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THE QUESTION OF OUTSIDE ORIGINS FOR THE ESIE STONE CARVINGS

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THE most intriguing aspect of the study of the Esie stone carvings is the question of their origin. Their discovery, in the obscure northern Yoruba town of Esie in 1933, has aroused much curiosity and speculation.

The people of Esie, who claim ownership of the carvings, have adopted them as objects of worship, though there are no established direct ancestral links with the images. The oral traditions of the origin of the images which have been gathered from the town are numerous, but the most popular variant has been described as implausible.¹

The images, carved in a type of soft stone called steatite, were discovered packed together in a farm in an haphazard manner suggestive of a hurried abandonment.² The way and the manner in which the stones were discovered have contributed enormously to speculation on their producers. Some scholars have described the images as enigmatic and one of the greatest mysteries of Africa.³ A stylistic analysis of the stones which may have given some indication of the origin of the images was not attempted at the early stage. It is only recently that analytical studies, employing several approaches, have started to be used. However, in these studies, answers to the question of the origin of the images have been sought outside the area where they were found. This paper aims at re-examining the origin of the carvings vis-a-vis the possibility of a local origin.

Milburn was the first to write an article on the Esie stone images. He recorded a tradition of origin which is, up till now, the most popular among their

present owners and among scholars. The tradition explains that certain strangers, who planned to pass through Esie, sent a message to the *Elesie* or ruler of the town that they intended to visit the town. They instructed that the king and his subjects should remain in their homes until their arrival. But the strangers gave no specific arrival date. The *Elesie* and his subjects are reported to have waited for the visitors for many days and become impatient. The *Elesie* then decided to take a quick trip to his okra farm to tend his crops. Unfortunately, the strangers arrived while he was away. The strangers had actually passed by and had even greeted the *Elesie* on their way into the town, without the *Elesie* recognizing them. When he realized who the passers by were, he quickly went home; but the visitors knew that he had flouted their instructions because a tiny piece of okra clung to his beard.⁴

The strangers, angered by the *Elesie's* disobedience, said that they had come to deliver a message from God which would have brought great happiness to the town. Instead, they prayed that *Esu*, the messenger to all the gods, should put a mark on the *Elesie's* forehead as a punishment. God, however, considered that they had exceeded His instructions and intervened. He made the strangers kneel down and turned them to the stone images which are now the Esie carvings.

This legend seems contradicted by the reverence with which the Esie people now worship the stone images.⁵ The possibility of this tradition having some hidden symbolism cannot be ruled out completely, but the true meaning of this unlikely

explanation is yet to be found. The images do not give credence to the story of the kneeling strangers turned into stone;⁶ only a few of them are sculpted kneeling or standing; most of them are seated.

In a variant of this tradition also recorded by Milburn, the strangers, in their anger, are said to have headed for Okodo, now identified as a previous site of Esie. On getting there, they are said to have dumped the images and left.⁷ However, the site where the images are presently housed, which is also where they were originally discovered, is not the location of abandoned Okodo. Only a few stone carvings, though in related styles, have been found at Okodo.⁸

Milburn, unsatisfied with the local traditions of origin, chose to ignore them and decided to examine the images themselves. Looking at the terracotta and stone carvings from Ife illustrated in Leo Frobenius', *The Voice of Africa*, and wood carvings from Yorubaland, he concludes that although the Esie images are not as fine as the Ife art works, they are sufficiently good to have been produced 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.⁹ 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. This led Stevens to suggest that the reference to 'idols' in the tradition may have meant *orisa* or gods, of which there are about 400 in Ife cosmology.¹⁰

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 converged.¹¹ The features of the images which advised his conclusion are cultural elements, which are more readily diffused than stylistic elements.

Other attempts to solve the mystery of the origin of the Esie stone images have shown that the oral history of the present inhabitants of the town is of little help. The unusually large number of the sculptures makes modest stylistic or formal analyses difficult. In addition, the discovery of more naturalistic art works at Ife in the 1930s diverted a lot of attention from Esie. It was not until 1959, when Fagg examined the images with a view to finding out their origin, that any further step was taken to study the images. He identified the forms, particularly the style of a peculiar head (plate 1) as naturalistic, with great affinities to some Ife stone sculptures, and therefore, suggested Ife origins for the images.¹²



Plate 1. The aberrant Esie head pointed out by Fagg

He pointed out similarities between the Esie stone head and the Idena and Ore stone figures at Ife, especially in the treatment of features such as the eye borders and ears. He substantiates these resemblances by noting a similar Ife figure which Berto 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 at Ife up till early this century. He placed such degenerate forms of stone sculptures, which include the Esie ones, between the classical period of Ife art and modern times.¹³ It appears, however, that his conclusions were rather hasty as no in-depth stylistic analysis of Ife or Ife-related stone sculptures or the Esie stone images was carried out.

Adepegba supports the belief of an Ife origin for the Esie sculptures. His observation is based on the similarity of the facial marks on the images to those on ancient Ife sculptures. He then noted the history of the dispersal of people from Ife towards northern Yorubaland and concluded that the Esie stone images were made or carried to Esie by early immigrants from the direction of Ife, if not from Ife itself. Adepegba, like many scholars before him, succumbs to the belief of the primacy of Ife among some Yoruba people, and the antiquity of its art.

Previous to Adepegba's suggestion, Stevens had assigned an Old Oyo origin to the stone images. In Steven's view, the images could only have come from Old Oyo, some area under its immediate influence, or one of the neighbouring towns occupied by refugees from Old Oyo.¹⁴ This view is based on the reports of Clapperton and the Lander brothers who reported on the artistic richness of the ancient capital shortly before its fall. His conclusion of an Old Oyo origin is substantiated by certain cultural features noted in the Esie stone carvings which he thought were exclusive to art works from Old Oyo. These, as well as the indication of the presence of soapstone in Upper Ogun in the geological map of Nigeria and the oral history of Esie people, appear to have led him to this conclusion.

But the bases upon which he concludes, if carefully examined, raise some pertinent queries. The reports of Clapperton and the Lander brothers on Old Oyo are not specific about the use of stone in the art works to which Stevens refers. Archaeological studies on Old Oyo are 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, *ilari*, *iyalode* and *magha*, are also common in other parts of Yorubaland.¹⁵ As regards the issue of the source of raw materials, there appears to be some bias on Steven's part, for he does not search for material south of Esie. His reason for leaving out the southern parts is that the Ife area, south of Esie had been well investigated, and no large quarry found from which the amount of stone used for the numerous Esie carvings could have been obtained. He was evidently assuming that only one large quarry could have produced the stones from which the images were carved.

Going by these reviews, there is evidence that many of the writers, except Stevens, are strongly inclined towards an Ife connection, if not an Ife origin. The question, therefore, is why should the origin for the Esie carvings be sought outside Esie when there are no doubts about the local origin of other arts of southwestern Nigeria, which were found in other extant towns like Esie. The Tsoede bronzes, for example, which were found scattered in villages on the Niger river banks, are historically connected with the Nupe¹⁶ who own and have lived in that area for a fairly long time.¹⁷

Since available information on the origin of the Esie images is unsatisfactory, 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 of their origin. This, it is hoped, will

confirm or disprove the outside origins already ascribed to the carvings.

There are indications from the review earlier in this paper that the Esie stone carvings are closely related to some other ancient art traditions of southwestern Nigeria. Such relationships, often cultural, tend to confirm the historical contiguity of groups and peoples within that region and, indeed in the whole of southwestern Nigeria. However, the use of stylistic links, which are more desirable because of their reliability and validity, to confirm such relationships has not been given much attention. The cultural affinities shown by the stone carvings within the region include the use of beads, dress, and face and body markings. This suggests, first of all, that they belong to a cultural continuum.

In African art, strictly religious forms were often typical and similar. The Ife works, seemingly portraits, do not seem to have been made for religious purposes. Similarly, the Esie carvings, which are not typically the same, appear to have been made for and by a large community. Considering their number, the Esie images might have been made to serve specific emergency purposes, although full figures appear to be portraits of individuals. Most of them are depicted with weapons, such as cutlasses, and bows and arrows in quivers. Traditionally in Nigeria, these weapons, are more commonly associated with northerners than with the Yoruba. In the past, the southwestern region of Nigeria was notorious for consistent warfare between the Nupe and the Yoruba.¹⁸ The uniqueness of the images makes me doubt the outside origin often ascribed to them, particularly as the local origins of other Yoruba stone carvings are not in dispute. Considering the heavy weights of the images, it is doubtful whether they were moved over any great distance. The discovery of soapstone in and

around the town also supports the idea of a local origin.

A certain characteristic which binds almost all artwork from southwestern Nigeria, including the Esie stone carvings, is the manner in which the eyes are depicted. They are represented as pronounced convexed eyeballs surrounded by distinctly rendered lids (plate 2). This special attention paid to the eyes also characterizes modern Yoruba woodcarvings. In the whole of the region, the only exceptions are the Oyo and Oyo-related sculptures, particularly in



Plate 2. An Owo piece showing the style of the eye typical of artwork from southwestern Nigeria

terracotta and metals. There is a marked difference in the representation of the eyeballs. The eyeballs are bulbous with horizontal slits across (plate 3).



Plate 3. An Egbado pottery piece showing the Oyo type of eyes with slits

Another feature which unites the Esie stone carvings to artwork from the southwestern region is the symmetrical disposition and frontality which is common to most Yoruba art. The stylistic and cultural connection between Esie and other Yoruba art suggests that all the art of southwestern Nigeria must have derived from a common source.

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 explains the movements of peoples and groups and even art objects. Most of southwestern Nigeria is inhabited by the Yoruba, who claim descent from Ife, from a common ancestor, Oduduwa. The traditional history of Benin also links its royal dynasty with Ife.¹⁹ The Nupe, the northern neighbours of the Yoruba, have been interacting with them for a very long time. Therefore, what we find is that many of the inhabitants of southwestern Nigeria are in one way or another related to or have historical connections with the Yoruba.

Until new data proves otherwise, Ife art is the oldest in southwestern Nigeria. The arts of both Benin and Nupe are closely linked with Ife. Stylistic differences exist among the Nupe bronzes. One of the bronzes, the seated Tada figure, is incontrovertibly linked with Ife on a stylistic basis.²⁰ The figure is even thought by some scholars to have been the model used for the production of the Ife bronze sculptures.²¹

Although the possibility of a direct connection between Esie and Benin seems remote, some connections are being discovered. When Frobenius first came across four stone heads (plate 4) in the Esie style in Offa, he noted similarities between the heads and Benin bronzes of the Dutch period, especially in the dressing and ornamenting of the hair.²² In comparing the styles of headgear in Benin and Esie, I have noticed some similarity between the headdresses in Esie, Ife and Benin (plate 5).

Since it is widely accepted among scholars that Ife antedates Benin and Esie, perhaps it is not unlikely that the similarities in the form of headgear in these traditions could be attributed to a common origin in Ife. The Benin headgear styles that are related in form to the Ife and Esie types are still worn by certain important chiefs of the Benin court.



Plate 4. Four Esie type heads found in Offa by Frobenius



Plate 5. Headgear of a Benin chief, similar to some of the Esie headdresses

The Nupe bronzes, numbering about ten, do not belong to a single style. Evidence is still lacking to prove that they were manufactured there. 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. The presence at Obo Ayegunle of ancient brass casting has also been useful in tracing the movement path of the seated Tada figure from Ife to Nupeland. In some respects, the Nupe bronzes are like the Esie images. An



Plate 6. The Jebba bowman with facial marks similar to those on an Esie head

identical facial marks pattern displayed by one of the Nupe bronzes (plate 6) and an Esie head (plate 7) has caused some scholars to suggest that there may have been a link between the Nupe bronzes and the stone images of Esie.²³ In addition, Esie and Nupeland are close to each other. The facial marks similarity is a good pointer to a local origin for the stone images because it is only in Esie that similar markings are found.



Figure 7. An Esie stone head with the facial marks similar to that of the Jebba bowman

The art of wood carving is believed to have been carried out in most communities in southwestern Nigeria. Wood carvings are indeed the most popular and numerous of the arts of the region and in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. There is a very close resemblance between the manner of production of these wood sculptures and the stone carvings of the region. It is thought that most extant

African wood objects are less than one hundred and fifty years old.²⁴ Perhaps it was the need for permanence and the high cost of bronze, especially among an artistically conscious and prolific people, that brought about the art of carving in stone, especially in areas where the raw material was available.

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 a few stylistic similarities but a progressive abstraction in form as the tradition moved northwards. At Ijara and Ofaro, the northernmost occurrence of Yoruba stone sculptures, the forms of the works are the same as in Esie. Fagg has pointed out a particular stone head (plate 1) which he describes as an aberration in the Esie tradition and which he closely associates with Ife on the basis of style.²⁵ The aberrant stone head and the few other naturalistic works in Esie perhaps provided the original images from which the others were inspired.²⁶ A close study of the images reveals that there are a few stylistically related works elsewhere within the same region and even outside it. The few occurrences of stylistic affinities can be accounted for by available evidence which confirms that African artists at times copied from pre-existing images within the same cultural context and even from the outside.

Archaeological efforts at Owo have revealed the presence of many terracotta art works which are closely related to the arts of Ife and Benin. There is a stunning resemblance between Owo and Ife art, especially in the degree of naturalism of the works. However, while Owo artists took

great interest in gruesome representations of diseases, Ife art seems to have been principally meant for the glorification of its monarchy. In spite of its close relationship with Ife, Owo equally shares close affinity with Benin in its royal culture and architecture.²⁷ In fact, a typical Benin forehead marking has been found on one of the Owo terracottas (plate 2). 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 (plate 8). This image, and two others



Plate 8. The 'woman holding a cock' from Owo

like it excavated by Eyo, are stocky and squat. The treatment of the feet, particularly their being carved and cut out of the base, and their general posture are similar to the style of the Esie stones. These examples are vivid indications of stylistic relationships between the Esie stone images and other Yoruba art. In spite of the closeness of Owu art works, particularly the terracottas, to those of Benin and Ife, they have not been ascribed any outside origin.

From the discussion, it is conceivable that except for the Esie stone images and perhaps the Nupe bronzes, all other art works of southwestern Nigeria are of local origin. Esie town, where the stone images have been found, 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 a myriad of features and facial markings which now appear to be non-Yoruba. The area where the stones were found is known to have been occupied at various times alternately by either Yoruba or Nupe forces until about the 18th century when the Yoruba appeared to have taken firm control.²⁸ The Nupe were driven northwards towards Omu Aran. As a result, it has been thought by some scholars that the works may have been the products of a conglomeration of different peoples.²⁹

Thermoluminescence dates got from Esie indicate a period about the 11th century A.D.,³⁰ which scholars do not accept. There is evidence of great waves of migration from Ife towards the whole of northern Yorubaland. Old Oyo, the most prosperous of the Yoruba towns from about the 16th to the 18th century, is believed to have been populated by immigrants from Ife. Olowu, supposedly the first son of Oduduwa, founder of the Yoruba race, is believed to have founded his own kingdom in northern Yorubaland after leaving Ife.³¹ 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 Yorubaland³² where the stones were found.

There is therefore, ~~good reason to believe 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.

Recent archaeological efforts confirm the availability of numerous stone outcrops in and around Esie.³³ Stevens, using only the geological map of Nigeria, thought that the raw materials could only have come from Old Oyo but overlooks reports from laboratory tests stating that the stones used for the carvings came from more than one source.³⁴ From these arguments therefore, I do not find any justification for theories of an outside origin for the stone images. They were most likely produced in or around Esie.

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The Cover:
male ancestor figure
Origin: Baule, Ivory
Coast
Medium: Wood