close relationship. Recent archaeological efforts also confirm the availability of numerous stone outcrops in and around Esie. Although Stevens, using only the geological map of Nigeria, thought that the raw materials could only have come from Old Oyo. He even overlooked the reports of the laboratory tests which he conducted, which say that the stones used for the carvings came from more than one source. Therefore, I do not find any justification for outside origin of the stone images. The images were produced in and around Esie.

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