



WEST AFRICAN
Journal of
ARCHAEOLOGY

30 (1)
2000

Revue
OUEST AFRICAINE
d'ARCHEOLOGIE



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CONTENTS

Editorial

- Aleru, J.O. Pottery from Igbominaland, North Central Yorubaland 1
- Boachie-Ansah, J. Preliminary Report on Excavations at Bonoso, Brong-Ahafo Region, Ghana 27
- Pogoson, O.I. The Aberrant Esie Head as Model: An Insight into the Styles and Origin of the Esie Stone Carvings 51
- Holl, A.F.C. & Lassina K. Settlement Patterns, Food production, and Craft Specialization in the Mouhoun Bend (NW Burkina Faso): Preliminary Results of the MOBAP 1997-1999 Field Seasons 69
- Technical Report:**
- Aremu, D.A. & Aleru, J.O. Archaeological Survey and Test Excavation in Imoleboja Rockshelter Area, Odo Owa, Kwara State, Nigeria. 109

The Aberrant Esie Head as Model: An Insight into the Styles and Origin of the Esie Stone Carvings

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Abstract

Ife is incontrovertibly the most important Yoruba town in terms of art, religion and culture, it is therefore advantaged as a possible source place to solve the problem of the enigma surrounding the Esie stone carvings. This hypothesis is pursued to the conclusion that Ife is the most likely place that could have conditioned the Esie stone carving in their present location.

An aberrant stone head, the largest among the over 800 stone carvings found in Esie is stylistically and culturally compared and linked with other Yoruba stone carvings from Ife and indeed a group of naturalistically carved stones also identified among the Esie corpus. This leads to conclusion of an Ife impetus for the creation of the Esie stone carvings.

Introduction

In most consideration of the over 800 anthropomorphic soap stone (steatite) carvings that are found in the northern Yoruba town of Esie, (fig.1), the question of their origin (which was dealt with in detail in Pogoso, 1990b) and their stylistic classification (Pogoso, 1984)

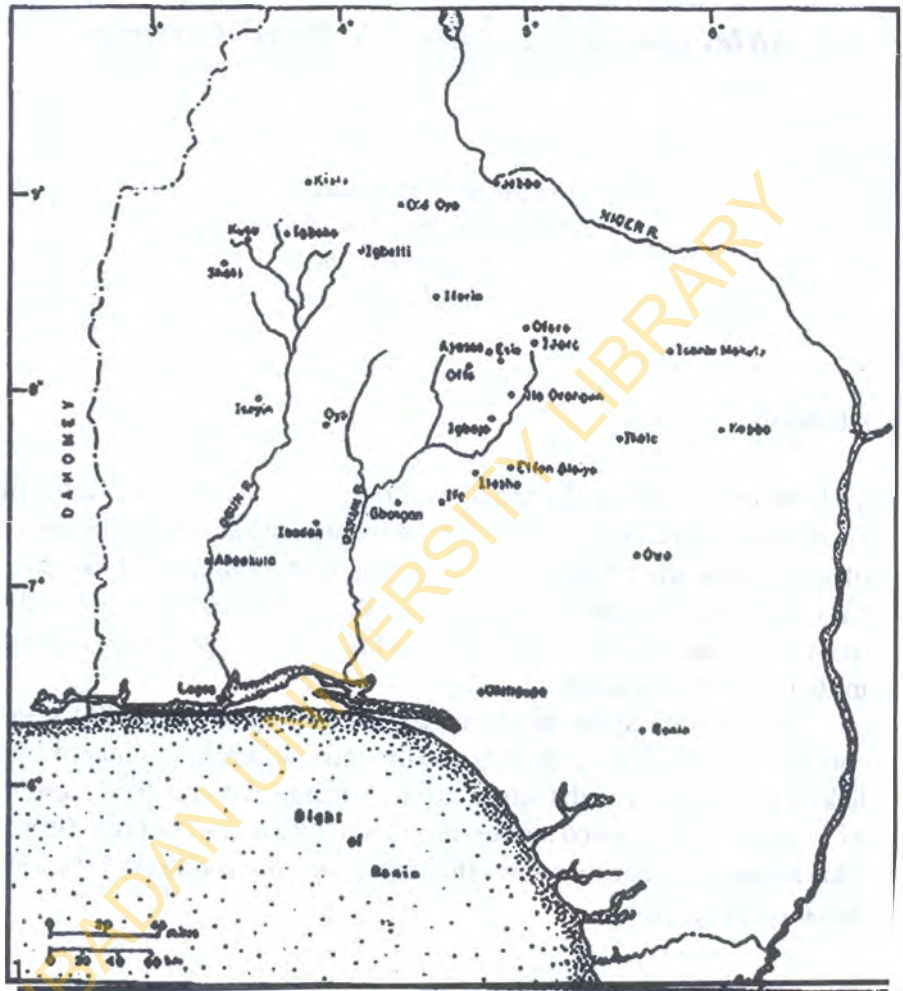


Fig 1: Map showing some major Yoruba towns mentioned (Stevens, 1978: XIII)

remain their most difficult aspects. Their origin remains a problem because the ancestors of their present owners and the present inhabitants of the town where the stones are found lack the information that would have shed desired light on this problem. Their present owners are in fact ignorant of the origin of the carvings as evidenced in their oral tradition of origin, which indicate that the stone carvings were already in the present spot where they were found before the arrival of their ancestral immigrants from Old Oyo to that area in the 17th Century. With regard to their stylistic classification, scholars have tended to view the works, which are the most numerous African stone sculptures belonging to one tradition, as too large and cumbersome to handle. Stevens who has written about the images, in an obvious capitulation to the problem, describes them as unwieldy (Stevens, 1978). He advocates the use of computers and statistical methods to tackle the problem of their stylistic analyses. Not being so equipped, he deliberately omits this aspect from his yet most important book on the Esie stone carvings.

But in spite of recent attempts made to investigate these two problems little is being done to illuminate the subject. There has even been a recent call for archaeological work in and around Esie town. Such an investigation, it is hoped will throw more light on the enigma of Yoruba stone sculptures (Andah, 1982) which are not limited to Esie area alone. An art historical approach, which has been used to study the stone carvings, is not directed, in the main, at tackling the problem of the images origin. But, resulting from a study of the faces on the stone images, their presence and development in northern Yoruba land has come the possibility that the impetus for the creation of the images may have originated from Ife area (Adepegba, 1982). Although multidisciplinary research efforts continue on the stone carvings, scholars are often faced with paucity of data. They are now gleaning information from the stone images themselves and the little scholars can get from other anthropological and ethnographic sources. Through these efforts, new information are being accumulated to make more secure statements about the major problems of the stone carvings.

In this paper, an attempt is made to study the Esie stone carving tradition, especially its dominant and unique (or aberrant) styles, with a view to finding relations elsewhere. This effort will also give some insight into the temporal sequence of the styles as well as throw some light on the problem of their origin but it does not claim to have resolved the problem of the images origin or completely settled the question of their stylistic analyses.

In an early contribution to the study of the Esie stone carvings, Fagg (1959: 41) noted the existence of an aberrant head (Plate 1a and 1b), which is similar in style to the most important stone carving at Ife, the spiritual capital of the Yoruba. The stone carving is called Idena (Plate 2). But despite the primacy of Ife in Yoruba history, Fagg (1959:41) in an eminently sensible manner does not draw hasty conclusions or point directly to Ife as the origin of the whole of the Esie stone carving. Rather, his cautious view is that the stylistic relationship should prompt us to look towards Ife, "the only other known centre of stone sculpture in the region". Later on he suggests that the Esie carvings might be intermediate in date between classical Ife arts and modern times.

Another contribution, which points towards Ife as the possible origin of the Esie carvings, is that of Adepegba (1982:105), which I have hinted on earlier. Then, using the abundance of face markings on the Esie stone carvings and on the Ife arts and their contemporary manifestations, Adepegba (1982) elucidates the eclectic nature of the face markings and goes on to suggest that their abundant use in Esie is a plausible point to suggest that the Esie stone carvings could have originated from Ife.

Samuel Johnson who had earlier associated the cat's whiskers face mark pattern with the Yagba subgroup of the Yoruba (Johnson, 1929:106-109) pointed out that examples of such markings can even still be found on the faces of old people in Yagbaland. But today, they are combined with a *baamu* (a diagonal stroke on the side of the nose) (Adepegba, 1982; Fagg, 1959: 41). Adepegba's view is that the Esie stone carvings are the property of immigrants from Ife who are responsible for the presence of cats-whiskers in Yagbaland and among

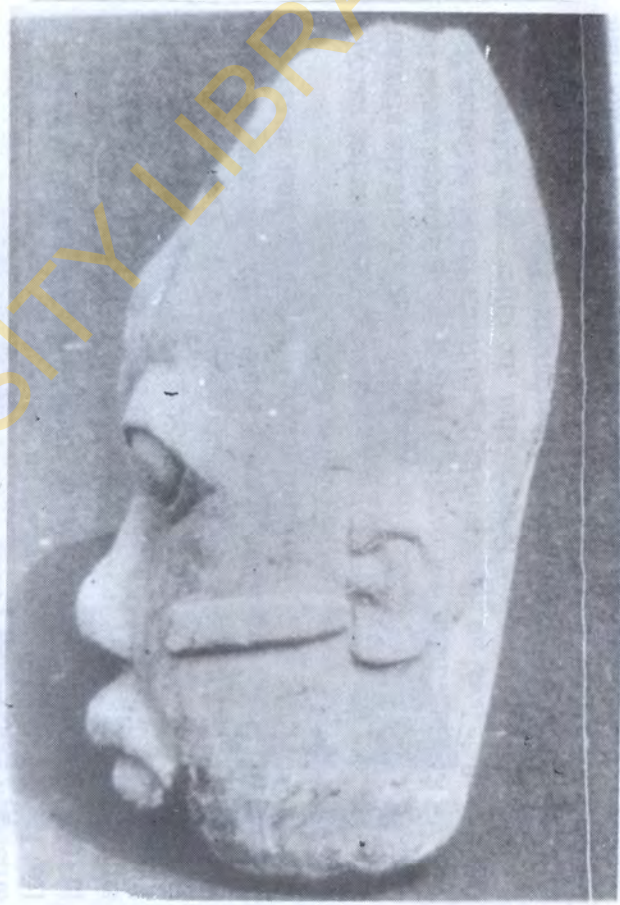


Plate 1a and 1b: The Aberrant Esie head. Frontal and side views (National Museum, Esie)



Plate 2: Figure of Idena discovered in Ore grove, Ife (National Museum, Lagos)

its rulers who claim direct Ife origin. These immigrants under sporadic Nupe attacks to gain the land abandoned the carvings (Adepegba, 1982:105). It is not surprising then that the Nupe are now closely associated with the mark even though they claim that it was adopted from the Yoruba. Such borrowing by conquerors and the conquered are not uncommon in the traditional history of the region.

These two studies undoubtedly associate the origin of the Esie stone carvings with Ife on stylistic as well as cultural grounds. This is not surprising considering Ife's antiquity, its cultural and spiritual importance as well as its artistic pre-eminence in Yoruba land, and all through southwestern Nigeria. Indeed, Ife should be naturally the first place to look at considering the importance of the Esie stone images. The Yoruba people are even believed to originate from Ife, which is only about 100 km south of Esie. In some other villages between Ife and Esie several other important stone carvings have been found. They substantiate an artistic continuum in that medium. This also makes an Ife origin for the Esie stone carvings tenable and plausible (Pogoso, 1990(a): 35-41). Then, most if not all of Yoruba artistic production has been in one way or another associated with Ife. The number and quality as well as the variety of art works found in Ife itself also substantiate its importance and in particular the pre-eminence of the town in Yoruba art history. This paper is about using the artistic evidence to substantiate the Ife impetus for the creation if not an outright origin for the Esie Stone images. Fagg (1959) had also noted a similarity between the aberrant Esie head and the arts of Ife (*Idena*). According to him, the two stone carvings certainly suggest a similarity or affinity both of general treatment and in certain particular features such as the eye borders and ears.

These features to which Fagg refers and which he has used to point out an affinity between the *Idena* figure of Ife and the aberrant head in Esie are the incontrovertible pointer, which indeed make the aberrant Esie head an aberration in the culture where it is found. It is in the treatment of these features that the differences between the others in the Esie group and the aberrant head can be found. But interestingly, there are others in the Esie group that are stylistically related to the aberrant head. Some of these as well as the aberrant

head have the features of the face depicted naturalistically as against the stylised others. However, it is again noteworthy to recognise, the fact that the stylistic classification attempted in the text is, in spite of the homogeneity of the stone carvings of Esie and other considerable variations in quality and treatment, indicating the presence of several and many hands. (Pogoson, 1984:27-31)

As indicated in Pogoson (1984) that in the multiplicity of the stone carvings of Esie, these two distinct styles, the naturalistic and the stylized exist, each with numerous sub-styles. This classification was based on a close observatory study of the distinctive stylistic features of the carvings, their shared common traits, as well as the varying degrees of naturalism of the carvings. The two major styles, which emerged, are the highly stylised works and those showing a clear tendency towards the rendering and representation of naturalistic forms. Other discernible sub-styles were also noted, but they only represent slight deviations from the major styles and therefore may have been the result of individual hands, workshop styles or the hand of master carvers. At any rate, they invariably fit into the two major classifications. (Pogoson, 1984: 8-31, Plate 3: Naturalistic style/Plate 4: Stylised style).

Daniel (1937:48) noted that some Esie carvings had perfectly flat backs, which made him think they were similar to woodcarvings of the town. Our studies confirm that about two-thirds of the Esie carvings are in the style noted by Daniel.

Faces with swelling forehead, straight noses and at times pointed beards as well as broad thick lips further characterize this style. An important distinguishing feature, which runs through all of the carving in this style, is the angular and cubic treatment of their forms. The backs of the full figures are very sharply cut thereby creating lines, which appear to run down to the buttocks. Generally also, the carvings in this group are executed without any attempt being made to round up fleshy human forms. These works are closely associated with Yoruba woodcarvings on a stylistic basis.

A close look at particular forms and features shows that the ears of the images in the stylised group (described in the previous paragraph) are pushed backwards such that when viewing the images

from the front, no ears are visible. In some cases, the ears are small, unidentifiable nodules, but viewed from the back or top they may also be hard to recognise. This ear positioning which clearly distinguishes them from others in the entire collection is important in associating the Esie tradition with Yoruba woodcarvings. The eyes are represented with thick ridges running from one side of the head to another. This ridge represents perhaps the eyebrows. Daniel (1937: 48) and Clarke (1938: 106-108) think that this form of eye belongs to the northern Yoruba naturalistic style and the northern type respectively. This confirms that the images are in fact indigenous. The bridges of the noses are treated as a mass of cartilage coming out of the forehead between the eyes, terminating in a spread Negroid nose. Lips are thick, spread and wide, even at times, wider than the spread of the nose. The necks of the carvings in this group are usually thick and similar in size to the head and headdresses put together. As observed, the artists of this group paid much interest to the details of headdresses, faces and ostentatious decorations with bracelets, anklets and necklaces. The ornateness of these works is an important distinguishing factor. The head of the full figures are represented in a forward thrusting position, with a peeping posture.

Perhaps at this point it is important to mention that what could pass for actual portraits are few in Esie. What has happened is that some of the heads (i.e. those which limbs have been lost) are numerous to the extent that matching the heads with the bodies that are available will be a tedious process, if not an impossible task. Indeed Stevens attempted some restoration work, but he could only manage a few. The style of having the head thrust forward possibly occurs as a result of the unusual flatness of the backs of the carvings. This makes the shoulders and neck region to be thinner and almost non-existent. Their trunks are uninteresting; at times deformed although the artist still managed something close to naturalism. Beards and necklaces which reach down to the navel and quivers where the personage represented carries one, are used to disguise poorly treated rounded forms thereby succumbing to the angularity that is common to the works in this group.

It is doubtful that an artistic similarity pervades all the carvings in this style. This in fact, makes the identification of styles an onerous



Plate 3: The figure of a kneeling naked man, Esie. It also represents the naturalistic style in Esie. (National Museum, Esie)(Left).



Plate 4: A stylized image from Esie. It is represented as a Warrior with a quiver on its back. (National Museum, Esie).(Right)

task to undertake. But a close scrutiny of the works yielded sub styles resulting from the treatment of other features such as the eye borders, eyelids, the triangularity of the entire carving and even the placement of their feet. The carvings in this group have attracted great attention perhaps because they are truly more closely stylistically and formally associated with Yoruba woodcarvings. At any rate they are the dominant ones in the whole group.

In the naturalistically rendered group, there is a vivid and deliberate attempt by the artists to represent the human forms as they really occur. As a result there is a tendency towards fleshy, rotund and natural treatment of human forms. The artists are biased towards the nature and behaviour of the flesh and therefore make conscious attempts to represent them as they naturally are. The heads of the figures in this group are generally characterised by a rounded shape, with the neck region merging subtly into the shoulders in a naturalistic manner. The ears are at their approximate natural positions and only small portions of them can be seen when viewed from the back.

The back view of the works in this group reveals a line, which also reveals the position of the spine. This is very common among the works in the naturalistic group. In some, attempts are made with some success, to represent the scapula and the clavicle. They even seem exaggerated where they occur. By so doing, the artist has been able to get the cylindrical forms of the body and the rotundity of the torso. In others there is tendency towards attenuating the torsos and limbs. The buttocks are fleshy and rounded and separated by a line, which represents the spine. Apart from these common features, the works in this group are unlike those of the stylised group. But certain works exist there, which differ from the two major styles that were mentioned earlier. These are taken to be the sub styles emanating from, perhaps individual styles.

An example of a unique naturalistic rendering of particular forms in this group can be found in the treatment of the navels and breasts. They are at times represented as protrusions from the abdomen and chest but are more subtly carved to reveal a dull and rounded organ. The apex or the most part of such protrusions from the plane of the body is obtuse. They certainly do not convey the impression of

carvings but rather appear modelled. There is a close similarity between the works in this group and the soapstone figure called *Alafere* or *Moremi* published by Bertho and Mauny in 1952.

The obvious lack of profuse decorations also sets works in this group apart from the others in Esie. A few nude figures that are found in Esie belong to this group because of their naturalistic treatment. In one case, a pregnant woman (See Plate 5) is depicted on her knees. In cases where beads are used, they are done by incised rather than raised patterns around the necks and waist region. This disinterest in decorations might point towards a hierarchical art: those that are less profusely decorated belong to a lower class. Some sculptures in this group are well dressed and fully kitted for war. But weaponry is particularly scarce among the works in the naturalistic style. Weapons are commonplace in the other group. Several conjectures are possible to explain this situation.

One of the most striking features of the aberrant head, with which it is linked to Ife, is its high degree of naturalism. First of all, its size of about 11 inches high makes it life size, uncommon in Esie. There is also the tender rendering of the facial features, which also sets it apart from even those in the naturalistic group in Esie. Quite uncommon to the works in Esie, are representations of eyelids and eyeballs. But the eyelids and eyeballs of the aberrant head are prominent and naturalistically rendered. Its ears are carved in a manner that suggests that the artist made a conscious attempt at naturalistic representation. Apart from these factors, which differentiate the aberrant Esie head from the others, Fagg (1959: 41) also noted the asymmetrical keloids between the eyes and ears which he does not remember a parallel of in the region. So also new to Fagg is the sword or dagger of indeterminate length set on the forehead of the carving. But the positioning of the dagger reminds him of the crest on the heads of Yoruba kings. The aberrant Esie head carries no face markings. It seems highly probable that this head might not have belonged to Esie originally. Could it have been brought from Ife and been used as model for the creation of the other stone sculptures that were obviously made there?



Fig. 5: A kneeling pregnant woman also represents the naturalist style in Esie (National Museum, Esie)

On stylistic grounds, the aberrant Esie head is more closely related to the naturalistic Esie carvings. And indeed they are quite different from the stylised ones. An example of a figure in Esie, which has a great deal in common with the aberrant Esie head, is another aberrant figure (considering its unusual size), the largest extant figure in the tradition (Plate 6). There are some similar others, but this is not unexpected because African artists are known to have a small repertory of forms. Invariably they copy from actual object or from a conceptual model. The question therefore is, to what extent can an aberration such as these be justified, especially when its origin is being considered from outside where it was found? Based on the non-local stylistic features already elucidated, one can on plausible grounds seek the origin of the aberrant art from nearby traditions, especially if they have historical connections. Ife is the only other place, which is nearby that, has a long standing artistic tradition in stone as well as other material, also with a *prima facie* position in Yoruba history. Perhaps the aberrant head was taken to northern Yoruba land by immigrants from Ife and used as a model for the production of other such carvings to satisfy a spiritual (or religious) purpose. Indeed the naturalistic style carvings may be earlier than the stylised ones. The assumption is that a progressive degeneration could have led to stylisations.

The naturalistic carvings of Esie are therefore considered to be earlier than the stylised ones. This assertion is based on the premise that the aberrant Esie head was the original image, which gave impetus to the artists to produce stone carvings in and around Esie. Of course there must have been a very strong motivation for this. The stone images may therefore have been personal gods to be owned by all the towns' citizens. At the early stage there could have been insufficient room for extemporising with new forms. Such blockades of adopting new forms may have resulted from rigid and faithful religious associations. It is indeed true that in African art, religious images are more fixed than others.

Some Yoruba slaves in Timbuktu had in fact informed Frobenius (1968:69) that their forebears who descended into the ground had been turned into stone. This information suggests that funerary stone images may have been used at some point in time in certain parts of



Plate 6: Another aberrant figure from Esie. This picture illustrates the size difference between it and the others in Esie (National Museum, Esie).

Yorubaland. Interestingly, Frobenius did investigate and excavate three stone heads of a similar style with the Esie ones in a nearby town called Offa. But considering the large number of stone carvings found in Esie, it could only be conjectured that only a highly populated and urbanised setting could have produced such a large number of carvings in that region. Therefore the images are more likely communal rather than elitist. Mabogunje and Omer Cooper (1971: 31-32) have somehow lent credence to this view by suggesting that most Yoruba towns of historic importance lie in the open hilly grassland or on the edge of the forest as Esie is presently situated. They also suggest that Owu, the oldest of the Yoruba kingdoms after Ife, could only have been situated in Northern Yorubaland. In addition, the whole region is historically known to have been unstable as a result of Nupe and Yoruba bids to gain total control of the land (Obayemi, 1980:158). The region being urbanised, there is a possibility that the Nupe may have controlled the land for some time before the Yoruba gained control. Therefore the *Tapa* marks, which are now common to the stylised images, may have been introduced during this period. The Nupe have even admitted that the face marking now referred to as *Tapa*, were adopted from the Yoruba (Adepegba, 1982: 96-98). Based on a further study of the stylised images of Esie, there is sufficient reason to believe that they represent a basic change from an earlier naturalistic style introduced from Ife, the only other known centre of highly naturalistic art. Then unlike the naturalistic carvings, which are depicted without weapons, the stylised ones carry weapons. The Nupe warriors are famous archers and are equally famous in the use of sheathed knives and cutlasses. The similarity between the stylised images and Yoruba wood-carving, an obvious fact from a stylistic standpoint, may have resulted from the abundance of woodcarving in that region.

Conclusion

It is plausible to add that after the Nupe were routed and pushed further northeast and across the River Niger by the Oyo army, later Yoruba immigrants to that region came across the images and adopted them. Traditional accounts of the origin of the images, which associate them

with Ife, may be for political and religious legitimacy. With the present state of knowledge on the Esie stone carvings, Ife is the most likely place that could have influenced the art of stone carving there. However, more archaeological work is still desired to shed further light on the images of Esie and indeed the cultural and artistic potential of northern Yorubaland.

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