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Contents

Editorial

'Dele Layiwola v

Book News vii

Main articles

The Yoruba Concept of Art and Its Significance in the Holistic View of Art as Applied to African Art

Cornelius O. Adepegba 1

Aspects of Language Use in Yoruba Traditional Medicine

Wale Adegbite 7

Establishing Liminal Categories in African Ceremonial Dances

'Dele Layiwola 19

The Esie Stone Carvings in the Art History of Southwestern Nigeria

Ohiona I. Pogoson 28

Nigeria and Cameroon: Boundary Disputes and the Problem of Border Security

Ajamu Olayiwola Owolabi 39

Institutional and Structural Variables in City Management in a Third World Country

Chike F. Okolocha 48

The Origin of Ejere in Ora, Emai and Iuleha Clans of Owan Local Government Area of Bendel State of Nigeria

J.A. Ilevbare 59

Poems for Sale: Stylistic Fratures of Yorùbá Ìpolówó Poetry

Niyi Osundare 63

The Nigerian Labour Movement Under the Military

Austin Isamah 73

Pleasant Imperialism: Conjectures on Benin Hegemony in Eastern Yorubaland

'Biodun Adediran 83

Traditional African Philosophy: Its Significance for Contemporary Africa

Olusegun Oladipo 96

Leatherwork in Oyo: Access to Material as a Factor in the Origin of an African Craft	
<i>R. O. Rom Kalilu</i>	105
Barefoot Doctoring: An Alternative Approach for Eliminating Pharmaceutical Drug Pedlary in Rural Nigeria	
<i>Olugbemi Moloye</i>	113
The Nigerian Yoruba Traditional Birth Attendants' Intervention Techniques During Normal Childbirth	
<i>Sylvester Ntomochukwu Madu and Olayinka Adejumo</i>	119
Book Review	
Reflections on Fiberesima's Okrika and Gwanjo Culture	
<i>T. N. Tamuno</i>	127

THE ESIE STONE CARVINGS IN THE ART HISTORY OF SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA

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THE position and status of the Esie stone images in comparison with other artistic traditions of southwestern Nigeria is still fairly obscure. This is true despite the fact that the Esie museum, which houses over 800 stone carvings is the first and oldest museum in Nigeria. The stone images were discovered in 1933 and the museum was founded in 1945. Why has so little attention been paid to these unique examples of Yoruba sculpture, even though Yoruba culture has for a long time been the subject of both local and international scholarship? Perhaps, the anonymity of the stone carvings results from problems and difficulties in establishing their provenance. In addition, the unwieldy size of the collection may have discouraged research activities. In this paper, the Esie stone images will be studied against the background of the other artistic traditions of southwestern Nigeria, with a view to better understanding likely connections between these art traditions.

The geographical area to be discussed in this paper includes the area immediately north of the Niger, occupied by the Nupe, and the entire Nigerian land area south of the River Niger. The larger part of this region is occupied mainly by the Yoruba and Bini (Benin Kingdom) who, traditionally have had a long-standing filial relationship. The Yoruba people have a rich and varied artistic tradition, more profuse than any other ethnic group within the region. The ancient arts of Ife, Owo, and Old Oyo attest to the artistic expertise of the Yoruba. The nature and form of Yoruba art and the influence of Yoruba artistic traditions on their immediate neighbours will be a central theme of this discussion.

Esie is an Igbomina town situated in northern Yorubaland. The Igbomina are a subgroup of the Yoruba, who were for a long time under the suzerainty of the ancient Yoruba kingdom of Oyo. Although traditional accounts describe an early northward movement of populations from the south, i.e., Ife; the capital of the ancient northern Yoruba kingdom of Oyo, Oyo-Ile, appears to have acquired power over most of northern and southwestern Yorubaland in the 1600s. There is, however, archaeological evidence to confirm that the region, which became the economic nerve-center of the ancient empire, was being exploited by man at least by the 8th century A.D.¹ However, until the discovery of the stone carvings in Igbomina, Esie was insignificant in the cultural history of the Oyo empire. The present inhabitants of Esie seem to have no knowledge of the origin of the stone carvings. They claim to have discovered them at a site where they intended to resettle and adopted these artefacts as objects of worship, as peoples are wont to do when confronted with mysterious or inexplicable objects.

The inhabitants of Esie previously referred to themselves as children of the images, *omo ere*. However, the gradual erosion of traditional cultural values and practices by Western influences and by religion have greatly affected the way the townsfolk now view the stone images. In the past, these images were believed to provide assistance to barren women and to ensure plenty of rainfall and consequently a good harvest. They are, however, no longer seen as capable of solving such problems. To the Christians and Muslims who now live in the town, the images are seen as idols. The result is that the annual

festival to propitiate the images has now been modified to appear a modern carnival; the traditional significance of the event seems to have been lost. As a result of this unfortunate circumstance, there is little information that can be obtained about the images from the present residents of Esie or from the annual festival. Scholars, realizing the importance of the images as art objects, have had to resort to studying the objects themselves to understand these *chef d'oeuvres* of Nigerian, and indeed African stone sculpture.

The Esie stone carvings, unlike the well studied arts of Ife, Owo and Benin, have not enjoyed much academic analysis. It appears as if colonial/foreign interest in the stone carvings has been greater than local, indigenous interest. What is available in the literature about the stone carvings, even though mostly mere documentation, was done by colonial officials. The museum which now houses the stone carvings and which is the oldest in Nigeria was also a result of colonial initiative. Early writers on the stone carvings, whose works began to appear shortly after the discovery of the sculptures in 1933, tended to look at them against the background of the more prominent wooden carvings² of the region which were, and are, still being produced. These early accounts, apart from noting the existence of such a large corpus of African stone carving, concluded that because their styles were similar, they are likely to have been modern manifestations of traditional Yoruba wood carvings.³

Another popular view is that because of certain prominent features alien to the Yoruba, which are found on many of the stone carvings, they were a result of the convergence of diverse cultures⁴. This view is quite natural given the history of northern Yorubaland, which is seen as a melting pot of many cultures, and also the vital confluence of early northern and southern trade links. Whether the meeting of diverse cultures would necessarily elicit a cultural outcome such as the images of Esie, is yet an unproven assumption. At any rate, Esie town, which is yet to be properly investigated archaeologically, does not show any signs of having

been a major urban center. If it had been a major centre, the large number of carvings found there could be justified. The assumption is that only a large and politically stable urban setting could have produced the stone carvings. There are temporal implications for this assumption, but the c.1100 A.D. date obtained from some terracotta figurines⁵ found at the site of discovery, which seems to support this idea, has been quite unpopular in academic circles. If by chance however, the stones happen to be products of many cultures, such cultures are more likely to be from the immediate vicinity of the finds. Therefore, the arts of Ife, Owo, Old Oyo, Nupe and Benin are clearly an essential reference to this study.

More recent efforts, notably the book by Stevens,⁶ now provide the best data on the stone images. In this invaluable work, the author has used anthropology rather than art history, to approach the subject. Unfortunately, his efforts, although remarkable, are not rewarded by plausible results. A major criticism of his book, *The Stone Images of Esie, Nigeria*, is that it does not include a stylistic analysis of the works. Nevertheless, Stevens' book is rich not only in its well researched traditional accounts about the images, but also in photographs. In concluding his book, he draws heavily on the oral history of the origin of the town and the analysis of some stone fragments which he collected from Esie, Ijara and Ofaro, where stone sculptures similar to the Esie ones have also been found. Stevens suggests an Old Oyo origin for the stone images and although he does not indicate whether the stones were carved *in situ* or not, he implies that the images were moved from elsewhere to their present site⁷.

Adepegba and Andah have recently highlighted the problems in Esie studies and made a call for an interdisciplinary study of the town, its stone images and the northern Yoruba region. Using both oral history and the face markings to be found on the faces of a large number of the stone images as evidence, Adepegba is of the view that the images were made or carried to the area by early immigrants from the direction of Ife, if not Ife itself.

Such immigrants are, according to him, responsible for the presence of the cat whisker face marking which is an ancient Ife face marking in Yorubaland where some of the rulers claim Ife origin.⁸ Andah does not think that the methods employed by Adepegba are sufficient, and therefore, he calls for more ethnographic as well as archaeological research to solve the enigma of these stone sculptures in Yorubaland.⁹ In 1984, the present author was able to embark on a stylistic analysis of the stone images. Two major styles, and several substyles were discerned, although this finding has not been backed by spatial or temporal considerations. The styles were categorized by their tendency to depart from naturalistic representation of the human figure. Hence the major styles were referred to as the *naturalistic* and the *stylized*. The works in the stylized group, which make up more than 80 per cent of the entire collection, were not only less naturalistic in their treatment of the human form, they were also characterized by profuse decoration with cultural motifs. The stylized form was angular and cubic, compared with the rounded form of the naturalistic style. Several substyles were distinguished from these styles based on other criteria.¹⁰

Stevens' link of the Esie stone images with Old Oyo has been rejected.¹¹ Old Oyo was being evacuated under increasing pressure from northern Muslims in the 1830s, until total destruction was finally wreaked on the ancient capital within that decade. Although this was the final blow that broke the political hegemony of Old Oyo over the region, cases of frequent confrontations with other northern peoples, especially the Nupe, were not uncommon in Old Oyo history and politics.¹² In the developmental years of the empire, its capital was known to have been moved from various sites¹³ as a result of pressures from the north. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the kingdom gained political and economic stability and success, during which time it was well noted for its cultural and artistic richness. Although archaeological work at the ruined site of the ancient

capital has not revealed much of such arts, early travel accounts from Clapperton, the Lander brothers and an early Oyo Yoruba historian, Samuel Johnson, support the existence of a rich artistic tradition in the ancient capital.

The paucity of extant manifestations of the arts in the ancient capital have led scholars to search further into the history of Old Oyo. It has been discovered that because of the manner in which the ancient capital was abandoned, the arts of the town are difficult to reconstruct. In the process of its abandonment, much of the treasure of the town was evidently burned, looted, scattered or otherwise destroyed. This, according to Thompson, has led to the omission of the town in Nigerian art history and to our inability to quantify or qualify its actual role in the formation of Yoruba art as it is known today.¹⁴ Adepegba, in an unpublished manuscript titled, *Oyo-Ile: Its origins and arts in the light of new archaeological data from Yorubaland and Benin*, has thrown fresh light on the art of the ancient capital. According to Adepegba the artistic traditions of Old Oyo included: leatherwork, calabash decoration, wood carving, pottery, dyeing and blacksmithing. Even though extant evidence of the town's artistic richness cannot now be found in the ruined capital, these arts have spread to other parts of Yorubaland to which fleeing Old Oyo refugees took them. His arguments are enhanced by the works of Awe¹⁵ and Thompson¹⁶ on Yoruba blacksmithing and pottery. Practitioners of these crafts in some parts of Yorubaland often trace their lineage origins, as well as the origin of their crafts, to the ancient capital of Oyo-Ile.

Other crafts like calabash decoration have, for a long time, been exclusive to new Oyo. Leatherwork is also presently being carried out at the new capital, which grew out of refugee populations from the ancient capital. There is also an ancient manifestation of Old Oyo brass casting in the presence of a certain brass face mask called *alakoro*, which is significant in certain palace festivals in new Oyo. Its users and keepers claim direct descent of

their mask and themselves from the ancient capital. Such masks are known to exist in at least three former towns of the Old Oyo empire and their keepers are consistent in recounting their traditional origin from Oyo-Ile. It is also significant that apart from the Obalufon face mask of Ife, the alakoro masks are the only other face masks known in Yoruba art. There are also extant examples of Old Oyo house-posts in the Department of Archaeology, University of Ibadan. These house-posts were salvaged from the ruins of the ancient capital. From these examples, therefore, although little now exists which can be definitely linked directly to Old Oyo, we are not totally lost as to the artistic richness of the defunct capital. However, most of these arts are not relevant to this study. They are either two dimensional or like the alakoro, whose form is static and exclusive to a special role in palace festivals.

The history and culture of the northern Yoruba establishes the Igbomina relationship to Old Oyo.¹⁷ The present inhabitants of Esie, who know little about the origin of the images claim, in their traditional history, to have left Old Oyo during the reign of Alaafin Abiodun in the late 1700s.¹⁸ But in spite of this relationship, I do not share the view that the Esie stone images are products of an Old Oyo polity. This is because, apart from their apparent lack of similarity to present manifestations of Old Oyo arts, the oral history of the present inhabitants of the town, which holds that they found the images there when they arrived, appears to me a *fait accompli*. Further, why are cultural motifs which characterize Old Oyo not represented on the stone images? There are no indications of popular Old Oyo themes such as the equestrian figure or even people involved in the commercial activities, from which the ancient Oyo kingdom developed its power, on any of the Esie stone carvings. Animal symbols said to have been popular on Old Oyo arts are also lacking in Esie sculptures, and there is no evidence that stone carving was practiced in the ancient capital. Finally, it seems to me that the proposers of an Old Oyo origin for the stones have simply chosen

Oyo because of its historical prominence. No explanation is given for ignoring other centres.

The ancient city of Ife is the traditional 'cradle' of the Yoruba. If oral traditions there, which claim that Ife was the beginning of life, particularly of the Yoruba race, are implausible because their details sound mythical, the arts of the town, which are the oldest in southwestern Nigeria, tend to support these traditional claims. These arts are not just the oldest, but also the most technically excellent, the most naturalistic and they closely relate to an ancient leadership which appears to have continued in the town to date. The Ooni of Ife is regarded as the father of all Yoruba. Ife is maintained to be the spot from which all of the Yoruba dispersed. Many of the artistic traditions found elsewhere in the region are thought to derive from Ife. The introduction of brass casting into Benin is credited to an Ife master, who was sent to teach the art there at the request of Oba Oguola. This transfer of technology, as it were, is attested to by the foremost Benin historian, Jacob Egharevba.¹⁹ Other material evidence to support this claim is available in Ife and Benin. It is said to have been Oranmiyan who established the present Benin ruling dynasty, who also founded Old Oyo when he found Benin too unpleasant. Two of the most powerful kingdoms in the region, Oyo and Benin, therefore derive from Ife according to oral traditions.

The arts of Ife are in metal, terracotta and stone. The metal and terracotta arts of the town are popular and well known outside Nigeria. Perhaps this is because when they were discovered, because of their beauty and naturalism,²⁰ they were thought to be derived from Europe, and not the products of a black race. Since then, however, scholars working on the arts of Ife have plausibly associated them with the town and its people. Although the tradition of brass casting in naturalistic forms in Ife appears to have died out, the numerous extant evidence of its rich artistic tradition abounds in the town. Art works similar to those of Ife are not restricted to the immediate environment of the town. Other arts elsewhere in southwestern Nigeria have become not

only historically linked with Ife, but artistically linked on the bases of forms, styles and even themes. As a result, one of the Nupe bronzes, found in the village of Tada, the seated Tada figure, is referred to as of Ife manufacture because, it is not only contemporaneous with classical Ife arts, it is also in the same style as the Ife bronzes.²¹ In Owo, terracotta art works that were excavated show Ife related styles, although possessing a uniqueness of their own. The origin of Owo is also credited to an Ife prince who left to found his own kingdom.²²

In Ife and immediately north of Ife, there are stone sculptures that are not very well known. Such sculptures appear to be well distributed in this immediate northern region. In Efon Alaiye, Kuta, Igbajo, Eshure and Ikirun, all within the forest, just below the present limit of the forest zone, have been found stone sculptures, which are similar not only in form and style, but also in themes and variety to those of Ife township.²³ Also to the immediate north of the northernmost of these towns, towards the probable former limit of the forest zone, in Esie, Ifara and Ofaro there have been found other stone sculptures which are closely related in form, style and theme.²⁴ The stone sculptures, taken together, form the entire corpus of Yoruba stone carvings uncovered so far; Allison thinks they are related to the classical age of Ife, although stylistically he does not class them with the Ife bronzes and terracottas²⁵. The possibility of a correlation in the early northward migrations from Ife and the occurrence of stone sculptures in northern Yorubaland is perhaps noteworthy. The spatial correlation is also significant.

In spite of this correlation, it has been difficult to establish a direct stylistic link between Ife stone sculptures and the Esie stone carvings. But two significant stone sculptures, Idena in Ife and an 'aberrant' head in Esie, are related in terms of general treatment, size and proportion.²⁶ I have suggested that the aberrant Esie head may have been taken there from Ife and used as a model, after which the immigrants who took it there produced the

carvings in the naturalistic style at Esie.²⁷ A progressive movement from naturalistic to stylized modes can be noted as one moves northwards. Ife stone carvings are the most naturalistic in Yorubaland, while the majority of the others including the Esie stone carvings are mostly stylized, possibly after a traditional woodcarving style in northern Yorubaland. The stone carvings of the towns between Ife and Esie can be more closely related stylistically and thematically with Ife. In those towns, as in Ife, the themes of their stone carvings range from anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations to column-like obelisks or pillars and quartz stools. The stone figures of Eshure are clearly connected with Idena on the basis of style, form and their tendency towards naturalism. It is only with the northern-most stone sculptures that hard stones or granite are not used. In Esie, Ijara and Ofaro, the stone carvings are done in a type of talc schist called steatite or soapstone which is commonly found in a belt running from Ilesa to the Esie region. Soapstone was also being used in Ife.

From all indications, the cultural content and motifs of the Esie stone images and of Ife stone carvings are more similar than the artistic style, although stylistic similarities would have undisputedly linked both traditions. The cultural motifs depicted on the sculptures in the form of beads, facemarkings, dress and accoutrements, and certain household objects such as the stools on which the Esie figures sit and the calabashes (of wine) point to a relationship of cultural interchange. The fact that the traditional origin of the images also link them with Ife rather than the Old Oyo polity is suggestive of a temporal sequence. There is a good possibility that the stone carvings had been produced prior to Oranmiyan's establishment of old Oyo by immigrant groups from Ife before, or during, but not later than the formation of the Oyo state. Perhaps the Owo state with which Old Oyo had to contend during its early days and which Mabogunje and Omer Cooper have suggested was located in

northern Yorubaland may have provided the political stability, the population and the urban setting that might have nurtured the production of these stone sculptures in that area. Owu is believed to have been founded by Oduduwa's grandson by his first daughter.

The question of the purposes for which such a large number of stone images were produced, no doubt, lies hidden in the ancient religious practices of their producer cultures. According to Olajubu (personal communication, 1989), images representing human beings are never carved for reasons other than religious in Yoruba cosmology. Frobenius implies (from a hint in Timbuktu), that the Yoruba prepared stone images as representations of their forebears which they buried after their departure from this world.²⁸ Perhaps it was this information that led him to discover the three stone heads in the Esie style at Offa. Although this specific practice does not appear to have been carried on at Ife, the stone sculptures of Ife are incontrovertibly linked to Yoruba religious practices. In fact, the stone carvings of the town are found only in sacred groves and shrines. It is my view that the images of Esie derive the greater influence for their production from Ife.

The artists who created the Tsoede bronzes, like the stone images of Esie are also apparently anonymous. Tsoede bronzes have even been considered by a school of thought to be trade goods or war booty.²⁹ The ten bronze sculptures which have been found in the Nupe villages of Jebba, Tada and Giragi are in a variety of styles. While some are more related to Benin, others are related to Ife and Owo on stylistic and ichnographic grounds. In some other cases, the works do not conform to any of the styles of the region. It was this problem that led Fagg to lump these bronzes and others found within the region with similar non-conforming stylistic characteristics in what he called the lower Niger bronze industry.³⁰ Apart from the fact that the Nupe sculptures are made from bronze and the Esie images from soapstone, a significant cultural

similarity with respect to facemarkings between the Jebba bowman and an Esie stone head has raised certain questions on the possibility of a relationship between these two art traditions.³¹ Therefore, in spite of the differences in material, scholars employing the multi-disciplinary approach have been working on the possibility of confirming or refuting such a relationship.

Facemarkings are cultural idioms which are subject to fashion. Unlike artistic interchanges, cultural interchanges are more fluid and more easily diffused from culture to culture. Therefore because there is hardly any stylistic or formal relationship between the Nupe bronzes and the Esie stone sculptures, the trend has been to contend with the possibilities of cultural diffusion between both cultures as being responsible for the spectacular occurrence of this similarity of facemarkings in both arts. But because the region where the Nupe bronzes have been found is not known for brass casting and since some of the bronzes found there are in Yoruba related styles, an ancient brass casting center at Obo Ayegunle, which is nearly equidistant from both areas, is being suggested as the likely source of the Nupe bronzes. The decorative aspects of the sculptures, quite apart from the spatial factor, also link Obo Ayegunle with Esie. The history of the entire region, northern Yorubaland and Nupeland, is rife with numerous and frequent encounters between the Nupe and the Oyo Yoruba.³² The Nupe bronzes could possibly have been trade goods as Shaw has suggested, or even booty from war, as I suggested earlier on. These suggestions are plausible in justifying Yoruba elements or relations among the Nupe bronzes in spite of their being traditionally credited to Tsoede, a Nupe culture hero of the 16th century.³³

It is an undisputed fact that the present ruling dynasty of Benin derive from Ife. As I have mentioned earlier, the technology of brass casting is believed to have been transferred from Ife to Benin. But Benin arts are not only in bronze. They can also be found in easily discernible styles using ivory,

wood and terracotta. The arts of the town were first brought to official notice during a British punitive expedition in 1897, when the court of the Oba of Benin in which the art works abounded was sacked and a large number of them were taken away to Britain. The larger number of Benin art works are, as a result, in private and museum collections outside Africa. An advantage that this situation has created, however, is that Benin arts are now the best studied and best documented Nigerian arts. They also happen to be the richest of all ancient Nigerian sculptures in terms of number, themes and perhaps material preserved. In Benin, traditional arts range from free-standing three dimensional zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures and busts to rich and scenic plaques and intricately carved elephant tusks, all for the glorification of the kingship. The artists also produced richly carved wooden memorial heads for lesser personages and custom-made ivory objects for their foreign visitors. In the great variety of themes, their interactions with local and foreign visitors are reflected.

Benin arts and the Esie stone images hardly share any formal stylistic or artistic qualities. In fact, the themes and formats of each art tend to set them apart rather than relate them. Benin arts are particularly renowned for their busts and plaques whereas at Esie such forms are not represented. Of over five hundred and fifty-one fragmented suspected heads, only H245, H128, H244, H370, H545 and H546 (the aberrant Esie head) are thought to have been principally carved as busts.³⁴ There are no plaques at Esie or anywhere else in south-western Nigeria. The forms of both arts are distinctly different, although at times, isolated cultural similarities may be found. The cultural similarities are more significant in the arts of both places and they tend, at another level, to be justified by the proliferation of Benin culture among the northeastern Yoruba and Ekiti. The culture of the northeastern Yoruba is still rich with evidence to show that Benin had great control, perhaps for a considerable length of time, over certain towns there.³⁵ Obo Ayegunle,

an ancient town with the Yoruba type of brass casting, which I have earlier mentioned, is believed to have been a base for Benin armies who then controlled the territory in that region. In the entire region, echoes of Benin culture are evident in daily life and in the case of Obo Ayegunle, its brass bells, *Omo*, are spectacular in their resemblance to the well known Benin brass bells.³⁶

A strong cultural similarity between the stone carvings of Esie and Benin arts can be found in a certain type of head-dress worn by Benin equestrian figures. Similar head-dresses with slight modifications in form are to be seen on many of the Esie stone carvings and even on a terracotta head of the classical period of Ife art. The occurrence of this head-dress in Ife is significant because it confirms the antiquity of the head-dress as well as the possibility of its dispersal from Ife. Also significant is the fact that in Benin, the head-dress is part of the regalia of certain palace chiefs, the recognized ambassadors of the Benin court. The Benin equestrian figures which also wear similar head-dresses are at times referred to as messengers from Ife, especially when they display certain Ife peculiarities such as the cat whisker facemarkings and the Maltese cross.³⁷ This interchange of cultural motifs is more likely to have occurred through trade, or intertribal wars.

Wood sculptures are numerous and widespread in southwestern Nigeria, but they are not all relevant to this study. The architectural woodcarvings for which Old Oyo was known are only relevant to the extent that the figures carved on them can be studied against the background of other Yoruba sculptural images from the point of view of form and style. But extant examples of these are now scarce, while the few in existence are defaced and representations on them hard to decipher, even in relief. In spite of this limitation, a thematic interest in animal representations has been noted in Old Oyo houseposts, although such representations are few and insignificant in Esie. In Benin, traditional wood sculptures consist of memorial heads and

representations of hens and cocks. From their forms and styles, they appear to have been produced under certain strict traditional conventions which do not give room for extemporizing new ideas. Thus their forms are restricted within the particular culture of the producer group. These type of art works in Benin are not similar or relevant to the stone images. However, the style adopted in the representation of certain features of the heads, especially the treatment of the eyes are, according to Adepegba, common and related to wood carvings of the Yoruba and Benin.³⁸ The eyes consist of pronounced convex eyeballs surrounded by articulately rendered lids with the pupil left out or indicated by an engraved circle or a circular depression in Ife and Benin sculptures respectively.³⁹ The eyes of the Esie stone images are more closely related to the Ife type in which the pupil is not represented.

The wood sculptures of the region, which are more relevant to this study, are the three dimensional, free standing full figures whose forms can be more readily discerned for a comparison with the stone images. Thompson, in his classification of Yoruba wood carving styles, included the Oyo and the Igbomina in the same category, on the basis of style. Their styles are, according to him, characterized by pronounced eyes, emphasis on the head, elongation of coiffure and a characteristic blending of the arms at the sides.⁴⁰ From this description, it appears that Thompson may have been dealing, in the main, with *ibeji* statues which, according to Adepegba, are likely to be a northern Yoruba phenomenon.⁴¹ Perhaps it is the similarity between these *ibeji* wood carvings and their frequency in northern Yorubaland that prompted early writers on the Esie images to associate them with northern Yoruba wood carving styles. Hammer and Hammer have even noted the expertise of an anonymous northern Yoruba wood carving master, whose workshop they placed between Ila Orangun and Oro, based on styles.⁴² Coincidentally, Esie is situated between these two towns and is only about one kilometer away from Oro town. Also, the

frontality which Willett finds common to the general treatment of Yoruba wood carvings is also common to the stone images.⁴³

Because African wood sculptures are thought to be older than traditional sculptures in other materials and because wood is abundant in southwestern Nigeria, the carving tradition in the forest areas is believed to have enjoyed an uninterrupted continuum. Their styles and forms are, therefore, stereotypical and tend to be fixed within a particular culture. Since African artists were in the habit of copying from pre-existing images, there is a good possibility that the wood carving styles may have been transferred to stone when that material became popular. The stylistic similarities which we have noted suggest a possible relationship between the Esie stone carvings and Yoruba wood carvings, although no spatial or temporal stylistic sequence can now be established because of the paucity of relevant information.

The Esie stone carvings share a very strong cultural relationship with the other arts of southwestern Nigeria. The common motifs depicted on the arts of the region, as well as the known historical connections, suggest artistic diffusion. Cultural and social interaction, although seemingly very fluid in the region, varied in degree. In my opinion, spatial factors are essential in determining the degree to which a smaller cultural entity imbibes cultural elements from a larger cultural group. The temporal factor, that is the time when particular cultural or artistic elements are exchanged, is also very important in determining the knowledge of such a period, especially within the culture of the receiver group and its continued retainership within the cultural history of the group. Therefore, while Old Oyo and Ife are more culturally related to the Esie stone images than other art-producing centres in the region, historical evidence suggests that Ife culture is likely to have diffused northwards before Old Oyo was established.⁴⁴ But since the political influence wielded by Old Oyo was later to surpass that of Ife, the need to identify with the larger and more

powerful polity could have influenced the Esie claim of an Old Oyo origin at a later stage. Time may well have blurred the historical perspective of the present inhabitants of Esie and their knowledge of the stone carvings. There is also a possibility that previous occupants of the Esie area abandoned the site and their images, perhaps because of political or military pressures. In that case, new immigrants from elsewhere, say Old Oyo, who were later to occupy the same area, then built an Ife relationship around the images because of Ife's position in Yoruba history and cosmology.

An important aspect of Esie arts in relation to others in the same region, apart from the peculiarity of the materials, is their stylistic uniqueness. In spite of occasional stylistic relationships which they share with the other artwork, it appears that the Esie carvings have a genius of their own. Therefore, in my opinion the images were not removed or transferred from any of the surrounding cultures with which the town had relations, but rather, they were carved and used within the immediate vicinity of their discovery. A search around the immediate area where the images are located has revealed not only similar materials to those in which the images are carved, but also in a few cases, stylistically similar stone images. The cases of Ijara, Ofaro and Offa attest to this. Recent geological surveys and archaeological reconnaissance in the Esie area have been rewarded not only with finds of steatite outcrops but stone images, still being discovered in surrounding bushes.⁴⁵

Perhaps it is pertinent at this point to recall Mabogunje and Omer Cooper's suggestion that the venerable Yoruba kingdom of Owu was situated in the northern Yoruba region.⁴⁶ Although the kingdom is no more in existence, Owu communities with similar oral traditions of origin exist in northern and southern Yorubaland presently. But the ancient Owu kingdom, in my opinion, and from its reputation, could have provided the setting suitable for the production of the stone images. The kingdom was not only acknowledged as a warrior group, its first

ruler, Asukungbade, was a grandchild of Oduduwa by his first child, a daughter. Although no large urban site has been uncovered in northern Yorubaland to suggest the existence of the ancient Owu town, at Ijara where stone carvings similar to the Esie carvings have been found, an inquiry into the relationship between the Ijara and Esie stones reveal in their traditions that the people of the area were 'as one' until the Olowu wars.⁴⁷ There, it was also gathered that the Olowu in question was a reputable warrior and blacksmith who worked at Esie, Ijara and in many other towns in the region.⁴⁸ An Owu community which escaped Mabogunje and Omer Cooper's search is in existence only a few kilometers north of Ijara.

Finally, although evidence to support an Ife origin for the Esie stone images is far from conclusive, I have put forward a proposal elsewhere⁴⁹ that the aberrant Esie head identified by Fagg may have been the model after which the stone masons of Esie worked. Consequently, I have also indicated that, as a result, the Esie carvings with the tendency towards naturalism may be earlier than the stylized ones. The stone images are also stylistically more related to Ife than to other art traditions in southwestern Nigeria. The time gap between Stevens' Esie dates also makes their relationship with other art traditions of southwestern Nigeria unlikely. Therefore, an Ife origin, in this regard, appears most plausible. The stone carvings are in my opinion, the products of Ife sensibilities and influences by emigrants from Ife to northern Yorubaland before the establishment of Old Oyo.

End Notes

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