

“East-West, West-East”: Cultural Transmission and Exchange of Yorùbá Religious Wood-Carvings between Òyó, Sábẹ and Ifẹ-Ana

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Abstract

In the early part of the 18th century, and at the height of its political power, the old Òyó Empire established its hegemony over Sábẹ, Benin Republic, and new Yorùbá communities were founded in Sábẹ. Yorùbá communities also exist at Ifẹ-Ana in the Atakpame region of Togo. The Ifẹ-Ana Yorùbá were migrants from Ilé-Ifẹ between the 16th and 18th centuries. In these new Yorùbá communities, the people continued with the worship of traditional Yorùbá religion and the use of wood-carvings for this worship. This study employs historical and ethnographic methods to establish the presence of traditional Yorùbá religion in Òyó, Sábẹ and Ifẹ-Ana. It then identifies and classifies extant Yorùbá wood-carving paraphernalia in the worship of Ifá, Sàngó, Egúngún, Geḷẹḷẹ, and Ìbejì that were transferred from Òyó to Sábẹ and Ifẹ-Ana. The study observes a cultural interrelationship moving from east to west and west to east among the communities.

Introduction

The immensity of the domination of old Òyó - variously called Òyó-Egboro, Òyó-Oro, Òyó-Ajaka, Òyó-Katunga and Òyó-Ile (Smith and

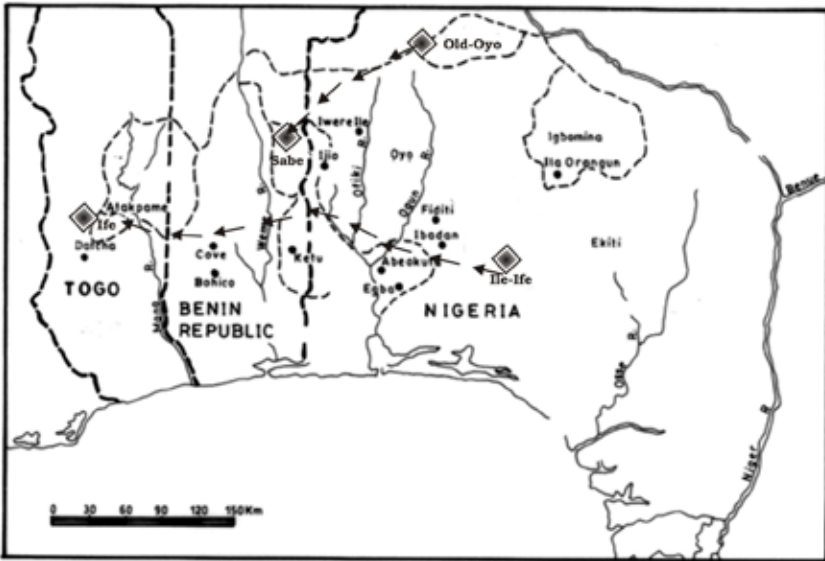
Williams 1966:56-60) - on territories under its hegemony between the 17th and 18th centuries was beyond politics (Akinjobin 1976) and economics (Morton-Williams 1964). It also encompassed cultural domination, although this has not been made obvious enough because research has not been adequately intensive on the transfer of Òyó-Yorùbá religion culture to countries in the immediate diaspora. A study carried out by Kalilu (1992) on the arts and crafts of old Òyó as manifested in the history and practice of arts and crafts in West Africa is commendable in this respect. It is a survey of the ripples of the artistic influence of old Òyó on communities in West Africa. Kalilu's research addresses a wide range of artistic objects transferred from old Òyó to other West African communities; it is, however, a general overview. Although, Òyó's reasons for expansion and domination of territories were, in the main, political and economic (Morton-Williams 1964), however, from that point, inadvertently, religio-cultural domination dovetailed into Òyó's relationship with communities under its hegemony and communities founded and populated by the people of Òyó.

It is interesting to observe that, apart from the Yorùbá communities founded and populated by Òyó-Yorùbá and the ones directly under its domination, other Yorùbá communities who, for one reason of association or the other, especially the association of their ancestry to Ifè, and by extension Òyó, have their equal share of Òyó's religion and cultural influence. It has been observed that such Yorùbá communities may in reality not be directly under the influence of Òyó.

Indeed, Ojo posits that a number of cultural elements - supposedly core to the Òyó-Yorùbá which were assumed to diffuse to other Yorùbá communities outside Òyó-Yorùbá - cannot be said to be originally those of Òyó-Yorùbá, because some of such communities have not been historically proven to be directly under the cultural or political hegemony of Òyó at any point in history (Ojo 1976: 364). According to Akinjobin (1966: 450), "By 1698, it [Òyó] would seem to have grown larger than any other Yorùbá kingdom and its influence had certainly outstripped its physical size." The overblown reputation of Òyó, as described by Atanda (1973:1-3), was intimidating, probably frightening, and was enough to cause panic and fear even in the heart of communities outside its hegemony. Thus, for the reason of wanting to be at peace with Òyó, such territories could have reasoned that an association with Òyó, through linking their ancestry to Ilé-Ifè, was a wise move. Except for an eclectic study such as this - cross-carpeting from art, culture, to religion and partially political - it may be difficult to comprehend the thrust of the physical and psychological domination of old Òyó.

The study employs deep history, ethnography and extensive scrutiny of literature in its examination. This research, in no way, dismisses or undermines

the movement of people from old Òyó to other parts of West Africa for reasons of expansion, war, economy and politics; rather, it attempts to consolidate Òyó’s artistic and cultural diffusion and strong presence in the communities to where they expanded. The study, therefore, establishes the diffusion trajectory of people and cultures from Òyó-Yorùbá communities in Nigeria to diasporic spaces in Sábẹ (Benin Republic) and Ifẹ-Ana (Togo).



Source: Mba Ifeanchukwu, Cartographer, Department of Anthropology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Figure 1: Map Showing the Trajectory of the Migration of Yorùbá People and Culture from Oyo to Sabe and Ile-Ife to Ife-Ana

The study then identifies in the three historically-connected Yorùbá communities (Òyó, Sábẹ and Ifẹ-Ana), the branches of traditional Yorùbá religion that employs wooden paraphernalia in their liturgy. The conformity of the identified paraphernalia of worship in the three communities to their archetypal standards are discussed and then, for compactness, classified on the basis of their forms.

The Yorùbá community in Sábẹ, Benin Republic was founded as a result of the dispersal brought about by the expansionist wars of old Òyó towards Dahomey (now the Benin Republic). The wars were fought by Òyó because she was desirous of gaining access to the sea, at Quidah and Port Novo, in order to carry out her slave trade business. Morton-Williams (1964: 25-45), Akinjogbin (1966: 449-458; 1976: 373-412), and Law (1975: 20-25) wrote extensively on the 16th to 18th century expansionist wars of the Yorùbá towards the Benin Republic. The Yorùbá armies from old Òyó attacked and subdued Dahomey (Benin

Republic) around 1730. And, subsequently, the Dahomenian Port Novo became a major trade outlet for the Yorùbá (Morton-Williams 1964: 27).

The third Yoruba community discussed in this essay are the Ifè-Ana located in the Atakpame region of Togo. This group of Togolese Yorùbá people claim they migrated from Ilé-Ifè in Nigeria to their present settlements. The veracity of this claim is strongly corroborated by the fact that the people still speak an archaic form of Yorùbá language. It is, however, difficult to ascertain the reason and the time of their movement from Ilé-Ifè. Gayibor (1992: 12-16) and Odji (1997: 14-21), using available historical evidences among the Ifè-Ana people, have attempted to resolve the issues of trajectory and time of their migration. Gayibor (1992:12) records that after their movement out of Ilé-Ifè, the Ifè-Ana people initially occupied areas in the middle of Benin Republic but were later sent packing by the menace of the Abomey army and, therefore, moved to their present location at the Atakpame region of Togo. Odji (1997:14) points out that the migration to their present location took place in two phases. The first phase was between the 12th and the 14th centuries, when they moved from Ilé-Ifè through Oke-Oyan (in Nigeria, but now unknown) to Tchabe (Sábe). Odji placed the second phase of the migration between the 17th and 19th centuries.

Evidently, Òyó, Sábe and Ifè-Ana have a strong historical connection. Yorùbá communities in Sábe and Ifè-Ana have continued to worship Yorùbá deities and practice the Yorùbá traditional religion they took with them from Òyó and Ilé-Ifè. Since they were founded centuries ago, Sábe and Ifè-Ana communities have existed independently of Òyó and over time, they have built a corpus of wooden paraphernalia in the practice of traditional Yorùbá religion. The corpus has now become a gamut that can be studied from diverse perspectives. The present study identifies the shared traditional Yorùbá religions in the three communities and assesses the formal features of the carved wood paraphernalia employed in the practise of traditional Yorùbá religion in Òyó, Sábe and Ifè-Ana.

The present exercise attests to the indefatigability of Yorùbá people and religion outside their original homeland. It is important to point out that the Yorùbá religion has had to co-exist in Sábe and Togo with autochthonous traditional religions of Sábe and Togo. Their interaction and successful maintenance of their existence in these communities are commendable and worthy of the probe. Yai (1999:32-35) points out that no study of the Yorùbá culture is complete without an examination of its fate in the new world where it is exposed and tested amidst existing cultures. He submitted that it is in the difficult conditions of exile that a tradition can best prove its ability to innovate. Yorùbá culture can, by this assertion, be said to be resilient and intransigent.

Shared Extant Traditional Ọ̀yó-Yorùbá Religion in Oyo, Sábẹ̀ and Ifẹ̀-Ana

According to Wande Abimbola (1977:1), the Yorùbá believe that at the beginning of creation, God (Olódùmarè) sent four hundred and one divinities (òrìṣà) that descended from Heaven (*orun*) to Earth (*ayé*), specifically to what would later be known as the city of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ (Abimbola 1972:23). These divinities form part of the pantheon of òrìṣà worshipped by the Yorùbá people today. However, according to Ladele *et al.* (2006: 15-70), in the present time, the core and popular traditional Yorùbá religion worship includes Ọ̀gun, Sàngó, Ifá, Egúngún, Obalúayé, Èsù, Sònpònó, Yemoja and others (Awolalu 1991: 15).

Out of the popular extant traditional Yorùbá religion branches in Ọ̀yó, this research found prominent in Sábẹ̀ and Ifẹ̀ the worship of Ifá, Sàngó, Egúngún¹/Geḷẹḷẹ́ (masking tradition) and Ìbeji. The similarity that informs the grouping of Geḷẹḷẹ́ and Egúngún together by this study is simply because they are both masking traditions. It is, however, important to mention that the very fundamental beliefs of the two cultures are different. Egúngún is a belief in and worship of ancestors. The belief encapsulates the view that long-dead ancestors can visit the people they left behind on earth in the form of Egúngún, and that the ancestors can participate in the affairs of the living (Akande 2019). It further encompasses the belief that the ancestors have super-human powers and when venerated and worshipped, their benevolent powers can be harnessed. On the other hand, the Geḷẹḷẹ́ masking tradition, according to Lawal (1996: 65), is a cult for women, especially in respect of their powers. A deeper understanding of the word *geḷẹḷẹ́* reveals that it is a combination of three words that have independent meaning but put together they form a statement of what *geḷẹḷẹ́* is all about. *Gẹ̀* means “to soothe, or to placate, or to pet or cuddle,” *ẹ̀lẹ̀* refers to “a woman’s private part (the vagina),” and *dẹ́* means “to soften.”² Put together *geḷẹḷẹ́* means “to placate the vagina softly” or “to placate and soften the vagina.” Lawal,³ Thompson (1976: 14:1), and Kruger M. (2010: 316-328) suggest that the tradition originated in Ketu.

1 Egúngún, in the context of this research, refers to all Yoruba masking traditions. Also, defined by Alhaji Sheu Rasheed Ademola, the Chief Alapini of Oyo as all forms of covering the human face for the purpose of hiding the identity of the masker, in a personal communication. August 20, 2018.

2 Abiodun Janvier is the secretary to the Alaketu of Ketu, the king of Ketu, in Benin Republic. Personal Communication. January 28, 2015.

3 Lawal B. (2016). The author engaged Professor Babatunde Lawal at the lobby of Hilton Hotel in a personal communication during a session break at the College Art Association Conference in Washington D.C. February 23, 2016

According to Lawal,⁴ the religious culture that is now called *geledé* is quite complex, given the fact that it has some connection with ancient ceremonies associated with the veneration of Olókun, Yemoja, and the ‘powerful mothers’ (àwọn iyá wa), as well as òriṣà Ọlómowéwé, Aráagbó and Ìbejì. Among the Ọyó-Yorùbá, the worship of Ìyámàpó (the vagina as indicated by the èlè in *geledé*), Ìbejì and Yemoja are all cultural variants of *geledé*. However, in the worship of Ìyámàpó, Ìbejì, and Yemoja, there is no masking performance. For the purpose of this research, which its main interest is to analyze the iconography of the forms of wooden paraphernalia in the service of the branches of the Yoruba religion, Egúngún and Geledé masks shall be put together.

In the selected shared religion phenomena highlighted above, the study found common to the three Yorùbá communities of Ọyó, Sábẹ and Ifẹ-Ana, the following carved-wood paraphernalia of worship: *ọpón Ifá, àgẹrẹ Ifá, irókẹ Ifá, ère egúngún/geledé, osé Sàngó, olúmẹyẹ* and *ère ibejì*. These artefacts will be the subjects of our discussion. At first, iconographic analysis or archetypal modelling of each of the paraphernalia will be carried out and then their classification will follow.

Iconographic Standards of Traditional Yorùbá Religion Wood-Carvings from Ọyó to Sábẹ and Ifẹ-Ana

Ọpón Ifá (Divination Board)

Ọpón Ifá is one of the chief paraphernalia of Ifá worship and divination. These divination boards, as they are usually called, may be carved in a round, spherical or rectangular shape. The edges of the boards are usually decorated. The decorations on Ifá divination boards have caught the attention of several scholars. Drewal and Drewal (1987: 225) point out that the decorations on Ifá divination boards do not have a single narrative link binding the diverse depictions; rather, they convey myriad autonomous forces operating in the Yorùbá cosmos and those affecting the diviner and his clients. This implies that decorations carved around the boards are independent of one another and that they can be the illustrations of any of the many items, human or animal forms, that can be linked with the diviner and his clients. Drewal, Pemberton and Abiodun (1989:23) have divided the compositional picture plane on the fringes of Ifá boards into nine sections. Eight sections are on the border of the board while the center of the board forms the ninth section. The most important of all these sections is the one opposite the diviner. It is called *ojú ọpón* (the face of the board); this is where the Èsù face/head is usually portrayed. The section nearest the diviner is called *esẹ ọpón* (the foot of the board). Halfway up the right-hand side is *ọnà ògánrán* (the right path) and

4 Lawal B. (2016)

opposite on the left-hand side is *onà múnu* (the direct path). Between these sections are four spaces that make up the eight sections of the border. Witte (1994: 67), and Pogoson and Akande (2011: 35) observe that many of the representations on the borders of Yorùbá Ifá divination boards are human and animal activities that, in one way or the other, have mythological connection with Ifá. Stories of animals feature prominently in Ifá poems (*odù Ifá*). Pogoson and Akande (2011) further conclude that a large number of the images are extemporizations by the carvers and that it is only the Èsù head that is constant.

Ìròké Ifá (Divination Board Tapper)

Ìròké Ifá is the symbol of identification and authority of a Babaláwo (Pogoson and Akande 2010). However, a more common use of ìròké can be observed during a divination session. The use and emblematic connotations of ìròké has been thoroughly discussed by Pogoson and Akande (2010) and Abiodun (1989: 1-18); they observe that the ìròké usually consists of three sections, the topmost or pointed-end section, the middle section, and the third or bottom section (in order of importance). Elsewhere, Abiodun (1975: 10), attempting an interpretation of Ifá art objects based on oral traditions, suggest that the topmost part of the ìròké symbolizes the inner spiritual *orí*, while the middle section - which is usually a depiction of a nude, kneeling female figure, holding her breasts - symbolizes the position of a woman during childbirth. The Yorùbá belief is that it is at this point that a child chooses its destiny. He explained that to the Yorùbá people, the choice of one's destiny is of utmost importance and that a woman is significant because of her role in childbirth. The woman, usually represented in a kneeling position, is a symbol of *ìkúnlè abiamọ* (“the kneeling pain of childbirth”), and is often regarded as the greatest act of reverence that can be shown to any being, especially to appease the gods and solicit their support.

Abiodun's submission is that the features that essentially qualify a carved object as a typical ìròké are: it must have three main sections; the first is the cap, which is at the top, usually depicted with a curve cone; the second is the picture section which may have illustrations; and, lastly, the handle. The inside of the handle may be hollow in order that bells may be attached in them. An ìròké must be portable and easy to be carried around; it must also be strong enough to tap divination boards without breaking.

Agere Ifá (Ifá Bowl)

According to Roache (1974: 20), a large number of imageries can be portrayed on an *agere Ifá*. They range in style from very simple ones with a single simple column supporting a large dish at the top to ones with a lot of

complex mythical images. He cited the example of an *agere* Ifá that portrays what might be a myth. In the *agere* he described, two hunters or warriors are attacking a wild animal which has a huge coiled snake in its mouth.

A large number of representations can be found for the use of *agere Ifá*. Most important of its characteristics is that it must have three main sections. The top is usually in the shape of a dish where the sixteen Ifá divination palm-nuts (*ikin*) is kept; the middle section is where a variety of images may be depicted, and the third section is a flat base on which the entire structure rests. It is very important that the top must be hollow enough to contain the sixteen Ifá divination palm-nuts to prevent them from falling out. The middle section may bear any form of depiction, and the base must serve to hold the whole carving and its contents without tilting.

Osé Şàngó (Carved Axe with a Handle Surmounted by Twin Blades)

Samuel Johnson (1921:4) recorded that Şàngó, the thunder-god in Yorùbá-land, was the fourth ruler of Òyó-Ile. He was deified by his friends and well-wishers after his death. According to Johnson (1921), Şàngó was said to have ruled over all Yorùbá-land, including Benin, Popo and Dahomey. He was hot-tempered and had 'trickish' tendencies. Şàngó is believed to have had the ability to emit fire and smoke from his mouth and nostrils. His chiefs saw him as a ruler with a dangerous personality which constituted a threat to the safety of his citizens. They therefore decided to exile him.

A variant of this story narrated by Beier (1959) presents Şàngó as a powerful warrior as well as a great magician. He was said to know how to make thunder and lightning. One day when he was testing the potency of a charm, he inadvertently destroyed his whole palace, killing most of his wives and children. Faced with such a calamity, Şàngó could not face his people to relate his misfortune; he, therefore, committed suicide. As indicated earlier, he was deified afterward. And whenever a house was destroyed by lightning, it was attributed to Şàngó's anger.

Thompson (1971: 133) records a tradition of how Şàngó came into the possession of the *osé* and *sééré* (rattle). He relates that at a point in history, Şàngó was going to war and he consulted the god of divination, Ifá. Ifá gave him two men to serve as his bodyguards. One was Osé and the other Sééré. Osé carried a staff with him to battle while Sééré carried a calabash which he would rattle in order to invoke supernatural powers to aid him in winning battles. These two instruments have since become associated with Şàngó as tools with which he vanquishes his enemies.

A praise-poem of Şàngó gathered by Verger (1957: 305) indicates that the *osé* must be sturdy and that the mortar of Şàngó must be strong and big. Thompson (1971: 133) suggests that the *osé* Şàngó in traditional sculpture is

a symbol of the comradeship between worshippers and the deity. He narrates that the initiates of *Şàngó* must balance on their heads pierced vessels in which living flame burns. They dance with this fiery burden, properly balancing the vessel and never allowing it to fall. The ability to rise to this challenge and swallow fire proves that they have become, in effect, *Şàngó* himself. In relating this ritual with the physical features of the *osé*, Thompson likened the axe-head to fire and the human figure usually forming the next tier as the devotee carrying the fire. Thompson publishes a number of *osé* with kneeling and nude female figures holding their protruding breasts with their hands, a posture that is typical of many Yorùbá wood-carvings.

Armstrong (1983: 28-33) mentions that sometimes the *osé* is simply carved with a handle surmounted by twin blades. He also notes that there are instances where the blades are further embedded with human faces at the centre or the end of each blade. Describing the next section of the *osé*, Armstrong notes that this portion may portray a variety of forms, but mostly it bears the carving of a full human figure (which is sometimes a male but most times a kneeling female). There have been examples of *osé* without the illustration of full figures. Thompson R. (1971) records one from Igbomina with a number of heads around the base of the axe before its handle. There are lots of variations in the carving of *osé* in different places.

***Egúngún* Masks**

The masking culture of the Yorùbá called *egúngún* comes from their belief in the existence of life after death. Yorùbá people believe that death is not the end of life; that it is a mere indication that the body (*ara*) has been separated from the soul (*èmi*). The belief in the independent and corporate existence of the body and soul, and that the soul can potentially influence the affairs of the living, have necessitated the search for a means to appease the souls of the deceased. The masking tradition is therefore one of the ceremonies lined up as a means of propitiating and integrating the dead with the living.

Lawal (1977) observed that there is a great variety of *egúngún* masks and head-dresses. They are produced with various materials such as wood, bones, metals and even skulls. Kalilu (1991: 22) listed the materials used for *egúngún* masks as wood, leather, iron, lead, and brass. He notes that the masks range from single-faced to multiple-faced ones. The types of masks he recorded include a few helmets and head-masks, but face-masks are completely absent. The masks use both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic subjects in naturalistic, abstract and stylized forms. Most of the anthropomorphic types are in the form of human heads depicted with face masks, while the zoomorphic figures are all in abstract forms.

Kalilu (1991), however, warns that the images on *egúngún* masks are less important and it may be misleading to associate them with the very essence

of the *egúngún* cult. *Ère* (mask), he submits, is just a reflection of the affluence of the owner of the masquerade. Furthermore, he adds that the images on the masks are not symbolic; the carving (*ère*) is chosen or applied according to the owner's or the carver's fancy. The use of images in these masks is born out of the Yorùbá's regard for sculptured images.

Gèlèdé Masks

There are two types of *gèlèdé* masks. According to Thompson (1971), and corroborated by Koshoni Owolabi,⁵ and Drewal,⁶ there is *èfè* (lit. joke), sometimes referred to as the male, and the *tètèdé*⁷ (lit. early-comer) or female. Koshoni Owolabi described the order of a *gèlèdé* performance. He stated that it is the *tètèdé* that usually comes out first. *Tètèdé* will sing and dance to some songs into the middle of the night when the stage will be set for the *èfè* to come out. The *èfè* is said to possess powers to fish out evil people in the society, and this is why it usually comes out at night when it can carry out its purgative activity. Thompson recounted that an Awori *Gèlèdé* priest explained that the *èfè* masks are worn by males only because it is only a man who has the courage and strength to single out a person from a crowd and accuse him of having done evil. However, Koshoni Owolabi pointed out that the power of *gèlèdé* is more than mere physical powers. He explained that *gèlèdé* possesses charms, amulets, and incantations that can be used to inflict harm and even kill. Drewal (1974: 8-19) also observed similar variations in the forms and motifs of *gèlèdé*.

The difference between the *èfè* and the *tètèdé* masks is that the *tètèdé* types are simple and are carved as a single face or double-sided face masks without superstructures. *Tètèdé* is usually represented in the gender of a female with woven hairstyle, and many examples have either *àbàjá* or *pélé* facial marks. The *èfè* types have two sections, the lower section, and a superstructure. The lower part is usually a depiction of a human face as found in *tètèdé*, but on top of this is an upper section that bears the depiction of diverse human and animal activities. Scenes depicted in the superstructure can range from social to political themes, and even animal compositions are depicted. It should be noted that both the lower section and the superstructure, no matter how complex, is as a rule carved out from a single piece of wood.

5 Owolabi Kosoni. is the custodian and Family head of the *gèlèdé* families of Oke-Amosun, Sabe. Personal communication on March 22, 2013.

6 Drewal H. (2017). Personal Communication with Professor H. J. Drewal at the Conference of the Art Council of African Studies Association, Ghana. August 11, 2017.

7 Owolabi Kosoni, op. cit.

Ère Ìbejì (Twin Figures)

The Yorùbá are said to have the highest twinning rate in the world (Kreher 1987: 82), with a ratio of about 45.1 per 1000 births. The high rate of infant mortality among twins has been said to account for the ubiquity of these small wooden carvings in Yorùbáland. Yorùbá people believe that twins are special children with supernatural powers and are, therefore, to be venerated. Indeed, after the birth of twins, the mother of the children must carry out oracular consultations, in which the Babaláwo (Ifá priest) will check the *esèntáyé* (general outlook of life's circumstances) of the children and find out the wishes of the newborn twins. According to Houlberg (1973: 20-27), some twins may want their mother to change occupations, ask her to dance in the market begging for alms or to sell beans and palm-oil (a delicacy that is believed to be the favourite food of twins). At specified intervals, the mother is expected to gather children in her neighbourhood and serve them with beans; this act is called *sàárà* (free gift). It is also believed that if one of a pair of twins dies, the spirit of the dead may continue to trouble the one that is alive. Ultimately, the dead may invite the living into the world beyond.

For this reason, a carved wood figure is commissioned. When completed, the spirit of the dead twin is invoked into the carved figure and venerated as if it were alive. In a situation where the two twins die, two figures are carved. The Sábẹ and Ifẹ-Ana Yorùbá also uphold the belief in the ìbejì (twins) cult.

Carved ìbejì figures have been observed to have a number of characteristics. They are carved nude, usually male and/or female; the head is oversized when compared with the size of the body. Particular attention is paid to the head, and its frontal parts; the features of the head are bold, the eyes are protruding, and the nose is pointed. It appears as though the remaining parts of the body are given less attention, but this is dependent on the region where the carving is from and, indeed, the carver. The arms are mostly at the sides of the body, but sometimes they extend out from the thighs or are left dangling. The sex organs are pronounced, making it easy to identify the sex of the carved figures. In females, the breasts are protruding, and they wear elaborate coiffure, and in the male figures, the genitals are erect. In some cases, the wrists and waists of the figures are bedecked with cowries, beads or coins. Sometimes the images are clothed in small jackets.

Classification of Shared Extant Traditional Yorùbá Religion Wood-Carvings in Ọ̀yó, Sábẹ and Ifẹ-Ana

The classification carried out by this research is only on the Traditional Yorùbá religion carved-wood paraphernalia involved in the diffusion process from Ọ̀yó to Sábẹ and Ifẹ-Ana. In the process of identifying the typical




iconographic features of the wood carvings employed in the shared traditional religion in Òyó, Sábẹ and, Ifẹ, it is observed that some of the paraphernalia share commonalities in their general forms. Therefore, based on the shared formal features and structures, this paper proposes and attempts a classification of the paraphernalia based on artistic forms. This research has been able to classify the available Yorùbá wooden traditional religion paraphernalia into four, namely: (1) Carved-Wood Yorùbá Traditional Religion Paraphernalia in ‘Relief Sculpture’, (2) Carved-Wood Yorùbá Traditional Religion Paraphernalia with ‘Three Dimensional Three-Sections’, (3) Carved-Wood Yorùbá Traditional Religion Paraphernalia, ‘Three Dimensional, Free-Standing Sculptures’, and (4) ‘Carved-Wood Masks.’

So far, in the course of this research, the listed categories are the ones identified in the process of interactions and exchanges between Òyó-Yorùbá people and Sábẹ-Yorùbá and Ifẹ-Yorùbá. The present study is just the beginning, and more could be discovered in the future.

Carved-Wood Yorùbá Traditional Religion Paraphernalia in Relief

Opón Ifá is the only one of its type in this class of Yorùbá traditional religion worship objects. It is so categorized because *opón Ifá* is basically a *baso-relievo* board. As stated above, they are consistently and constantly either circular or rectangular. The friezes are usually decorated with anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or geometric relief forms. *Ojú Èsù*, or the head of Èsù, which is located at the *ojú opón*, is also carved in relief and is the only feature that has a consistent form on all *opón Ifá*. There are, however, various examples of *opón Ifá* that have no decoration around their edges.

TABLE 1
Relief Sculpture (*Opón Ifá*)

| Oyo (1:1) | Sabe (1:2) | Ife (1:3) |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |

Ọpón Ifá in Ọyó, Sábẹ and Ifẹ-Ana




Table 1 below presents Ifá trays from the three communities under this study. Shapes of divination boards in the table vary. The one from Ọyó (Ọyó 1:1) is circular and, the one from Sábẹ (Sábẹ 1:2) is oval in shape. Trays with oval shapes are not common. This shape could be some form of extemporization by the carver or a form compelled by the shape of the wood used for carving. Other trays from Sábẹ observed during this research are circular. The tray from Ifẹ-Ana (Ifẹ-Ana 1:3) is rectangular. The decorative compositions on all the trays are linear and geometric patterns.

Carved-Wood Yorùbá Traditional Religion Paraphernalia with Three-Dimensional, Three-Sections




The three-dimensional (three-section) sculptures are *agere* Ifá, *iróké* Ifá and *osé* Sàngó.

TABLE 2




Three Dimensional, Three-Section Sculptures (*Agere* Ifá)

| Oyo (2:1:1) | Sabe (2:1:2) | Ife (2:1:3) |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |

Three Dimensional, Three-Section Sculptures (*Iróké* Ifá)

| Oyo (2:2:1) | Sabe (2:2:2) | Ife (2:2:3) |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |

Three Dimensional, Three-section Sculptures (*Osé* Sàngó)

| Oyo (2:3:1) | Sabe (2:3:2) | Ife (2:3:3) |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |

These objects are characterized by a three-section carving format, and the reason they are classified as three-dimensional (three sections). The three paraphernalia perform different functions and, indeed, while two belong to Ifá worship, the third, *osé Sàngó*, is employed in the worship of Sàngó. The three-section carving format they share is the basis for their being grouped together in this research as a way to study their forms.

The three-section format may have been informed by the function of the paraphernalia, but the possibility of its significance to the three sections may not be totally over-ruled. Three is a significant number in the worldview of the Yorùbá people. On occasions when the spirit of the dead has to be invoked, it is called three times. Also, when there is a need to command the rapt attention of someone, the person's name will be repeated three times, and on such occasions, the person will be asked by the caller; usually an elderly person, "How many times did I call you?" and he has to answer "Three times." Interestingly, too, sacrifices to the gods are usually asked to be placed at *oríta méta* (the intersection where three roads meet). Therefore, there is a significance to the number three in the Yorùbá tradition that these sculptures may have drawn from.

Agere Ifá in Òyó, Sábe and Ifè-Ana

According to Roache E. (1974: 20-25), there is a wide variety of *agere Ifá* in use, and the depictions in them range in style from very simple ones with a single, simple column supporting a large dish at the top to ones with a plethora of complex mythical images. From the fieldwork of this research, however, all the *agere* found in Òyó (2:1:1 in Table 2), Sábe (2:1:2 in Table 2) and Ifè-Ana (2:1:3 in Table 2) have human figures as their central theme. Notable is that the two from Òyó and Sábe are females. The gender of the figure depicted in the *agere* from Ifè-Ana, picture 2:1:3 in Table is not clear.

The *agere* from Sábe (2:1:2 in Table 2) and Ifè-Ana (2:1:3 in Table 2) have the Yorùbá *pélé* facial marks on their cheeks. Òyó (2:1:1 Table 2) and Sábe (2:1:2 in Table 2) are depicted in kneeling positions. The *agere* from Òyó is nude from the head to the waist; its breasts are pointed in the usual Yorùbá wood-carving style of depicting women. The kneeling position of Òyó, 2:1:1 (Table 2) and Sábe, 2:1:2 (Table 2) is in line with the symbolic position to the Yorùbá and described by Abiodun (1975: 10) as symbolizing *ikúnlè abiamọ* (the pains and travails of mothers at childbirth), a time that the Yorùbá believe the child chooses his destiny.

As earlier discussed, *agere Ifá* usually has three sections; the top-most section being the cup in which the *ikin Ifá* are placed, the middle section where a variety of illustrations can be depicted holds the top section in position, and

the bottom section serves as the pedestal on which the entire structure stands. All the *agere Ifá* in the table above have the three stipulated sections and are therefore in conformity with the archetypal structure of Yorùbá *agere Ifá*.

***Iróké Ifá* in Òyó, Sábẹ and Ifẹ**

It has been pointed out in the main body of this essay that the *iróké* Ifá has three main sections. All *iróké* images in the table above have the three sections. The *iróké* from Òyó (Òyó 2:2:1 in Table 2) has bells attached to the inside of its handle, thus making the handle larger than those from Sábẹ and Ifẹ. The handles of Sábẹ, 2:2:2 (Table 2) and Ifẹ-Ana, 2:2:3 (Table 2) have no hollow space in them.

Depicted in the middle section of Òyó 2:2:1 (Table 2) are two heads, backing each other, thus, facing opposite directions. The heads are joined together at the back; they then thin out into an intertwining spiral that terminates at the conical head of the *iróké*, the conical head is the part used for tapping the divination tray. Sábẹ 2:2:2 (in Table 2) bears a depiction of the kneeling female figure, the emblematic symbolism of *ikúnlè abiamọ*. This kneeling female figure is found in almost all Yorùbá wooden paraphernalia of worship. Ifẹ-Ana 2:2:3 (Table 2) looks like a mere stick and is obviously not carved by a wood-carver, it is probably shaped by a carpenter. Notwithstanding, it still serves as an *iróké*.

***Osé Sàngó* in Òyó, Sábẹ and Ifẹ**

All the *osé* in 2:3 of Table 2 conform to the three component parts said to characterize the iconography of *osé Sàngó*. Òyó 2:3:1 (Table 2) is a classic example of the nude, kneeling female figure holding its breasts. Sábẹ 2:3:2 (Table 2) has an image of a standing male figure, probably holding charms in its hands. The double-sided axe in Sábẹ 2:3:2 (Table 2) is stylized. Instead of the usual broad blade end, the blade ends appear like a curve-shape axe pointing to the ground. This is probably an extemporization by the carver. It will, however, be observed that the axe heads of the three wands are different. The shape of the axe head is probably another point of extemporization by the carver or the owner of the axe. Ifẹ-Ana 2:3:3 (Table 2) depicts a female figure squatting on its heels. Although the gender of the figure is not clear, the breast depicted on its chest is a pointer that it is very likely a female. The breast is a notable feature for identifying female figures in Yorùbá wood-carving.

All the *osé* discussed here have three sections and are three-dimensional. Coincidentally, all of them have human figures in their middle sections. As earlier pointed out, the middle section serves as the illustration platform, a platform on which the artist or the worshipper is allowed to dictate what will




be depicted. The representation in the middle section is, however, limited to a predefined repertoire known to adherents as well as carvers.

**Carved-Wood Yorùbá Traditional Religion Paraphernalia,
Three-Dimensional, Free-Standing Sculptures**




Two types of traditional religion wood carvings have so far been identified in this category, *ère ibeji*, and *olùmèye* figures. The nomenclature ‘three-dimensional, free-standing’ is used to describe the sculptures in this category because, by their forms, they are sculptures in the round and can totally stand on their own. Coupled with these is that, except for the awareness of their traditional religion functions, they can be mistaken for art meant to serve purely aesthetic functions. The major difference between this category and the ‘three-dimensional, three-section’ type is that the paraphernalia in the latter is purposely designed for ergonomic reasons, while the former’s figures are designed solely to serve as effigies in human forms to house spirits.

TABLE 3

Three Dimensional, Free Standing Sculptures (*Èreibeji*)

| Oyo (3:1:1) | Sabe (3:1:2) | Ife (3:1:3) |
|--|--|--|
|  |  |  |

Three Dimensional, Free Standing Sculptures (*Olùmèye*)

| Oyo (3:2:1) | Sabe (3:2:2) | Ife (3:2:3) |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |

Ère ibeji in Ọ̀yó, Sábe and Ifè

The *ère ibeji* in Ọ̀yó 3:1:1 of Table 3 are two roughly carved *ère ibeji*. The figure to the left is a male, while the one on the right is a female. They are both nude and the genitals of the male is obvious and the breasts of the female are pronounced. The same formal description is applicable to the *ère ibeji* from Sábe in Sábe 3:1:2, except that the figures depicted here wear the *àbàjà* facial marking of the Yorùbá. The *ère ibeji* figures in Ifè-Ana 3:1:3 are nude from the head to the waist at which point they wear a loincloth and attached to the loincloth, are cowries and shells.

Olúmèyẹ in Ọ̀yó, Sábe and Ifè

Kneeling female figures (called *olúmèyẹ* in the Igbomina and Ekiti regions) are commonly found in Yorùbá shrines. The Ekiti people believe that the image is that of a woman and that she is a messenger of the spirits. Such sculptures are used when kola-nuts are being offered to visitors, and as shrine containers for keeping offerings to *òrìṣà* and to hold palm-nuts for Ifá divination. More often than not, they are carved nude with protruding breasts and carrying bowls which are sometimes in the form of roosters. When the bowl is carved in a rooster form, the upper part of the rooster is usually removable and serves as the lid. The lower part, which is the body of the rooster, is attached to the kneeling figure and it serves as the main bowl inside which items are kept. Many of such *olúmèyẹ* and other Yorùbá kneeling figures are carved with a child on their back.

The kneeling figure in Ọ̀yó 3:2:1 (Table 3) possesses most of the characteristic features associated with Yorùbá kneeling female figures, but instead of a rooster, it holds a bowl with lid and carries a bigger bowl on its head and has a baby on her back. The female figure has a *sùkú* hairstyle on her head, and an elaborately decorated wrapper holds the baby figure on her back.



Sábe 3:2:2 (Table 3) also has the typical features of the kneeling Yorùbá female figures. The bowl it carries is in the form of a rooster. It has a baby on her back. The hair-style is such that the woven sides are directed towards the centre, where the hair rises to form an intricate flat network of weavings running from the back of the head to the front. This hairstyle is not common in carvings found in Ọ̀yó. The figures bear a *gòmbó* facial mark. There are very rich beautiful linear markings on its body that appear like striations or tattoo. The markings extend to the nude breasts and to the lower region of the neck of the carved figure.

Ifè 3:2:3 (Table 3) is a kneeling figure and is found in the shrine of Olubuku, the spiritual leader of the Ifè people of Atakpame. The figure is a kneeling figure but has no bowl on its head or its hands. Olubuku, the owner, places a plastic bowl in front of it from time to time as the need demands.

Carved-Wood Masks Employed in Yorùbá Traditional Religion of *Egúngún* and *Gèlèdè*

This category comprises wooden sculptures employed in masking traditions in Òyó-Yorùbá communities and Sábẹ. No masking tradition was found in Ifẹ-Ana in the course of sourcing for this research. However, this is not to say there are no masking traditions, but a deeper search will need to be carried out in the future. The wood-carvings, called masks, in this category are not necessarily face masks, but they are carved to represent the ‘facial’ or one could say ‘visible facial’ identity of the *egúngún*, *eléfòn*, *epa*, *gèlèdè*, etc. Many of the said masks are placed on the head of the person under the masks. However, because they form the visual facial identity of the *egúngún* or *gèlèdè*, they are referred to as masks in this classification.

TABLE 4
Carved-Wood Masks (*Egúngún* and *Gèlèdè*)

| Oyo (4:1) | Sabe (4:2) | Ife |
|--|--|-----|
|  |  | |

Egúngún and *Gèlèdè* in Òyó, and Sábẹ (Table 4)

Table 4 compares the *egúngún* and *gèlèdè* masks of Òyó, and Sábẹ, respectively. As earlier noted, these two genres of art tradition have been grouped together for reasons of their graphic similarities and because they are both masking traditions paraphernalia. In this comparison, however, no mask is recorded for Ifẹ-Ana, as none was found extant in the course of this research. Generally, the images that are found in masks are geometric, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic images.

Òyó 4:1:1 (Table 4) is an assemblage of male and female figurines. The figures are carved independently of one another, but in this head-dress, they are tied together and made to exist as a single piece; a form of ‘installation art.’ Individually, the figures are akin to *ère ìbejì*. They are nude and their sexual

organs are exposed, their heights and sizes are also within the range of those found in *ère ibeji*.

Sábe 4:1:2 (Table 4) is a *gèlèdé* mask. It is an *èfè* (male *gèlèdé*) mask.⁸ Depicted in the lower section of the mask is a single face/head of a man with *àbàjá* face marks. The superstructure is that of a big bird, encircled by two snakes. The bird holds the heads of the snakes in its large beak. The snakes loop and entangle together to encircle the big bird. There are other smaller birds around the big one. On both sides of the mask are sheathed swords. This mask is painted with a variety of enamel paints. Koshoni Owolabi, the owner of the mask, pointed out that they paint the mask from time to time, not only to prevent it from termite attack, but also to give it a new look for each occasion it is on display.

Conclusion

This research observes that Yorùbá people, in the course of old Oyo expansionist wars and migration, spread from Nigeria (east) to the Benin Republic and Togo (westward). In the course of their migration, new Yoruba communities were founded in the Benin Republic and Togo - although as at the time of these expansions, there were no constitutional/political entities with the nomenclatures Nigeria, Benin Republic, and Togo. It is, however, pertinent to note that the three communities, after the founding of Sabe and Ife-Ana, have existed independently for centuries, and yet have continued with the worship of the traditional Yoruba religion and the use of attendant wood-carvings in the service of the religion and its sub-divisions.

It is also observed that the branches of the traditional Yoruba religion - such as Ifa, Ibeji, and Sango - travelled westward, but the *Gèlèdé* culture is an exception to the westward directional transfer of Yoruba culture. *Gèlèdé* masking tradition travelled from the west to the east. Drewal (2017), Lawal (2016), Thompson (1971) and Kruger (2010: 316-328) state that *gèlèdé* originated from Ketu, but have not categorically indicated the contradiction in the directional trend of *gèlèdé*, against the directional transfer of other traditional religion branches.⁹ The writer also observes that the eastward cultural transfer of *gèlèdé* is very likely responsible for its popularity in the border towns of Ayetoro, Yewa, Egba, Ijio and Iwère-Ile of Nigeria and the Benin Republic. The culture is barely practiced, if at all, in the hinterlands of Yorubaland.

8 According to Koshoni Owolabi, there are two types of *gèlèdé* masks – there is *èfè* (lit. joke), sometimes referred to as the male, and the *tètèdé* (lit. early-comer) or female. In the order of performance, the *tètèdé* usually comes out first to set the stage for the *èfè*.

9 Lawal, B. (2016).

The classification carried out by this paper is borne out of the observation and identification of typical forms and features in each paraphernalia category. The forms and features are consistent in many of the objects over time and space. The peculiarities have thus dictated, to a large extent, the iconography of this paraphernalia. This research, therefore, establishes that many Yorùbá traditional religion carvings (*òpón Ifá*, *agere Ifá*, *ìròké Ifá*, *osé Sàngó*, and *gèlèdè* masks) are cultural icons in their own right.

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