

Rare Objects and the Rhapsodic World of Yorùbá Elite Art Collectors: Preliminary Notes

Adérónkẹ Adéşplá Adésànyà
James Madison University
adesanaa@jmu.edu

Abstract

This paper is a preliminary note on the data collected during my research on archives in Nigeria in the summer of 2013. While I examined both public and private archives, I found the private archives particularly those in the cities in southwestern Nigeria to be surprisingly rich in objects that are rare, new, and sometimes with unusual subject matter. The archives belong to notable elite collectors who are the *de facto* shapers of the art industry in Nigeria today. Their archives are worth art-historical study in terms of the richness of the collection, and because the sites are the contemporary repositories of not only ancient art but also traditional, modern and contemporary works of art. From the range and volume of the collections, the archives seem to have taken over from the government-owned museums. The shift is very interesting to study as one traces the trajectory of art acquisition and accumulation from pre-modern to modern institutions. The preliminary submission here is that Nigerian elite art collectors are interveners and game changers. Their intervention could be seen in two ways: First, as rescuers of disappearing cultures and by the same platform they are pivotal to reclamation of cultural patrimony. Secondly, as game changers and transformative agencies the elite collectors become culture brokers who work assiduously to stem 'culture flight' and 'heritage drain'. The platforms they offer grant them boasting rights as art connoisseurs and promotes the affirmation of elite power within the matrix of a post-colonial nation state.

*The past is a prologue¹
 History, memory, tradition,
 fast-forwarded,
 dots bond into lines.
 The threads of time,
 spun in steady wheels
 ensure tomorrow's tapestry.²*

Private Archives of Yorùbá Elites and Cultural Patrimony in Nigeria

My research in Nigeria in the summer of 2013 was the most productive in recent years. I found private archives owned by Yorùbá elites and viewed their stunning and stupendous collections. I discovered artifacts that were totally new to me in terms of the medium used to make them, sometimes it is the subject matter that pose a puzzle to be unraveled, and in other examples two styles collide to form a hybrid genre, and yet another intrigue to solve. In some cases I find works that bear strong stylistic similarities with works from the hand of well-known masters of Yorùbá art that I have studied. My knowledge of the stylistic conventions that such old masters demonstrated and the number of works they could have produced during their lifetime compels me to thread with caution in handling attributions, and not to draw hasty conclusions. Nonetheless, there were quite a stupendous number of pieces that were easy to identify and attribute to artists and cultures.

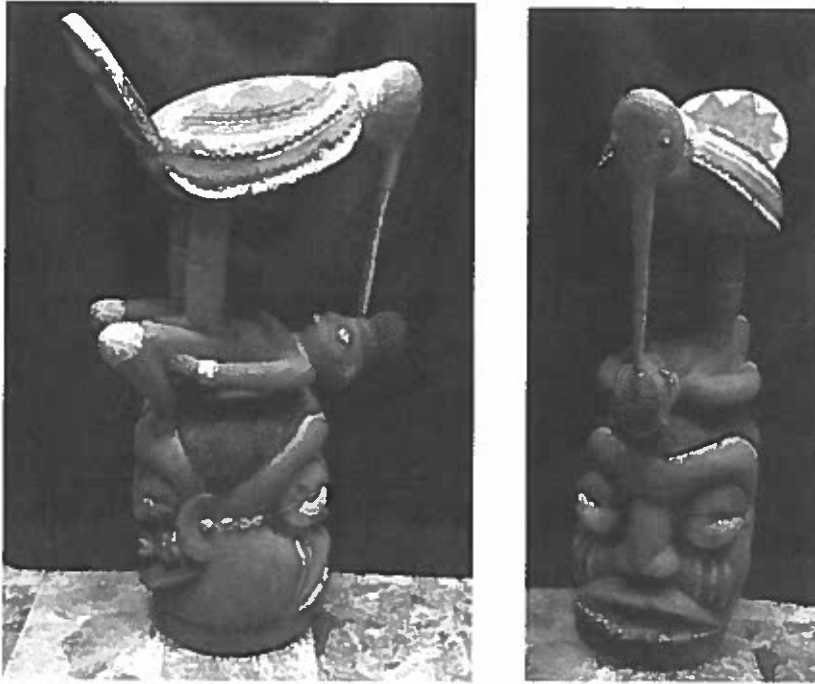
I also had the fortune of meeting notable elite Yorùbá collectors who are modern custodians of treasures that used to be domiciled in palaces and chiefdoms, and later museums. These elites have become the *de facto* shapers of the art industry in Nigeria today. Some of them are increasingly framing new paradigms of institution building in Nigeria as oppose to the culture of consumption and indifference prevalent in the last three to four decades. At any rate, the threefold blessing of the encounters in the summer months yielded enormous data such that I had to open up new research topics that I will be preoccupied with in the next couple of years. I have since returned to Nigeria to update my research notes some of which I now share in this write up.

The rare objects that I found in the collections of the Yorùbá elites mentioned in this study are as varied as their preferences and focus. Shyllon's archive includes a wide variety of artifacts many of which stand out in terms

1. Inspired by Antonio's lines "What's past is prologue," in William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act II, Scene I, Signet Classics (Updated Edition) 1998.

2. Adérónké Adéşolá Adésànyà, August 2015.

of their materials and subject matter. A terracotta sculpture, in particular, is an intriguing piece of art. It is a tiered sculpture with a base composed as a janus-faced human head similar to Èpa mask (Figs. 1 and 2). The su-



Figures 1 and 2. Janus-faced superstructure in the format of Èpa mask of the northeastern Yoruba. Terracotta painted with pigments. Photo credit: Aderonke Adesanya, 2014. This image is in the collection of Omo Oba Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon Foundation (OYASAF), Lagos, Nigeria.

perstructure however is the startling subject matter; a large bird pecks at the forehead of a female lying on her back. I have seen miniature of a motif similar to this in a palace door made by Ọlòwẹ̀ of Ìsẹ̀ where he shows birds pecking at the eyes of a woman depicted spread eagle on a platform.³ There are also several metal sculptures including some Ife metal heads (Figs. 3a, b, and c). Other surprises in Shyllon's archive are the stunning and large number of gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ pieces (Figs. 4a and b; and Fig. 5), èpa, and ògbóni drums.

3. See the motif on the *Palace Door (Ilẹ̀kùn-Ààfín)* c. 1904–1910, work of Ọlòwẹ̀ of Ìsẹ̀. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert H. Kuhn, Los Angeles, ca. 1972 to 1988. <https://africa.si.edu/collections/view/objects/asitem/Objects@11545/3/title-asc;jsessionid=5CDDE-2277B57E885CF292B4360C45A2F?t:state=flow=888a970f-96c3-496c-be6c-05f166b59d2d>.



Figures 3a, b, and c.



Left: Detail of Figure 4a. Right: Figure 4b. Gelede with superstructure of mother and child surrounded by crouching maidens all set on a pedestal. Below the pedestal is a complex theme of two birds, a snake and an animal possibly a pangolin preying on one another. Image is in the OYASAF collection. Photo credit: Aderonke Adesanya, July 2014.



Figure 5. Pair of Gelede Alapere (Basket headload). Collection of OYASAF.
Photo credit: Aderonke Adesanya, July 2014.

The rare artifacts in Ògúnbíyí's collection comprise a metal sculpture with hybrid motifs that fuses Yorùbá art with Benin art (Figs. 6 and 7), and the largest private collection of twin statuettes in the country. At the last count, the Ògúnbíyí's Ìbejì figurines number over 1000 pieces, and since he continues to acquire that figure may have changed at the time of writing this piece. I add to this list a pair of Ìbejì metal sculpture that I discovered in the collection of Níkè Òkúndayè-Davies. These are discussed in subsequent paragraphs and in the context of my preliminary notes on the Yorùbá elites whose archives I have visited. The examples documented in this article are simply representative sample of a large impressive trove. The remarkable collections of these elite collectors indicate deliberate attempts to preserve heritage, and change the narrative that Africans today do not attach significance to, and care for their heritage. The archives also point a new direction in art collection, and open windows of other possibilities from where observers including the author begin to glimpse the future impact of the initiatives of Yorùbá elite art collectors.

There is no doubt that the evolution of private archives in Nigeria is phenomenal and has begun to stir debates just as documentation is emerging on them. They are greeted with enthusiasm in contrast to the reaction of the



Figure 6.

public to the systemic plundering and neglect of government owned museums. I have heard colleagues and other researchers lament the rapid decline in access to artifacts to study in such museums. The emergence of private archives thus generates momentum and for many, they offer a dawn of a new era. Private archives owned by elites and located mostly in southwestern Nigeria with a great number in Lagos metropolis are the contemporary domains of cultural artifacts including ancient, traditional, modern and contemporary works of art. The shift from shrines to museum cases and gradually to private storehouses in elite homes is very interesting. When one traces the trajectory



Figure 7.

of art acquisition and accumulation of pre-modern and modern institutions, it becomes clear how rapidly social change, market economy, competition and various other factors of modern societies can quickly change behaviors including the culture of consumption. One can also put in context the immense influence that the modern elites cult of heritage increasingly wields in the Nigerian art circles. Before the rise of modern institutions such as museums and galleries, palaces, chiefdoms, and shrines were the repositories for cultural artifacts. The traditional rulers and chieftains in various locations controlled the production, acquisition and circulation of art. Their loss of control of human and material resources in their respective domains to modern institutions such as federal, state, and local governments reduced patronage of art and the maintenance of heritage archives. A hiatus was created. To bridge the gap, the modern state responded by setting up modern institutions to house cultural heritage. The development of museums birthed a transition and migration of artifacts from the traditional sites to centralized institutions

such as the National Commission of Museums and Monuments with centers located in different regions of the country but specifically in the sites of origin and or producer cultures of the artifacts. However, over time, institutional neglect started to manifest. This, triggered by dwindling funding and other supports from the Federal government of Nigeria, together with the very limited private and corporate organization participation, marked the hey days of the government owned museums.

It is within this challenging period that contemporary elite collectors emerged. Their intervention could be seen in two ways: They have become rescuers of disappearing cultures, and agencies that work to stem 'culture flight' and what I would call 'heritage drain.' The elites collect artifacts from different locations using various intermediaries, informants and vendors. Sometimes they travel to the hinterland, to abandoned shrines, to festivals, and to other places where artifacts no longer in use were likely to be sold. In such terrains and transactions, they sometimes also encounter the unexpected — manufactured artifacts — or what is now known as 'modern antiquities.' I will return to this point in subsequent paragraphs.

Against all odds, elite collectors now straddle the art world in Nigeria like colossus. The Yorùbá elites are very prominent among them. They demonstrate growing and sustained interest and passion in collecting ancient, modern, and contemporary pieces. They provide avenues for display in response to a growing elite audience and a society that is increasingly having renewed interest in the arts. They sometimes drive the agenda for art shows, workshops, salon talks and art auctions. Whether one is a keen or cursory observer, it is easy to surmise that the platforms the elites offer to support art initiatives and programs are also useful for their boasting rights as art connoisseurs. Such platforms help the affirmation of elite power within the matrix of a post-colonial nation state. They have more or less created what I have already described as *elite cult of heritage*. As more and more personalities join their clique, the established elite art collectors offer motivation for people who come into new fortunes to see the connection between art and money and art and socio-economic power. New entrants take cue in how best to invest in the industry; they also struggle for supremacy by expanding the size of their collection with highly sought after works — old and new. Today, elite collectors remain at the epicenter of art circulation, and are key players in the globalization of the art of the country.

Until recently, the elite collectors followed a predictable pattern of exposition of their collection notably private viewing. This is typically geared towards fellow elites and expatriates. A gradual shift from this paradigm has evolved whereby many of the collectors now open their archives to researchers, the media, students, and a retinue of visitors. This allows for news features

and serious scholarship to develop on the collections. Examples of Yorùbá elite private archives of note are the collections of Ọmọ Ọba Ọládélé Ọ́dímayọ, Ọmọ Ọba Yẹmísí Shyllon, Chief Rasheed Gbàdàmọ́sí, Chief Níkẹ̀ Ọ̀kúndayẹ̀-Davies, and Dr. Yẹmí Ọ̀gúnbíyí, to mention a few. My cursory observation on the types and size of some of these collections are as follows. Most collections are domicile in southwestern Nigeria and notably in the city of Lagos, the hub of art exhibition and circulation in Nigeria. The archives these elites control range from small, medium to large collections — the largest of all at the time of writing belongs to Shyllon and it is closer to 10,000 pieces (if one adds the collection of photographic images to the over 7,000 art works). The elites collectors appear to be aware of posterity of the heritage they archive so they have consciously documented or supported documentation on their collections in catalogues and books.⁴ Other interesting issues worth noting includes the fact that some of the elites specialize in collecting specific art genres, and acquiring select works of particular artists.

To illustrate, Ọmọ Ọba Ọládélé Ọ́dímayọ is a collector of ancient and traditional art forms and the artifacts he archived at his Ijù-Lagos home are mostly from cultures in southwestern and southeastern Nigeria. In 2005, his collection is said to comprise 800 pieces to which he has added more artifacts of unknown number.⁵ Ọ́dímayọ started collecting art fifty years ago⁶ with a set of wood sculptures — Yorùbá male and female heads — that he later used as book ends for his bookshelf in his student days at Mellanby Hall, University of Ibadan. This was his initial impetus. Additional encouragement came from a closer look at the activities of Sotheby's and Christie's in the global art circle. Ọ́dímayọ realized the monetary value of art and this encouraged him to develop

4. For instance, Ọ́dímayọ's collection is published as *Traditional Nigerian Art in the Ọmọ Ọba Ọládélé Ọ́dímayọ Art Foundation Collection*, Exhibition Catalogue, MUSON, Lagos, 26th October – 6th November 2005. The Yoruba art in Shyllon's collection is published in Ohioma Ifoumu Pogoso ed., *Yoruba Traditional Art: The Collection of Ọmọ Ọba Yẹmísí Adédoyin Shyllon Art Foundation*, Nigeria: Lighthouse Limited, 2008. Sylvester Ogbechie's *Making History: African Collectors and the Canon of African Art: The Fẹmí Akínsànyà African Art Collection* puts Akínsànyà's collection in the context of art historical discourse and the critical role that a Nigerian collector plays in it. Jess Castello's edited volume *Contemporary Art in Lagos Private Collections: New trees in an Old Forest*, Ibadan: Bookcraft, provides a compendium and broad spectrum for looking at art collection and art collectors in Nigeria.

5. Ọ́lášẹ̀híndé Ọ́dímayọ, "Introduction" *Traditional Nigerian Art in the Ọmọ-Ọba Ọládélé Ọ́dímayọ Art Foundation Collection*, Exhibition Catalogue, MUSON, Lagos, 26th October – 6th November 2005:11.

6. Ọ́lášẹ̀híndé Ọ́dímayọ, the collector's brother who also curated the TOOAF-MUSON and NCMM collaborative exhibition said the elder Ọ́dímayọ began collecting in September 1965 when he was an undergraduate at the University of Ibadan.

deeper interest in art collection. Though he veered into collecting European art, he later turned his to focus on traditional arts as from 1985. The art dealers who sold artifacts to Òdímayò include Umaru Dutse, Haruna Abubakar, Isah, and Monday Oviahon. From these folks, and from other dealers, Òdímayò got assortment of artifacts (wood and metalwork) such as figures, Ìbeji figurines, ẹpa superstructures, dance wands, Ifá receptacles, Benin chests, and stools, among others. After amassing a sizeable collection, Òdímayò turned to collaborations geared towards visibility notably the 2005 partnership he had with the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) and the National Commission for Museum and Monuments (NCMM). Such collaborations helped him to feature his Ọmọ Ọba Ọládélé Òdímayò Art Foundation (TOOAF) collection and also to promote Nigerian art. To date, his collection boasts a handsome assemblage of Benin heads, several Yorùbá house posts, bowls, door panels, and drums that very much reflect the style of Ọlówẹ of Isẹ (c. 1875–1938). Indeed, the Ọlówẹ style dominates the Yorùbá pieces in Òdímayò's collection and thus generates puzzlement. Ọlówẹ, as I have classified him elsewhere is *the master of composition and design* when compared with other Yorùbá artists of his generation, and beyond.⁷ One could also say he made excellent raised compact forms, and sculpted figures in composite poses that are unusual in Yorùbá art. Ọlówẹ was the cultivated woodcarver of many Yorùbá kings especially those in the regions of northeastern Yorùbáland in the early 20th century. His works are recognizable by the way the figures on door panels or drums project several inches away from their platforms. Catalogue note on one of his doors in the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African art puts the projection of the figures from the background at 10 centimeters (approximately 4 inches)⁸. Ọlówẹ's figures have protuberant foreheads, bulging eyes, and in some cases feature signature bared teeth that suggest a wide smile. They also spot elongated necks and the female figures have spectacularly coifed hairstyles that imitate hairdos of royal women of Èkiti kings. Since Ọlówẹ was a court artist, he had the latitude to make close study of the hairstyles that royal women wore at different occasions and during public ceremonies in the palace. The hairstyles that were popular during the time the artist flourished include *sùkú*, *agògo*, and variants worn by the Ọbas' wives (the *olori*) and brides in Èkiti-Yorùbá region. The human figures in his works are also never static, they are

7. Adérónké Adéşolá Adésànyà, *Carving Wood, Making History: The Fákéyẹ Family and Contemporary Yoruba Woodcarving*. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2012: 162.

8. See notes to *Palace Door (Ìlẹ̀kùn-Ààfin)* c. 1904–1910, the work of Ọlówẹ of Isẹ. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert H. Kuhn, Los Angeles, ca. 1972 to 1988. <https://africa.si.edu/collections/view/objects/asitem/Objects@11545/3/title-ascjsessionid=5CDDE2277B57E885CF-292B4360C45A2F?t:state:flow=888a970f-96c3-496c-be6c-05f166b59d2d>. Accessed September 26, 2015 @ 8.01PM.

either in latent motion striding across the ground — an illusion of dance poses, or they are twisted in composite poses but with the head facing the viewer. The figures are also rendered with various hand gestures. The king typically holds the insignia of his office including horsetail and beaded staff; semi nude women hold their breasts, and men carry guns, machetes, or drums. Other vignettes found in the work of Ọlówẹ are (i) signature frontal human face motif⁹ that alludes to Ọlówẹ's allegiance to Èṣù, the Yorùbá divinity of the crossroads, and (ii) the characteristic face marks ranging from one to three vertical gashes on both cheeks¹⁰ — that I have associated with the face markings that the artist bore.¹¹ There is also the jutting beard depicted on male figures that appear to be a psychobiographical reference to the artist's beard.¹² Many of the look-alikes Ọlówẹ works in the Òdímayọ collection share some of these templates, and thus throw up several issues.

Ọlówẹ did not have apprentices, and at the height of his fame, he was peerless. He had a distinctive style that I believed at the time of my study terminated with him.¹³ Though as a court artist at Ìṣẹ-Èkìtì, Ọlówẹ made many carvings for the Arínjalẹ, and also fulfilled the commissions of other Yorùbá kings in the Èkìtì region, he could only have produced a number of works that was humanly possible and also commensurate with his active years. Many of such works have also found their way into foreign museums. According to John Pemberton III, “the magnificent doors and verandah panels may now be seen in the collection of major museums including Washington, D.C., Chicago, London, and Munich.¹⁴ The rate at which Ọlówẹ's works became dispersed and how even the palace of the Arínjalẹ was denuded of the work of this wonderful craftsman show that few would have remained in any collection in Nigeria today. Who then is responsible for the lookalike Ọlówẹ sculptures that I stumbled on at the Òdímayọ's Ijù-Lagos private archive? I am still trying to tease out information on this and other finds in the Òdímayọ's archive. This fact-finding may take a while for two reasons: Òdímayọ now

9. This face motif sometimes appears as single or multiple representations.

10. These could be Ọ̀ndó, Ọ̀jẹ̀sà or Ọ̀yọ́ face marks. He seemed to have used more than one type of face marks for novelty.

11. In a previous study, I reported my encounter with Ọ̀gúndélé Ọ̀lówẹ, the son of Ọ̀lówẹ of Ìṣẹ who has similar face markings and told me that they are lineage marks and that Ọ̀lówẹ also had them too. See *Carving Wood, Making History*, 2012: 11, and 25.

12. When I met him in 1996, Ọ̀gúndélé Ọ̀lówẹ also wore this type of beard. As he talked to me and moved his head here and there, I studied his head in profile and could help but recognize the uncanny resemblance he had with the male figures in Ọ̀lówẹ's works.

13. *Carving Wood, Making History*, 25.

14. John Pemberton III, “Catalogue Note,” <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.60.html/2004/african-oceanic-and-pre-columbian-art-n07996>

resides in England, communication with him has been via email and telephone, and unfortunately he has not been responding to emails for a while. Regrettably too, the three-member staffs that manage his archive in his absence do not know very much about the provenance of the artifacts in the collection. Another confusion is a copper alloy Ifẹ head tagged *Head of an Ọ̀ni, Ifẹ* published in the 2005 TOOAF catalogue (CAT 37, h. 29.5cm). Its provenance is traced to a titled Benin chief whose name is not disclosed. Is this an original ancient Ife or a 'modern antiquity'? The phenomenon of 'modern antiquity' — a reference to a center in Cameroon Grasslands where iconic antiquities of various cultures are being reproduced in large numbers — has been around for at least a decade, perhaps more. Suzanne Blier brought this to my attention recently and Professor Babatunde Lawal also shared with me very useful insights on the phenomenon.¹⁵ I am looking closely at leads, sources, and asking useful questions with the hope of finding insights into the trajectory of artifacts of this type and to avoid the risk of misclassification in the absence of documentary evidence of radiocarbon dating.

In contrast to Ọ̀dímayò, Shyllon who is a collector of ancient and modern art as well as contemporary pieces is domicile in Nigeria, and he is very much engaged with his collection, and the art market. He grants appointment for visitors or researchers who wish to see and discuss his collection. His impressive archive boasts of more *gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀* pieces than I have encountered in any museum in Nigeria or in the museums that I have visited in the United States. I examined and catalogued over 30 pieces of them. The variety of Ọ̀gbóni drums found in the archive is also striking. The drums jostle for space within his residence and in storage. The variety of Ọ̀gbóni cult objects including male and female *edan* interlocked with brass or iron chain, Ọ̀gbóni single, standing, and seated figures, Ife and Benin heads indicate the eclectic nature of Shyllon's archive. Several Ịbejì figurines, Egúngún ensemble, and an unusual Ẹpa sculpture (Figs. 1 and 2) in the collection are as rare as they are stunning. The Ẹpa shows a large bird pecking the forehead of a woman lying on her back. The large legs of the bird pin her down. Scale is inverted; the human

15. On the issue of modern antiquities, Lawal cautions on relying on thermoluminescence (TL) date that is now widely used, "there are rumors that the technique has been compromised by some laboratories. At the same time, replicators across the globe are becoming smarter." The studies of a number of scholars have drawn attention to the phenomenon. Ernst Pernicka and Silke von Berswordt-Wallrabe (ed), *Original - Copy - Fake?: Examining the Authenticity of Ancient Works of Art - Focusing on African and Asian Bronzes and Terracottas*; International Symposium Stiftung Situation Kunst/Ruhr-University Bochum, February 17th and 18th, 2007. Mainz: Von Zabern, 2008. Also noteworthy is Barbara Plankensteiner's contribution titled "The Contemporary Production of 'Antique' Benin Bronzes in Benin City and Cameroon."

is smaller and vulnerable to the large bird. Such inversion is explicable if the bird motif is a metaphorical reference to supernatural forces known in Yorùbá cosmos as *àwọn iyá*—powerful capricious women who in a spate of fury can wreak calamity and untold destruction on individuals and the community. Is the composition thus a penal theme, a visual reference to cultural or spiritual sanctions against a female who contravenes mores?

Also in Shyllon's collection are contemporary art works of many Nigerian artists especially those who flourished during the era of the oil boom, the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) era, and the millennium generations provide a template for looking at the faces, icons, and phases of Nigerian art through the eyes of the artists and the window of the collector. Significant works of early masters of modern Nigerian art from Àiná Onàbólú to Akin Láṣèkan, Justus Akérédoló, Yussuf Grillo and Jimoh Akolo, to later masters such as Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Kóládé Ọshínówò; and still other artists such as Chuks Anyanwu, Lará Igè-Jacks, Tólá Wẹwẹ, and Victor Ekpuk also find a pride of place in Shyllon's collection. According to Shyllon, his OYASAF foundation houses the largest collection of the works of Ọṣogbo artists ranging from Táíwò Ọlániyí, a.k.a *Twins Seven Seven*, Jimoh Buraimoh, and Nikẹ Ọkúndayè Davies, to mention a few. Shyllon also collects personal art and the tools and materials that renowned artists used and have discarded. For instance, I found Susan Wenger's handprint (Fig. 8) in his collection.



Figure 8. Handprints of Susan Wenger, a.k.a Adunni Olorisa, late Osun priestess and erstwhile custodian of Osun Osogbo groove until her demise in January 2009. Photo credit: Aderonke Adesanya, 2015.

Just like the puzzlements I encountered in Òdímayò's collection, I also approach the classification of the Ife heads in Shyllon's archive (Figs. 3a, b, and c), with some caution. Though Shyllon said he sent the object for radiocarbon dating to confirm its antiquity, he has not disclosed the radiocarbon date. So, my assessment of the artifact is based on its formal features and guesswork on possible relationship this artifact has with other cast metal arts of similar tradition. The sculpture shares similar stylistic format with the ancient Ife bronze heads in terms of the life size representation of the adult male head. The subject is depicted in the prime of life, and the facial features are sensitively modeled including the almond shaped eyes, long nose, and thick lips. Striations run their course vertically from the forehead to the chin where they deviate from vertical to curvilinear lines and conform to the shape of the chin. There is an obvious bump on the forehead (Fig. 3b) that is clearly at variance with classical Ife heads. Did the bump occur as a result of an error in the casting process? A large hole close to the hairline and other patches noticeable on the head give the head a slightly damaged appearance. The patches are very more likely due to technical inadequacies during the casting process. Perforations encircle the hairline and around the upper lip. The sculpture is truncated at the base of the neck and five layers of lines punctuate the neck just as it is found in ancient Ife heads. A spherical hole cut at the back of the head is typical of metal cast heads whether at ancient Ife or Benin. The patina, greenish pigmentation that covers the artifact as a result of oxidation, alludes to the idea that the work may be of relative age. However, as I remarked above, in the absence of the radiocarbon date such attribution will remain speculative. When the date is released, it will confirm whether this piece belongs to the corpus of Ife art or it is a reproduction of classical Ife head. Getting a firm date on when the metal heads were produced is most important in the light of the information that art historian Suzanne Blier shared with me in September 2015. She told me she had visited the Cameroon Grassland roughly eight years ago, and had seen a center where 'modern antiquities' were being produced in large numbers to flood antiquity market. Given the length of time the center has been in existence, it is safe to assume that large number of copies would have been sold to unsuspecting buyers and many of such objects would have been dispersed around the globe. Original antiquities are rare but not totally out of circulation. The very fact that they remain in circulation keeps the excitement in the art market, but they also create room for blame game among stakeholders both private and public, collectors and curators, archaeologist, culture historians, among others on issues of ethics, and the lawfulness of creating ruptures in cultural patrimony.

To continue my discussion of Yorùbá elite art collectors, I was also pleasantly surprised to find in Shyllon's collection, an Epa sculpture with a retinue

of Benin imagery as superstructure! The superstructure is in the format of Yorùbá Èpa however it features figures in distinctive Benin court style. Benin warriors depicted in war garbs, bearing shields in their outstretched arms, are arranged in circular formation to frame (or guard?) an equestrian chieftain. In this unexpected hybrid work, Yorùbá art meets Benin art. The artistry is impeccable yet puzzling. As I viewed the stunning piece, many questions flooded my mind.

The Yorùbá Èpa undeniably inspires the form but the sculptural group featured in its superstructure speaks the visual language and thematic paradigm of Benin. At that crossroads, I ruminated over some questions perhaps that could assist me resolve the mystery. The collector could not help me fill the gap as he told me he bought this piece from middlemen who randomly sell such rare pieces. I faced another puzzle when I saw a metal epa at Yemi Ogunbiyi's archive (Figs. 6 and 7). It had a dominant figure of a male horserider surrounded by maidens and men carrying Dane guns, all of them arranged in tiers. Who is the possible patron of this enigmatic piece? When was it produced, and for what purpose? I can only proffer a tentative answer to these questions. Given the weight of the material, I tried to carry it and it was such a struggle because of its heaviness, I concluded that the piece was definitely not made for the type of performance associated with Èpa sculpture. Èpa mask also called helmet mask because of its superstructure (of a single dominant figure or a group of figures) and a Janus-faced pot that the masker wears on the head is "easily the tallest and heaviest of all Yorùbá masks."¹⁶ However, it is heavy to the degree that it remains danceable. The masker who wears the Èpa helmet mask must not trip or break his head load particularly the superstructure. It is considered a bad omen. So, both the Èpa mask in Shyllon's collection and the metal epa in Ògúnbíyí's archive could not have been made for the acrobatic display that Yorùbá Èpa demanded of the masker. This leads me to explore other suppositions. Perhaps, the metal epa was made for a patron who admired Èpa sculpture from purely aesthetic point of view but wanted it made in enduring material. Conceivably too, the patron who commissioned the wooden epa with imagery reminiscent of Benin art tradition is not Yorùbá. The patron could have been someone from Benin who wanted semblances of his/her own culture grafted into the Èpa sculpture, hence the Benin motifs. Other questions linger. When and where was the piece made? A closer look at the sculpture and its sumptuous decorations tells me that a skilled craftsman who knew the metalwork pretty well and the visual language of ancient Benin art made it. The style and the decorations on the figures choreographed on the "metal Èpa" are very similar to the Benin metal figures of the sixteen and

16. Babátundé Lawal, *Yoruba*, Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2012: 58.

eighteen centuries. While Èpa masks are the exclusive preserve of the eastern and northeastern Yorùbá groups principally the Ìjèṣà, the Èkìtì and the Ìgbómìnà, the best of their sculptors who come from the Èkìtì and Ìgbómìnà confluence including the legendary Àrẹ̀ògún, Òsámúko, Bámídelé (Àrẹ̀ògún's son) did not make any metal variant of Èpa. Even lesser known artists did not make Èpa in metal. Where then is the point of convergence to locate the artifact in question? Metalwork centers in Yorùbáland notably Ifẹ̀, Ìjẹ̀bù, and Òbó-Ayégúnlẹ̀ are renown for their craftsmanship. Their vignettes are also well known, however they do not make metal sculptures as tall as Èpa that typically towers at 5 feet.

Another intriguing aspect of the Ògúnbiyì's metal Èpa mask is the craftsmanship of the artist who made it. The parallels between the complex imagery on it and those made on some multifaceted wooden Èpa are stunning. Concerning the Èpa, Babátúndé Lawal notes:

What frequently commands attention in the headpieces to the tour de force manifested in their craftsmanship such as the execution of a complex subject matter from a single piece of wood and the balancing of mass and void, the rectilinear and curvilinear, as well as verticals, horizontals and diagonals to conjure up the metaphysical capacity of the Èpa mask to transmit the messages on its superstructure to the spirit world.¹⁷

That the maker of the Èpa in Ògúnbiyì's archive matched the virtuosity of Yorùbá Èpa carvers is remarkable. The fact that the artist who made the Èpa in Shyllon's collection also expertly matched Benin sumptuous surface decoration evident in ancient Benin figures and plaques is also astonishing. The ornateness is not like those found on Ifẹ̀ art or the Ìjẹ̀bù metal sculpture. While ornateness connects Ifẹ̀ and Òbó-Ayégúnlẹ̀ works, they are set apart by their genre. The specialty of Òbó casters is utilitarian objects such as quadrangular bells and medicine containers shaped in form of gourds.¹⁸ Although Ekpo Eyo¹⁹ notes that "the artists from the innovative metalworking center of Ìjẹ̀bù, in southern Yorùbáland, have created figural sculptures, heads, bells, stools and amulets, often echoing forms produced in the Benin Kingdom" and he also mentions a variety of forms peculiar to them including the Ògbóni male and female sculptures, nowhere in his study did he allude to the idea that the

17. Lawal, *op cit*, 59.

18. C. O. Adépegba, *Nigerian Art: Its Tradition and Modern Tendencies*, Ibadan: JODAD Publishers, 1995: 29.

19. Ekpo Eyo, *Masterpieces of Nigerian art*, Abuja, Federal Republic of Nigeria: The Ministry of Information and Communication, 2008: 159.

Ìjẹ̀bù metal casters made anything similar to Ẹ̀pa. The lingering questions on the artist, patron, and context that inspired the metal sculpture in Ògúnbíyí's collection thus become compelling points to resolve. Ditto the hybrid form in the Epa in Shyllon's archive.

Such unusual pieces and those that defy straightforward attribution definitely deserve art-historical inquiry that I plan to examine in the very near future. As I pointed out in the introduction, other rare pieces that I encountered in private archives in Nigeria are metal ìbejì statuettes. These surfaced in the collection of Nikẹ̀ Òkúndayè Davies. I am accustomed to Yorùbá ìbejì statuettes carved in wood, partly covered with indigo or polished to a fine sheen, dressed in woven or dyed garments and adorned with beads. However, until the August 2014 visit to Òkúndayè Davies gallery, I had not come across ìbejì metal sculpture except the miniature (thumb size) pieces I found at Osogbo Museum in 2014 thus I was pleasantly surprised when I saw the pair at Òkúndayè's gallery. Who commissioned a pair of metal ìbejì figurine? From what workshop did they originate: local or foreign, as far as the Cameroon grassland? With the proliferation of 'modern antiquities,' anything can pop up in the art market. As Lawal hints, "copies of some of the Ife heads are on sale at Ile-Ife, Benin City, Lagos, (Lekki market) and in neighboring Cameroon, among others. Same for Igbo-Ukwu, Benin and Nok antiquities." Still, I believe posing the right questions to various channels especially asking questions from scholars in the field will assist me in putting the pieces of the jigsaw puzzles together.

Beyond the Cult of Accumulation

Some pertinent questions arise: How do the collections or the private archives of these Yorùbá elites become relevant beyond the private viewing of the artifacts, and beyond just promoting the elite cult of heritage? What broader agendas should their archives serve and how can the elites embrace such agenda? For folks such as Shyllon, some of the issues that I raise here are already being taken into consideration, and others may not be hard to sell. Already, Shyllon has committed resources to institutionalizing part of his collection thus putting to rest what Jess Castello had anticipated in his observation of Nigerian and African art collectors. He states: "Till date — as far as I know — no Nigerian collector has gifted or bequeathed his collection to a public institution or set up mechanisms for the permanent public display of his or her works. But there are reasons to be confident that this will eventually happen, as it has all over the world."²⁰ And it did with the inauguration

20. Jess Castello, *Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos Private Collections*, 2012: 71.



Figure 9. Omo Oba Shyllon in a warm handshake with Pascal Dozie, Pro-Chancellor of Pan African University, Nigeria shortly after the business mogul and art collector made a handsome donation of 1200 artifacts and start off funds of 100 million naira to the institution to build a museum for the collection. With them are Mrs. Olufunmilayo Shyllon and Nike Okundaye-Davies, renowned artist, art philanthropist and art dealer.



Figure 10. Making history: Cross section of individuals who graced the occasion on June 10, 2015. Photo credit: Aderonke Adesanya, 2015.

of the *Ọmọ Ọba Yémisí Shyllon*-Pan African University Museum at the signing in ceremony on June 10, 2015. It is anticipated that fellow elite art collectors with similar passion will follow Shyllon's trajectory. Of significance however are the following issues that have implications for the establishment of enduring legacies. It is very expedient for collectors to give serious consideration to the conservation of the artifacts in their collection. A cursory observer and one who has interacted with some of them will note that they often shy away from this issue especially because conservation is quite capital intensive. However, it remains important in ensuring that the condition of the objects in private archives will not deteriorate as a result of lack of appropriate care and management. Incidentally, this is the bane of public archives. Elite collectors must also bear in mind the need to embark on professional cataloging of their collection; they need to adopt world standard curatorial practices, to develop archives of virtual images for scholarly study, to make artifacts available for periodic exhibition (e.g. permanent, revolving, and possibly traveling exhibition), and to institutionalize the collection for public good. For instance, artifacts in the collection could be on loan or could be donated to existing, vibrant local and global institutions that can sustain the collection, and guarantee the security of objects on loan to them. Collecting art is no small endeavor. It is capital intensive and requires enormous devotion to conservation and management. It is clearly not enough to collect; the ultimate and ideal thing is to make such collection available to the public for enjoyment, and for the expansion of knowledge and creativity. Private viewing as practiced by elite collectors in Nigeria must therefore transit to greater public viewing and accessibility.

Other purposes that the archives may serve not only in Nigeria but also on the continent include the protection of cultural patrimony, and the revival of cultural heritage. Not all the collectors share the same vision so this will largely depend on the vision and mission of each art foundation or art collector. A greater benefit however is the institutionalization of collections. If collectors follow the paradigm of institutionalization – that is yielding their archives to public good, then art academe stands to benefit tremendously from the services that such institutions will offer. With such dedicated structures in place, art institutions can develop new content for the curriculum. Indeed, the enormous resources in private archives means that cultural artifacts and other heritage production can be converted to open up new career paths for students in art schools in Nigeria. Higher institutions programs such as art conservation, art archiving, curatorship, Art Business, Art Law, Intellectual Property, and Museum Studies can emerge as areas of concentration in the curriculum of art institutions in Nigeria. The art climate and the academe are very ripe for such great leaps and innovations. The society is adequately primed for the

transformation with the apparent increase in interest and investment in the arts. The number of collectors is also growing astronomically especially with the gravitation towards art acquisition for investment purposes. Art as money, status and prestige generates excitement among Nigeria nouveau rich that throng salons, exhibitions and auctions to see what is new, big, and extraordinary to add to their collection. The competition for vintage art brought forward for sale at auctions or gallery shows is also noteworthy. Old money, oil money, and new money mingle and compete for the biggest, prominent art name in the art marketplace. Already, the Nigerian art landscape has witnessed the establishment of new and monumental institutions that support art circulation and market. Foremost is the ArtHouse Contemporary that opened in 2007 and has successfully run art auctions since it debuted the channel in 2008. This platform adds to the tempo and fervor for collecting art. As acquisitions increase, and more auctions continue to take place and the number of galleries continues to grow, ultimately, college art curriculum must be reviewed to meet the careers paths that are foreseeable in the horizon.

A final note for sustainability and posterity: it is imperative for owners of private archives to develop and maintain a model for running them. Careful planning and adoption of global practices in art collection, preservation, conservation, managements and so on will increase the viability of the archives. There are strong indications that the private archives will eclipse public archives unless some radical changes occur in federal funding of existing public institutions. Privatization of cultural property is also bound to increase. This is evident because of two issues: the rising profile of elites as art patron, brokers, auctioneers and so on. Secondly, the effect of Pentecostalism on the psyche of Nigerian Christians promotes disavowal and distancing from heritage revival and image acquisition. Consequently, only the liberal and or radical elites or those with entrenched interest in traditionalism do embrace cultural patrimony and consciously provide support for the arts. The danger of the latter is that it gives room for elite monopoly of cultural knowledge that could lead to the privatization of knowledge on cultural property.

Constructing Art Modernity: A Case in Point

The recent activities of some elites collectors in Nigeria indicate how they are shaping art modernity. The enthusiasm that they apply to promoting or sponsoring public, institutional art and related projects is novel. I cite a case in point: June 12, 2015 was a remarkable day at the University of Lagos when *Justice and Culture*, a stately 15-foot bronze sculpture that Shyllon donated to the Faculty of Law of the University was unveiled. The sculpture (Fig. 11), a female figure clothed in cultural ensembles synonymous with three dominant ethnic groups

in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá) and holding in her two hands an *eben* sword (on the right) and a scale of justice (on the left) is a game changer and genre bender in terms of how Shyllon envisions statues of justice henceforth to be made in the polity.²¹ It drew the attention of the public and the global community.²² Shyllon has used the gift to gesture to the society to return to their roots (a paradigm that was once an ideal), to integrate indigenous forms, and to recycle cultural icons especially in public institutions in order to stir a civic sense of pride in the various icons that ancient, traditional and modern artists bequeathed to the nation. At another setting, Shyllon again gestured the



Figure 11. Adeola Balogun's Justice and Culture statue commissioned by Omo Oba Yemisi Shyllon and donated to the Faculty of Law, the University of Lagos. Photograph shows dignitaries at the unveiling event: Chief Kolade Oshinowo, distinguished artist and a don at the Yaba College of Technology, Dr. Aderonke Adesanya, art historian, Mrs. Olufunmilayo Shyllon and Omo Oba Shyllon of OYASAF, Lagos, Professor Rahman Adisa Bello, the Vice Chancellor, UNILAG, Adeola Balogun, the artist, and Justice Amina Augie, the Presiding Justice, Court of Appeal, Lagos Division, standing close to the pedestal of the statue.

Photo credit: Aderonke Adesanya, June 2015.

21. The sculpture transforms the visual idiom and concepts of justice monuments in Nigeria, and pioneers fresh perspective in the conceptualization and indigenization of public monuments.

22. There was extensive local news coverage of the event. Perhaps not directly linked to the unveiling ceremony but in the month of June, Shyllon's collection also attracted the Cable News network (CNN) that dispatched its staff to Shyllon's sprawling mansion at Okupe Estate, Lagos to video his collection and interview him.

monumental impact that elites can make in the society with their resources. On June 10, 2015, he donated 1,200 artifacts to the Pan-Atlantic University Lagos.²³ He also provided a yearly sum of N150 million naira per annum for a period of fifteen years to enable the institution build a museum and manage the collection from the outset before it invariably becomes self sustaining. Shyllon's monumental gifts to these institutions (UNILAG and Pan African University) two out of several to which he committed his resources and gifted other institutions indicate the enormous political and social power that Yorùbá elites and other elites in Nigeria wield. Such gestures also demonstrate their ability to reclaim cultural patrimony, to reshape art institutions, to support knowledge production, and to (re)define the modernity of cultural heritage. Their activities also stand to determine how future generations learn about, respond to, and appreciate heritage and artifacts, among other goodwill that the universe of these elites promises to bestow on the nation. Evidently, personalities such as Shyllon demonstrate that enduring values can be created, institutions can evolve and ideologies can be sustained if necessary enabling structures are established. Nigerians simply need to emulate the mindset of institution builders and not the plunderers of the economy and prodigals who waste the resources of the state at the detriment of holistic and purposeful development.

Shyllon is not alone in the search for a new cultural phase for Nigeria and the globalization of the works of artists in the country. Art philanthropists and collectors are growing in number and making significant impact with their work, resources and institutions that they set up. The enthusiasm that they exude and the collaborations they foster are remarkable. For instance, Şèhìndé Òdímayò, an art broker and collector, was on hand to assist Shyllon with the valuation of the objects to be donated to the pan African University, Lagos. The trio of Shyllon, Şèhìndé Òdímayò and the author, spent many hours over a period of days in the month of June 2015 to comb through collections, edit collated data and value the artifacts in OYASAF collection.

23. The formal ceremony was held at 14A Qba Èlégúshí Road, Victoria Island on June 10, 2015. Qmọ Qba Yémis"i Shyllon's wife Olúfúnmiláyò, his associates, and the crème de la crème of the Nigerian art world and the academy graced the occasion. They include Mr. Pascal G. Dozie, the Pro-Chancellor of Pan-Atlantic University (PAU), Professor Juan Elegido, Vice Chancellor (PAU) and their entourage, Mr. Kóládé Ọshínówò, a renowned Nigeria quintessential painter and seasoned teacher, Chief Níké Ọkúndayè Davies notable artist, printmaker, painter and art philanthropist, Tólá Wèwè (painter) and president of Society of Nigerian Artists, Abraham Iyovbisere (painter, and the current president of the Visual Artists Association of Nigeria (VASON), Oliver Enwonwu (son of Ben Enwonwu, foremost Nigerian artist) a painter and the current president of Guild of Professional Fine Artists of Nigeria, Professor Frank Ugiomoh, Art historian and Chair of Yémisi Shyllon Professorship at the University of Port Harcourt, Professor Folarin Shyllon, professor of Law and a renowned intellectual property lawyer/activist, and Professor Adérónké Adésànyà.

In terms of concerted effort to nurture talents and provide avenues for exhibition, workshop, and local and foreign participation in the art circle in Nigeria, Níkè Òkúndayè-Davies (Fig. 12) is another renowned figure. Her multi-million dollar building houses the works of the *crème de la crème* of artists of Nigeria. Other Yorùbá elites such as Ọmọ Ọba Ọládélé Òdímayò, Chief Rasheed Gbàdàmọsí, Fẹmi Akínsànyà, Chief Sam Ọlágbajú, Mrs. Sinmídélé Ògúnsànyà, Folúshó Phillips, and many more, are also among the crop of Nigerian elites consciously and strategically (re)shaping the art world. Some of them have also attracted scholarly attention. As the vista continues to expand, Sylvester Ogbechie's study on Femi Akínsànyà, and Jess Castello's work on art collectors in Lagos provide important groundwork for future studies on art collectors in the country. Expatriates participation in contemporary Nigerian art remain significant and notable recent figures include Kavita Chelarams a collector and one of the prominent sponsors of art residencies.



Figure 12. Also at the contract-signing ceremony between Shyllon and the Pan African University was Nike Okundaye-Davies, a notable Yoruba artist, art philanthropist, art dealer and owner of Nike Gallery, Victoria Island, Lagos. Okundaye-Davies also owns other similar art cum cultural institutions in Abuja, the FCT, Ijumu in Kogi State, and Osogbo in Osun State, Nigeria. Photo credit: OYASAF, June 10, 2015.

