

FIGURATIVE SCULPTURE IN TRANSITION:

CONTEMPORARY YORUBA WOODCARVING

IN OYO

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A THESIS

PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE AWARD OF

THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

IN

FINE ART

AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY

ZARIA, NIGERIA

JUNE, 1977

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For Stan Bohrer,
who introduced me to woodcarving.

PREFACE

This thesis is an attempt to record the processes of contemporary Yoruba woodcarving in Oyo City, and to relate these processes to the forms which are being produced through their use. Technology has often been ignored in assessing works of art, and in this particular instance because traditional Yoruba woodcarving technology is fast being replaced by imported tools and practices, it seems especially important to make some record of present practices, and to attempt to see these within an historical framework. Naturally "traditional" is a rather flexible term, and in this thesis it has been used to refer to tools, processes, and technology as they existed in Yorubaland prior to extensive European contact. Contact between different West African peoples has been constant, though, and it is difficult to determine which practices described as traditionally Yoruba by informants were developed by the Yoruba and which were borrowed from other peoples.

A 35mm single lens reflex camera was used extensively to document the carving processes discussed in this thesis. The author is by no means an experienced photographer, and her

intention was to offer through photographs concrete examples of processes discussed in the text. In some cases, lighting conditions were not ideal from the photographic point of view, but it seemed better to let the carver work naturally, rather than to introduce distracting flash equipment or to ask him to work in an unfamiliar place. It was the writer's goal to be as unobtrusive as possible when in the field.

The writer would like to thank the Oyo carvers who made this thesis possible: Mr. Oke Akanbi, Mr. E. Olo Odekunle, and Mr. Boade Fawole. Thanks also go to Mr. T. Adeniji, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan; Mr. Gbade Akintunde, A.B.U.; and Mr. Isaac Komolafe, A.B.U.; who provided information on Yoruba woodcarving practices.

Dr. S. Suleiman, Head of Sculpture, and Professor S. I. Wangboje, both of the Department of Fine Art, A.B.U. were most patient and understanding in acting as the supervisors of this work.

Mr. Geoff Reeves, Head of Graphics, Department of Fine Art, A.B.U. kindly provided technical advice on the format of this thesis, and practical assistance to the writer as she developed and printed her films and photographs.

The writer would also like to express her gratitude to Ms. Firinne Adelugba, Ms. Louise Baker, Mr. S. G. H. Daniels, Dr. Phyllis Ferguson, Mrs. Barbara Murnane, Dr. Jimi Olufeagba,

and Miss Wendy Wilson, for their assistance.

Linda Grace Ludwin

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The Yoruba of West Africa have been called the "largest and most prolific of the art-producing tribes of Africa".¹ They are well known for their excellent figurative woodcarvings, which are created for a variety of ritual, architectural, and decorative purposes. These carvings are produced by a small group of men who specialise in carving, and who have maintained Yoruba style through apprenticeship traditions: the apprentice is trained to follow "age-old ideals of representation and expression common to his village or tribe".²

In discussing Yoruba woodcarvings there has been a tendency on the part of many art historians to refer to pieces without regard to their creation or creators. This leaves as big a gap in our understanding of the carving as referring to it with no

¹William Bascom, The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 108.

²Paul S. Wingert, Primitive Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 16.

knowledge of its function or cultural context would do.

Materials and tools are inherently limiting factors to the artist: both contribute essential aspects of form to the sculpture which the artist executes by using them. The procedural steps which the artist takes in executing a piece are of importance too, for they determine how the proportions of the whole work are set, and may reveal what importance the artist attaches to various aspects of form.

Artists create visual symbols for their societies, and they create them through the media of materials and tools. Some of the symbols which they create become fundamental motifs for their society, and may then be altered or abstracted without the loss of their original message. Biebuyck suggests that, "Once these motifs come into being they belong to the realm of art; that means that they can be technically modified, amplified, or reduced, regardless of their meanings, or without changing their meanings".³ However, convention demands some degree of restraint: once a motif has gained acceptance in a society, individuals are able to accept alterations to it as long as they consider that it still performs its function adequately.

The impact of western technology and patronage on the

³Daniel Biebuyck (ed.), Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art (Los Angeles: U.C.L.A. Press, 1969), p. 16.

formal aspects of Yoruba woodcarving and on the Yoruba woodcarver has been little researched. Father Kevin Carroll's book, Yoruba Religious Carving, touches upon the subject, but hardly from an impartial or detailed point of view, as his Oye Ekiti project was aimed at changing traditional forms and conventions in Yoruba woodcarving through Christian patronage.⁴

The writer's experience in working with the University of Ibadan's Institute of African Studies' collection of Nigerian sculpture during 1974 gave her some familiarity with Yoruba woodcarvings, and she became interested in learning more about the materials and processes traditionally involved in their production, and in knowing more about the carver's creative involvement with his work.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was three fold. First, the writer wanted to determine what the traditional techniques and procedures of Yoruba figurative carving were, to establish whether or not such techniques and procedures are still being followed today, and to document them photographically if they are still being used. In this way, the writer hoped to record some of the information necessary to clarify the methods by

⁴Kevin Carroll, Yoruba Religious Carving (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967).

which so many fine carvings have been produced.

Secondly, the writer was interested in investigating the impact of western technology and imagery on figurative Yoruba carving, both technically and stylistically, with special respect to motif, subject matter, and types of form.

Thirdly, the writer wished to explore what accommodations, if any, had been made by image carvers whose traditional patrons, the devotees of Yoruba religious cults, have become increasingly less significant as an economic force in Nigeria (1952 census figures record less than twenty percent of Nigerians as Pagan).⁵

Geographical Focus

This study was focused geographically on Oyo City, Oyo State, for several reasons. First, the writer was interested in comparing two or more woodcarvers in the same city, to see if procedures, techniques, and tools would be the same or different. Oyo offers an ideal situation for this, as there are two carving establishments centred there, and it is a location of particular interest because one of the carvers has been trained in Father Carroll's programme by G. Bamidele Areogun. The other carver, an older man, was trained in the more traditional Yoruba manner by his father, who had also been an image carver. Secondly, the writer wished to present a detailed description of carvers

⁵Bascom, The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, p. 2.

working in the field, and she felt that this would best be done by dealing with a limited number of individuals, as woodcarving is a relatively time consuming process and unlike many other craft activities, weaving or basketry, for example, is not based on a strictly repetitive technique. The carving process varies at every stage of the execution of the piece. Further considerations in choosing Oyo were that a discernible Oyo style has been recognised by international authorities on African Art⁶, and that Oyo has a long and active tradition of woodcarving.

Oyo city is located in Oyo state, fifty-three kilometres north of Ibadan, on the main north-south route in Nigeria, trunk route A1 (Plate I). In vegetative and geological terms it is best described as being located in a mosaic region of tropical grassland and savanna, with tall grass and scattered low trees, and tropical rain forest. The population in the general area is relatively dense, about 43 persons per square kilometre. The population of Oyo was estimated at 1,882,000 in 1963.⁷

Specific Topic

The writer investigated two specific Yoruba carving establishments in Oyo City: one, that of Oke Akanbi, is located

⁶ Rene A. Bravmann, West African Sculpture (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970).

⁷ Nigeria, Federal Office of Statistics, Annual Abstract of Statistics: Nigeria 1970, p. 14.



PLATE I. A MAP OF WEST AFRICA SHOWING YORUBALAND AND OYO
(from Willett, African Art p. 9)

in central Oyo, while the other, that of E. Ola Odekunle, is located on the Al road at the southern side of the city. These are the only carving establishments in Oyo which execute figurative carvings in wood. Both carvers are Oyo natives, although Odekunle was trained elsewhere.

Methods of Collecting Data

The writer commissioned a figurative carving at both of the establishments, she observed the pieces being carved, and she made a photographic record of the entire process. She repeated this on another occasion in order to verify her original findings. With the help of an interpreter she interviewed the carvers.

Various other sources were used in collecting the data for this thesis. The writer reviewed the available literature on the topic. Mr. T. Adeniji, a Yoruba historian working with the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, was consulted concerning traditional Yoruba woodworking practices, and the writer made a field trip to Iwo town with him to see examples of tools used there, and to look at examples of architectural woodworking. Two other Yoruba carvers, Mr. G. Akintunde and Mr. I. Komolafe contributed information on traditional Yoruba woodcarving practices.

CHAPTER II

YORUBA WOODCARVING: A GENERAL DISCUSSION

Status of Yoruba Carving

What these tribal styles do tell us is that, although they have developed through the creative efforts of numerous individual artists in the past, they impose certain limitations on the creative expression of the individual artists who are producing at any given period of time. These limitations derive from the accepted standards of a given style, and, in trying to produce something appropriate, correct, or beautiful, an artist is trying to achieve these standards in his own work.⁸

Woodcarving in Yorubaland is an art for both the élite and the masses. An individual may display wealth and power through finely carved doors and house posts, while the most humble members of the same community may possess votive images for their Orisas. Much of Yoruba art is personal: that is, it is owned and used privately by an individual: but there are also carvings which function for groups, such as Gelede, Epa, and Egungun masks.

Much of Robert Farris Thompson's fieldwork has been

⁸William Bascom, "Creativity and Style in African Art" in Daniel Biebuyck, (ed.) Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 99 - 100.

directed toward determining what Yoruba aesthetic criteria involved in judging a work of art are. The critical interests of Yoruba whom Thompson persuaded to comment on local carvings were (1) degree of abstraction, (2) separation of masses, (3) smoothness and luminosity, (4) proportion, (5) composition, (6) delicacy of detail, (7) straightness of form, (8) symmetry, (9) ephebism (odo; making the subject look young).⁹

Generic Style

The basis of Yoruba woodcarving style lies in the Yoruba practice of carving every object, regardless of its size or complexity, from one piece of wood. An exception to this practice is the Gelede mask, which may have stationary or mobile attachments to its superstructure.¹⁰ Otherwise, joining wood, even to mend an object, is considered undesirable. There are many different types of wood which can be obtained in Yorubaland, and it is not difficult to find logs several metres in diameter, so that joinery is unnecessary to create large blocks of wood for carving.

Usually, the vertical axis of the tree and the vertical

⁹Robert Farris Thompson, "Yoruba Artistic Criticism", in Warren L. d'Azevedo (ed.), The Traditional Artist in African Societies, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973) pp. 31 - 59.

¹⁰Henry John Drewal, "Gelede Masquerade Imagery and Motif", African Arts, VII (Summer, 1974), pp. 8 - 14.

axis of the carving are the same: the fibres of the wood run vertically through the figure. This makes accidental splitting off of projecting parts of the carving less likely. Also, many compositional arrangements are derived from the columnar structure of the tree trunk, and it is more common to find size expressed in terms of height, rather than in width.

Yoruba figurative sculpture tends to be symmetrical, with one side of the body mirroring the other.¹¹ Hair styles, or ornaments (such as bracelets) are usually bilaterally symmetrical too. However, there is often a minor note of asymmetry introduced in a piece, either through basic compositional arrangement of masses, in detail work, or coloration, especially in group compositions. Compositional asymmetry may be expressed by something slight, like the turning of a head, or by the alternation of the pose of a limb, by having individuals in a group composition carry or display different objects, or wear different clothing (Plate II). Asymmetrical detail includes the cutting of different linear hair patterns on individuals in a group, or decorating objects which they carry in common differently for every individual in a group. Asymmetrical coloration is the practice of painting forms which are identical with different colours, thus altering

¹¹Thompson, in d'Azevedo (ed.), The Traditional Artist in African Societies, pp. 55 - 56.



PLATE II. AN EXAMPLE OF ASYMMETRICAL COMPOSITION
(from Willett, African Art, p. 214)

the visual balance of the composition. Any piece may be given one or more of the asymmetrical treatments mentioned above, and yet remain basically balanced and symmetrical.

Figures tend to be rigid and upright in their poses, rather than sinuous or twisting. Ojo has said, "That each carving is seemingly static is remedied by the grouping of many together in one mass of wood, each like a verse in a poem...".¹² Some body postures have been identified with carvings intended for specific cults. For example, Ibejis always stand upright, with their hands at their sides.

Although Yoruba woodcarving has been referred to as frontal in orientation, a careful examination of the work will reveal that, with the exception of relief panels, it is fully three dimensional. In many figures and masks the back of the piece becomes a separate event, full of detail which a frontal view alone would not disclose (Plate III).

A number of features, such as the eyes, the ears, the nose, the mouth, the hands, the feet, the navcl, and the genitals are represented by stylized, conventional forms. For example, the eye is always depicted as being fully open, and the pupil area is left blank, although nails or other objects may be driven in to suggest pupils. Thompson suggests that such

¹²G. J. A. Ojo, Yoruba Culture, (Ife: University of Ife and University of London Press, 1966), p. 239.



PLATE III. THE BACK OF AN ESU FIGURE
BEING CARVED BY AKANEI

traits are carved in high relief because:

deliberate excrescences and edges in sculpture cast darkened silhouettes which may be 'read', as an abstract image, at considerable distance by an observer. Moreover, in the blur of the dance or under the shadows of a verandah, refinements of form must be made readily visible.¹³

The head occupies an important position in Yoruba religious belief and it has been suggested that it is because of this that the head in Yoruba carving is proportionately larger in relation to the body than is naturalistic. In a similar way, important figures in a group are portrayed as taller and larger than subordinate figures.¹⁴

In most Yoruba carving, fine, detailed pattern work, whether representational (indicating a hair style or cicatrization pattern) or decorative (embellishing a base area) offers handsome visual contrast to solid areas of wood when they are juxtaposed. This type of detail work is generally symmetrical.

The usual focus of Yoruba figurative carving is the human form, although animals occasionally appear. Typically, figures represent Orisa or their devotees or their priests. Certain cults require special objects, such as dance staffs or divination trays, and these are carved with the emblem of the Orisa involved. Each Orisa has symbols by which she or he can be

¹³Thompson, in d'Azevedo (ed.), The Traditional Artist in African Societies, p. 40.

¹⁴Bascom, The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, p. 111.

recognised. For example, Eṣu's hair style is distinctive. Also, colours are linked with specific deities (Sango's colours are red and white)¹⁵ and bead or cloth ornaments attached to the carving might indicate in that way which Orisha the carving belongs to. Secular relief panels usually depict scenes of daily life or scenes or objects of particular interest, such as a warrior returning from battle, or a man riding a bicycle.

Regional Styles

There is evidence to indicate that there are regional styles of carving in Yorubaland. Specific traits have been associated with towns or regions. Houlberg has carried out a stylistic analysis on a group of Ibejis using computer technology. Ibejis are particularly suitable for comparative studies because of the large number of them still extant. Her study has suggested that Ibejis with two base pieces, carved waist beads, carved sandals, and carved amulets are strongly associated with the Igbomina subgroup, those with decorated bases with the Oyo subgroup, those with a carver's sign or signature with the Egba subgroup, those with free hands and carved clothing with the Egbado subgroup, and those with carved teeth with the

¹⁵Robert Farris Thompson, Black Gods and Kings, (Los Angeles: Occasional Paper of the Museum and Laboratories of Ethnic Arts and Technology, University of California at Los Angeles, Number II, 1971), Ch. 12/7.

Northern Yoruba.¹⁶

Some areas or towns are particularly involved with the worship of specific deities, and more pieces of sculpture relating to those deities are produced there. Ibejis, for example, are said to have originated from Ishokun Quarter, Oyo.¹⁷ Sango too is associated with Oyo, and is reputed to have been the fourth Monarch of that city before his death.¹⁸

However, the question of regional style is one which offers great possibilities for further study. Much more attention needs to be focused on the definition of town styles and their relationship to individuals' styles. Many collectors have accepted without question the geographical attributions supplied by traders or dealers, without requiring documentation. Until more work has been done in the field, and larger bodies of work collected or recorded with definite geographical attributions, bodies of unattributed works cannot be classified meaningfully.

Function

Biebuyck has suggested that there are at least fifteen

¹⁶Marilyn Hammersley Houlberg, "Yoruba Twin Sculpture and Ritual" (unpublished M. Phil. thesis, University of London, 1973), pp. 224 - 34.

¹⁷Thompson, Black Gods and Kings, Chapter 13/3.

¹⁸Ibid., Chapter 12/1.

different purposes which an art object may fulfill in any tribal society. They are: (1) to serve as an iconic transcription of a myth, (2) to act as a mnemotechnical device, (3) to be a didactic element used for teaching or initiation, (4) to represent an essential aspect of an ancestor, (5) to be a stereotyped rendering of a supernatural being, (6) to express several meanings in one figure, (7) to represent the opposite of the group value code, (8) to act as a mask, (9) to be used in dance, (10) to be an emblem, (11) to be a crest, (12) to be a token, (13) to be an initiation object, (14) to act as a mark of difference and autonomy, (15) to symbolize the integral unity of the group, or its power structure.¹⁹ An object may fulfill several of these purposes simultaneously.

Yoruba woodcarvings fulfill most of the functions which Biebuyck mentions: essential attributes of ancestors are represented in Egungun masks; stereotyped renderings of supernatural beings are typified by Esu images, which also represent contradictory values within a single image; masks are used by many cults, such as the Gelede, the Epa, and the Egungun; dance wands are typical of Sango worship, and Ibejis are also dance sculpture; Ibejis function as emblems of dead children; fine architectural carvings can act as a

¹⁹Biebuyck (ed.), Tradition and Creativity In Tribal Art, pp. 17 - 18.

mark of difference either for an individual or a shrine.

In addition to the above functions, carvings can become mediums through which divine advice is relayed to mortals. Ifa carvings are used for this purpose. Many of the Yoruba religious carvings represent, in an abstract manner, the worshipper, and function as shrine sculpture. Architectural carvings, such as those which may ornament doors or house posts, are indications of the wealth and status of individuals or cult groups.

Most Yoruba woodcarving is made for occasional public display: masks, dance wands, and Ibejis are brought out during festivals sacred to their particular gods, while Ifa sculpture is seen by initiates when they consult a babalawo. Esu images are commonly found in marketplaces and by doorways.²⁰ Shrine sculpture, whether devoted to a particular Orisa or just representing a devotee, is kept in personal shrines, as are Ibejis and dance wands during most of the year. Secular carvings, such as carved doors, house posts, combs, mirror cases, and Obi bowls are on continuous display, and serve as an indication to the community of an individual's wealth and prestige.

²⁰ Eva Krapf-Askari, Yoruba Towns and Cities (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 47.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SOURCES

ON YORUBA CARVING WITH

SPECIAL REFERENCE TO

OYO

Woodcarving has been mentioned in a variety of sources such as Yoruba myths, folktales, Ijala chants, and proverbs. Oyo woodcarving was noted by early European visitors to West Africa, notably Hugh Clapperton and Leo Frobenius. In Yorubaland, prestige has been attached to excellent carvers, and to owners of fine carvings from at least the seventeenth century until the present time.

The Orisa Myth

A creation myth referring to Orisa (Orisanla) is cited by Bascom. Orisa is said to shape human beings in the womb: "[Orisa] is sometimes called Olorun's sculptor. He shapes their bodies like a woodcarver, and then separates the arms, legs, fingers, and toes, and opens the eyes, ears, nose, and

mouth".²¹ It is interesting to note that the process of blocking out main forms and then refining shapes and adding details, as described in the procedure which Orisala follows in forming humans is identical with the steps which Yoruba carvers use in creating figurative carvings.

Oyo-Ile

Thompson has suggested that Oyo-Ile held a place of primary artistic importance in Yorubaland:

The acceptance of the importance of Oyo-Ile as a primary source for the development of the arts of the Yoruba, from the end of the classic period of Ile-Ife in the twelfth century, to the appearance of Benin in the sixteenth, and continuously until the final destruction of the site in 1839, helps explain the amazing complexity of the arts of the Yoruba, a probable interweaving of impulses from Ife, Benin, Oyo-Ile and elsewhere. The possibility of the role of Oyo-Ile as one of the great centers of African Art has far reaching implications for the history of Yoruba artistic accomplishment.²²

The existence of the Oyo empire was first recorded in 1698. At that time it was the largest and most powerful of all the Yoruba kingdoms, and it commanded tribute from places as far away as Dahomey. Oyo was then located about one hundred and thirty kilometres away from where it is presently situated, and that original site is now referred to as Oyo-Ile. The rule

²¹Bascom, The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, p. 81.

²²Thompson, Black Gods and Kings, Chapter 1/5.

of Alafin Abiodun (1770-89) brought the kingdom to the peak of its power.²³ Babalola has recorded a contemporary Ijala chant which indicates that woodcarving was well established at that time: "...He had to procure carved wooden posts and then take them to the palace at Oyo in the days of King Abiodun..."²⁴

Hugh Clapperton and the Afin Oyo

Hugh Clapperton, an Englishman who visited Oyo in 1826, mentions wood carvings several times in his description of the time which he spent in Oyo:

He [the Alafin] gave me his gooro-nut box, carved in the shape of a tortoise in ebony.²⁵

The people of Katunga [Oyo-Ile] are fond of ornamenting their doors and the posts which support their verandahs, with carvings; and they have also statues or figures of men and women, standing in their court yards. The figures carved on their posts and doors are various; but principally of the boa snake, with a hog or antelope in his mouth; frequently men taking slaves, and sometimes a man on horseback leading slaves.²⁶

The posts...are generally carved in bas-relief...[they] are by no means meanly executed, conveying the expression

²³Ibid., Chapter 1/4.

²⁴Thompson, Black Gods and Kings, Chapter 1/4 quoting S. A. Babalola, The Content and Form of the Yoruba Ijala (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 198 - 200.

²⁵Hugh Clapperton, Journal of a Second Expedition Into the Interior of Africa (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1966), p. 45

²⁶Ibid., p. 48.

and attitude of the principal man in the group with a lofty air, and the drummer well pleased with his own music...²⁷

Clapperton does not, however, mention any carved votive images, although he does refer to "fetish houses".²⁸ The present day Afin Oyo has finely carved posts supporting its verandahs, many of them depicting scenes similar to those which Clapperton described (Plate IV). It has been suggested that these contemporary posts were carved by Sabes, a Yoruba group living in the Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey), but this may refer to the idea that these works were part of the Alafin's rightful tribute from a subject group. As Oyo was the head of Yorubaland, the Alafin could require carvers anywhere in the kingdom to work for him.²⁹ The idea that the Afin's carved posts once had magical properties was raised by one of the author's informants, Mr. Adeniji, who said that there is a poem about the one hundred and sixty carved posts in the original Afin of Oyo-Ile, concerning how they could come to life and become guards for the palace.

²⁷Ibid, pp. 58 - 59

²⁸Ibid, p. 56.

²⁹Cornelius O. Adepegba, "Afin Oyo" (unpublished undergraduate thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, 1971), p. 57.



PLATE IV. OLD POSTS IN THE AFIN OYO

The Jihad

The Fulani Jihad, a Moslem religious war led by Usman dan Fodio, began in 1804 and spread southwards from Hausaland to Ilorin, which was Oyo-Ile's immediate neighbour, finally destroying Oyo-Ile, which was abandoned in 1839. Most of the inhabitants resettled in a town about eighty miles away, Ago-Oja, which became the present day Oyo. The writer collected the following story from Oke Akanbi, an Oyo woodcarver. It reflects to some extent the high status which woodcarvers formerly held in the Oyo community, and provides an interesting rationalization for the events surrounding the fall of Oyo as a result of the Jihad. The story that follows was recorded by the writer as it was translated by the interpreter.

Long ago, some people from the area around Mecca wanted to conquer Oyo. The Alafin was warned of their approach, and he decided to call together all of his wisest officials to advise him on an appropriate course of action. Ajibogunde, the head of all the woodworkers in the city, assured the Alafin that the city could be saved if the matter of its defense was put into his hands, and so the Alafin agreed. First, Ajibogunde ordered a deep ditch to be dug around the city. While this was being done, he carved many life sized figures of men on horseback holding guns, and painted them black. Then he caused the figures to be set in front of the ditch. The enemy troops attacked, and after they had expended all of their ammunition on the wooden figures, the Oyo men emerged and were able to safely repel them. This pattern was repeated twice. Then the enemy leader came to investigate. He crept up through the trees until he was close to the wooden figures, and he saw a bird sitting on one of them. He shot it, and then he realized that the soldier on which it had been sitting hadn't

flinched. Approaching the figure cautiously, he touched it. Then he realized how he had been tricked. He called for a meeting with the Alaḥin and acknowledged the superior cleverness of the Oyos, gave up his efforts to conquer them and returned to his own land. And so from that day on, the Alaḥin particularly valued the advice of his Ajibogunde.

Leo Frobenius

Frobenius travelled through Oyo in 1910 - 1912 and referred to the splendours of Oyo-Ile: "popular memory rumours the magnificence of the royal palace in Old-Oyo to have been something stupendous. The baked clay columns were covered with wood carvings and bronze plates.... My own people brought me specially beautiful carvings from the ruins of Old-Oyo".³⁰ One wonders how well woodcarvings would have withstood more than sixty years of weathering at the Oyo-Ile site. It seems more probable that the carvings supplied to Frobenius were produced by then contemporary Oyo carvers.

Proverbs

Quoting proverbs as commentaries on events is very common in Yorubaland. As Delano has commented, "In Yoruba society no one can be considered educated or qualified to take part in communal discussion unless he is able to quote the

³⁰Leo Frobenius, The Voice of Africa, Vol. 1 (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), p. 177.

proverbs relevant to each situation".³¹ In Delano's collection of five hundred and four Yoruba proverbs, he cites three which are concerned with woodcarving (Appendix B). The writer was able to collect two others, from Oke Akanbi in Oyo.

Gbena gbena gbena tan oku gbenu gbenu.

Translation: The wood carver has finished his job, it is now left to the critic.

Usage: This is used to indicate that a person has done all he can and has left the matter for the comments of others.

Gbedo gbedo kan kole gbe ojugun.

Translation: A mortar carver can't carve a shin.

Usage: This is an expression of an individual's limitations, and possibly a comment on his presumptuousness.

³¹Isaac O. Delano, Owe L' Eṣin Oro (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. ix.

CHAPTER IV

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF YORUBA WOODWORKING³²

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO

FIGURATIVE CARVING

In referring to the traditional practices of woodworking in Yorubaland, the writer is relying on information provided by Mr. T. Adeniji of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, and Mr. Oke Akanbi, an Oyo woodcarver, in addition to that provided by a survey of the available literature on the subject. Both men are over seventy years old. In speaking of woodcarving practices they rely on their personal memories which extend to the beginning of this century, and on information which they received from their parents and other informed older persons. So she has assumed that their information spans a period of one hundred to one hundred and fifty years (which would be from 1826/56 to the present). Of course, many of the practices discussed below are still being followed at the

³²Woodworking is a broader category than woodcarving and includes carpentry, building, and architectural and culinary work in addition to image carving.

present time in Oyo, but the researcher felt that the clearest presentation of contemporary Oyo carving would begin by discussing what are believed to have been the traditionally correct practices involved in Yoruba woodworking. More recent developments, and the combination of ancient and modern methods will be dealt with in the chapters on contemporary carving in Oyo.

Position

In Yorubaland, woodworking was considered to be one branch of the decorative arts, which fell into two general groups: those which could be practiced generally, and those which were restricted to a particular lineage. Woodworking was a restricted art, and prominent among the other restricted arts were facial marking, mud sculpture, calabash carving, leather working, blacksmithery, and brass casting. Calabash carving was considered to be a more ancient art than woodworking.

Training

A. A. Gerbrands remarks in his discussion of J. M. Cordwell's "Some Aesthetic Aspects of Yoruba and Benin Cultures" that:

It is important for an individual in these (Yoruba) communities to mark his position by a show of riches to increase, if he can, his power and prestige. Art is one

of the means of doing this...To supply their requirement, they need specialists. [emphasis mine]³³

Until the middle of this century, woodworking in Yorubaland was a closely controlled and regulated profession. All carvers had to prove their descent from one common historical ancestor. The craft, its tools, practices, and lore were restricted to men of this lineage. Other individuals who attempted to do any sort of woodworking were subjected to legal penalties. A man desiring to take up woodworking professionally had to appear before the head of the woodworkers of his city and prove that he was of the correct lineage before he was allowed to practice. Bascom comments that:

Woodcarving is a craft whose techniques are known only to a small group of specialists. These specialists, who are organized into guilds, supply all other members of the community with their particular goods and services. Formerly, these occupations tended to be more hereditary within the clan or lineage, but the apprenticeship system provided a method by which individuals from outside the kinship could be taught a craft.³⁴

³³J. M. Cordwell, "Some Aesthetic Aspects of Yoruba and Benin Cultures" (unpublished MS. Thesis, Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University, 1952), quoted in A. A. Gerbrands Art as an Element of Culture Especially in Negro Africa, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957), p. 104.

³⁴William Bascom, "Urbanization Among the Yoruba", American Journal of Sociology, LX (March 1955), p. 449.

Ajibogunde

I will chant a salute to Ajibogunde
 Lagbayi, the embodiment of craftsmanship at Are
 You carved the wooden posts as images
 Along the King's veranda,
 Ajibogunde
 I have carved a beautiful wooden tray for the King.
 With intuitive measurement I can change a piece
 of wood, I can turn it into a human shape...³⁵

Carving in each city was controlled by an Ajibogunde who was appointed for life by the Oba as the head of all woodworkers. There was also a supreme Ajibogunde for all of Yorubaland. Ajibogunde had two senior assistants, Osi and Oti, and a junior assistant, Agbanla, who functioned as a messenger. Ajibogunde directed all of the woodworking in the city, settled disputes, assigned commissions to individuals, and investigated the lineage of anyone interested in taking up woodworking professionally. An aspirant had to prove his descent from the original Ajibogunde, who was the father of carving and carpentry in Yoruba mythology. Usually, this right descended through the father's family, but the right to engage in woodworking could descend matrilineally too: a carver's daughter's son could become a carver.

Ajibogunde received a commission on every piece of woodworking carried out in his city. If the Oba wished to commission a piece he consulted him. Ajibogunde, with the aid

³⁵Babalola in Thompson, Black Gods and Kings, Chapter 1/4.

of his assistants, chose the most appropriate carver for the job. Although the Oba did not pay for the work which he commissioned, he did extend privileges to woodworkers. They were exempted from taxes, and from labour obligations. The Oba controlled the cutting of certain desirable trees, such as Iroko, and when he ordered something necessitating the use of that wood, many such trees would be felled in a search for the tree ideally suited to the project, the excess ones being retained by the carver. In addition the Oba might make the woodworker a handsome gift if the commission pleased him. Akanbi remarked that his father was given two slaves and a horse by the Alaḥin for a very good carving of Eṣu.

Categories of Woodworking

Woodworking institutions fell into three categories: architectural (house posts and doors); culinary (mortars, bowls, and plates); and image (images, masks, Ifa divination paraphernalia, and decorated personal objects). Architectural and culinary carving was regarded as requiring basic skills, while figurative work was executed by carvers of more expertise and talent. Bascom notes that "'carving art' such as figures is referred to as Gbe-ona-gbe-ona, and is distinguished from 'carving wood', gbe-igi-gbe-igi, which refers to the production

of bowls, mortars, etc."³⁶ Architectural and culinary work was often done in advance of a specific demand for the items, but images, masks, and personal items were carved only on specific commission.

Types of Wood

Different trees produce woods with different properties. For practical, or in some cases, for religious reasons, certain woods were preferred for specific uses. Gerbrands, referring to Cordwell's work, suggests that "In choosing a kind of wood account is taken of the spirits thought to be present in the tree and because of whom a certain kind of wood is considered more or less suitable for a particular purpose."³⁷ Some images demanded unusual quantities of wood. For example, only one Ibeji or pair of them could be made from a tree, and the remainder of the wood had to be carefully hidden to prevent harm from coming to the family involved. Several Sango figures could be made from the same tree, but they all had to be commissioned by the same patron, who could then distribute them to others. Some types of wood used for carving in Yorubaland which were mentioned to the researcher by her informants

³⁶Bascom, The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, p. 104.

³⁷Cordwell in Gerbrands, Art as an Element of Culture, p. 106.

are listed in Appendix C.

Tools

Woodworkers got their own tools when they finished their apprenticeship period and made a serious commitment to carving, although they had the right to borrow tools from other carvers before that. They were given initiation tools by their master, but these were usually preserved as objects of ritual worship, and not used.

It has been suggested that traditional tools were of very poor quality. However, Willett makes an interesting suggestion in this respect:

While traditionally wrought iron was softer, it took a very sharp edge and is commonly said to have been far more efficient than the cutting tools now made locally from imported steel tempered for other purposes (for example machets and knives are commonly made from motor car springs), but however good or bad the tools, carvings of very high quality were made in the hardest woods, such as iroko...³⁸

The tempering of tools was mentioned by Clarke in his Travels and Explorations in Yorubaland 1854-1858,³⁹ and Gardi has documented the contemporary production of carbon steel among

³⁸Frank Willett, African Art, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), p. 156.

³⁹William H. Clarke, Travels and Explorations in Yorubaland 1854-1858, J. A. Atanda (ed.), (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1972), p. 124.

the Matakam of the Cameroons, and also in Upper Volta.⁴⁰

The metal blades of the tools were made by a local blacksmith under the direction of the carver. They were made out of high carbon steel and were hardened and tempered. The head of the tool was hardened by being heated until it was red hot and then quenched in cold water. Then it was tempered: the hardened head was repolished and heated gently. Contemporary knife blades made in Nigeria are heated to about 230°C while axe blades and adze blades are brought up to approximately 300°C.⁴¹ The blacksmith judges the temperature of the metal by the colour of the area being heated.

Carvers had a great variety of tools. Father Carroll remarks about Areogun (1880-1954) that "sometimes, for example when carving a complex mask superstructure he might ask the blacksmith to modify an existing tool or make a new one so that he might reach into difficult parts of the carving".⁴² The carver prepared his own wooden handles into which the blades fit interchangeably, so that the same blade could be used in a longer or shorter handle to suit the carver's

⁴⁰ René Gardi, African Crafts and Craftsmen, Sigrid MacRae (trans.), (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1973) pp. 15 - 45.

⁴¹ E. I. Eleke "Blacksmithing in Item" (Unpublished undergraduate thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, 1965), p. 47.

⁴² Carroll, p. 83.



PLATE V. AKANBI SHARPENING AN ADZE BLADE

seeds which were both used to burnish painted surfaced.

Felling Trees

Usually, each woodworker cut down his own trees, and their wood belonged exclusively to him. The fallen timber remained in the forest and he returned from time to time to collect pieces of wood for specific projects. He might have allowed someone else to use his wood, but he charged a high price for it, as felling a large tree was both difficult and dangerous. If a carver were to borrow enough wood to make ten mortars, he would be expected to give the owner of the wood five of them in payment for the wood. Before cutting down a tree, the woodworker set a ring of magical powder around its base, lit it, and poured oil on the flames. Fasikun notes that every tree is considered by the Yorubas to have a soul which must be made to depart before the tree is felled. This is achieved through a series of songs, dances, food and animal sacrifices, and magical spells performed by the woodworker.⁴³ Willet remarks: "it is usual for the act of carving itself to be hedged round with rituals, since the tree which provides the wood is generally regarded as the home of a spirit which

⁴³E. M. Fasikun, "Wooden Sculptures and Their Significance in Isolo", (unpublished undergraduate thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, 1966) p. 14.

needs to be placated",⁴⁴

After this ceremony, the woodworker began to chop down the tree, using an edon (axe), an ahan (curved scraper), a boro (bark removing axe), and an iso (pick). If large sheets of wood were desired, the logs were split by driving apaya (wedges) into the wood using an obandu (large sledge hammer). A slab produced in this way is illustrated in Plate VI.

Image Carving

Image carvers often worked privately, either in a secluded room or courtyard, or at the place in the bush where the appropriate type of tree had been felled. Whether apprentices could assist in the work or not depended on the type of image being carved.

Carvings were executed only on a commission basis. Before some types of images, such as Ibeji were commissioned, the patron might have consulted a babalawo to find out which carver should make the figure. Once negotiations had been started with one carver, no other carver could accept the commission. If the client angered the carver by being stingy and failing to agree on what the carver considered a fair price, he would execute an image of inferior quality. The patron stated what kind of image he or she wanted, and in some

⁴⁴ Willett, p. 168.



PLATE VI. ONE HALF OF THE OLD GATE OF AFIN IWO:
A SINGLE SLAB OF WOOD SPLIT FROM A LOG

cases, such as ordering a Gelede mask or commissioning house posts or doors, might give the carver detailed instructions concerning the subject matter to be portrayed. In other cases, it would not have been correct for the carver to have made any conscious alterations in form. Every image carver was conversant with the entire range of images required by the community. However, some carvers did specialize in one type of work, such as the making of Egungun masks.⁴⁵

While the carver was working on a religious commission, his patron supplied him with clothing, money, and foods appropriate to the type of image which he was carving for her/him. Fakeye has suggested that some carvers exaggerated the amount of time which the carving process took, in order to impress their clients with the difficulty and importance of the task.⁴⁶ Good food, the application of magical salves, plenty of sleep, pure water, and a constant supply of Obi were considered essential for anyone undertaking work as dangerous as the creation of sacred images. As he worked, the carver might sing special songs or pour palm oil on the work to propitiate the spirit in the wood. Carvers also had

⁴⁵Rufus B. Fatuyi, "Isho Traditional Wood Carving", (unpublished undergraduate thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, 1969), p. 29.

⁴⁶Lamidi Fakeye, quoted in Houlberg, p. 94.

to observe certain taboos to preserve the quality of their work, and to perform suitable ritual sacrifices. Some people avoided carvers at work for they feared that the soul of the tree might affect them.

The carver executed his range of pieces entirely from memory, as he had been taught to. Only in making Ibejis did the necessity for naturalism compel him to sometimes use a surviving sibling for a model. Each piece was taken through a series of specific stages, from the piece of raw wood to the completed carving. They were: ona lile, blocking out the basic masses; aletunle, bringing the main forms into proportion and breaking them into smaller precise masses; didon, smoothing the forms; and fifin, cutting the detail patterns. Dividing the carving process into sections, and determining basic proportions at the beginning of the process by working from larger masses toward detail is a common practice among woodcarvers. It has been observed among such diverse groups as the Dan in north-eastern Liberia, the Ba Teke on the Lower Congo, the Fang of Gabon, and the Ibo of Afikpo.⁴⁷ Thompson has noted that, "a sculptor in Ketu declared that a good carver never works without careful measurements whether by adze-nicks or knifed incisions of the log, so that he can balance one

⁴⁷ Willett, p. 161.

effect against another as forms emerge from the raw chunk of wood".⁴⁸ Houlberg has noted that some carvers sign their work by cutting their personal mark on the bottom of the piece.⁴⁹

It was the carver's responsibility to have the figure painted. Bascom notes that Duga, a carver from Meko, was still making his own paints in 1950.⁵⁰ Six principal colours were used; black, red, white, yellow, blue, and purple. It has been suggested that colours were associated with particular emotions or gods, although there was no particular rule as to what colours particular images should be. Houlberg reports that in the case of Ibejis it is the client who applies substances such as osun (camwood), efun (chalk), and indigo to the images.⁵¹ Ornamental materials such as mirrors, chains, cowries, bangles, or beads were sometimes added to the carving.

When the carving was finished, a rite was sometimes performed to create power in it thus enabling the carving to become an effective votive image.⁵² It is interesting to

⁴⁸Thompson, in W. L. d'Azevedo, The Traditional Artist in African Societies, p. 55.

⁴⁹Houlberg, p. 226-27.

⁵⁰Bascom, in W. L. d'Azevedo, The Traditional Artist in African Societies, p. 72.

⁵¹Houlberg, pp. 102-103.

⁵²Fasikun, p. 15.

note that when the writer showed an Ibeji carved at Odekunle's establishment to Mr. Adeniji, he remarked that it was not an Ibeji, but a doll. When asked to explain his remark, he said that without consecration, an Ibeji is nothing but a toy: it is the consecration which makes it functional.

CHAPTER V

• OKE AKANBI

Oke Akanbi is a Yoruba carver working in Oyo who carves in the traditional Yoruba style and who also carves forms which he has developed himself. He began his career by carving religious images for devotees of Yoruba religions, and by making smaller decorated items too. Now he depends on tourists and elite Nigerians for most of his sales, although he still executes commissions for Oyo people. His work, both stylistically and technically, is based on the Yoruba tradition of wood carving. He has taken Western State Arts Council Prizes for excellence in carving, and he is the official carver for the Alafin of Oyo. He also holds the highest woodcarver's title in Oyo, Ona Ebuke. Houlberg mentions an Ibuke family located in Oyo: "The Ibuke family claims to have been carving at Old Oyo before the destruction of that imperial center in the 1830's".⁵³ It seems probably to the writer that both she and Houlberg are referring to the same family, the difference being

⁵³Houlberg, pp. 96 - 97.

one of orthography.

Ona means art and so Ona Ebuke (as it was spelled by Akanbi's son for the researcher) could be taken to mean "The Art of the Ebukes", Oke Akanbi being a personal name. Bascom, in 1960, recorded the following: "...one of the leading carvers in the city of Oyo complained to me that his son, who was training under him, could hardly expect to become a good carver because he was at home only a few months during the summer".⁵⁴ This agrees with what Akanbi told the researcher about his son, and one can assume that Bascom too is referring to him, although he never mentions him by name.

Biography

Akanbi was born during Agogo-Ija's reign in Oyo, 1903 - 1910, and he can recall the installation of the subsequent Alafin, which means that he is approximately seventy-four years old. He comes from a carving lineage: his father was an image carver, and he and all of his brothers are or were carvers. They were encouraged to follow their father about when he went to the bush to collect wood, and to use his tools to carve simple objects such as dolls, spoons, bowls, or small figurines. Then they would have been allowed to help with more serious

⁵⁴ Bascom, in d'Azevedo (ed), The Traditional Artist in African Societies, p. 68.

work by smoothing finished carvings, sharpening tools, and so on, until they had gradually learned, by imitation of the process, to undertake a complete figure.

Akanbi was exceptionally talented, and this was recognised when he was a young man. It is interesting to note that he has held the highest woodcarvers' title in Oyo for more than twenty years, although he has two senior brothers who are also carvers. Although his compound produced a variety of carved objects, including domestic utensils and house posts, his main interest always lay in image carving. Unlike some young men who were forced to become carvers, he was genuinely interested in the work, and remarked to the writer that as a young man he would often stay up late in the evenings to carve by lamp light because he was so anxious to translate his ideas into wood.

Because of the upsurge in conversions from traditional Yoruba religions to Islam and Christianity, the demand for woodcarving in Oyo declined very sharply, and Akanbi seriously considered taking up some other profession. However, he realized that there was foreign and élite Nigerian interest in carving and he turned his attention toward that market. Those groups still form the major part of his clientele, although he is consulted locally by babalawos and devotees of various cults who require devotional images. Akanbi considers prospects for carvers to be bright enough to insist that his four sons

become carvers. His oldest son works with him, carving mortars and pestles. Two of his sons are still at school, and the fourth is below school age.

The Working and Storage Areas

Akanbi's compound is located in the royal (Alafin) quarter of Oyo, close to the central marketplace which is directly in front of the Afin (Plate VII). His working premises consist of the porch of a small two-roomed building which faces onto a narrow (one vehicle) unpaved road which is busy with pedestrians, taxis, motor-cycles, and lorries plying to and from the marketplace. He has a sign saying "Woodcarver" propped up against the wall, and a few carvings, painted with bright enamels, are placed on the veranda to attract attention (Plate VIII). Akanbi uses one small room to store completed pieces such as mortars, pestles, dishes, ayo boards, wala, and other simple items which are likely to be commonly in demand. It is also where he keeps his tools and sharpening stones.

Akanbi works seated on the veranda. Wood is stored both on the veranda where he works, and at the left hand end of the building, where there is a small clearing between dwellings. His son works either on the opposite end of the veranda from him, or directly across the road in the entrance to a small



PLATE VII. A MAP OF OYO QUARTERS SHOWING THE AKANBI COMPOUND
(after Krapf-Askari, Yoruba Towns and Cities, p. 186)

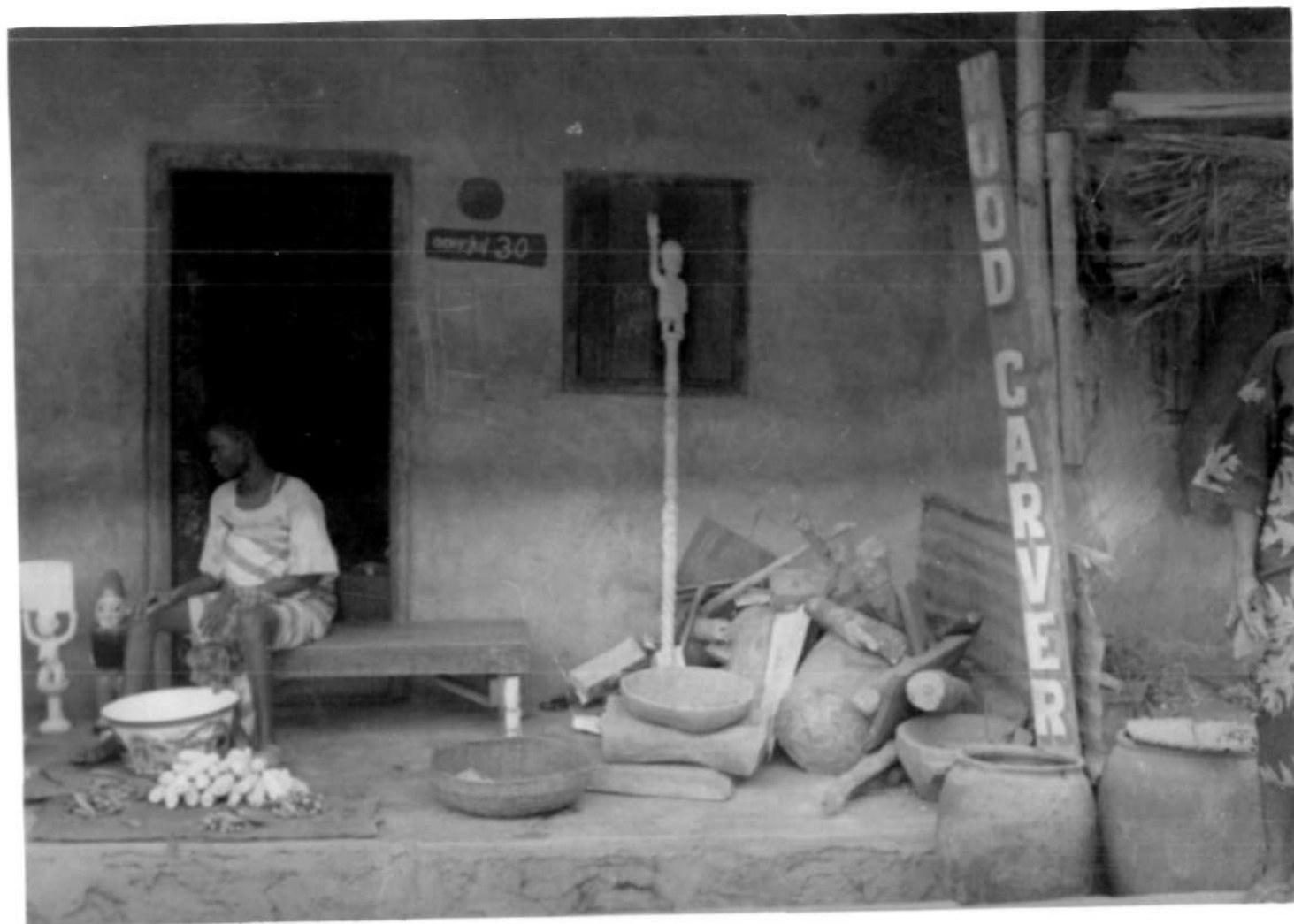


PLATE VIII. AKANBI'S WORKING AREA

alley. There are several benches on the veranda, and friends and family often sit there while Akanbi is working.

Most of his completed figurative work, and all of his religious images are stored inside his compound, which is located across the street from his working place, at the end of a short alley. He has two rooms there devoted exclusively to his carvings. Most of the work which he keeps there is his own, although some pieces were carved by others in the compound and may be considerably older than Akanbi's work, perhaps dating back to the beginning of this century or the latter part of the nineteenth century. For example, he has carvings in both wood and bone which were done by his father (Plate IX). Most of the pieces which he stores in these rooms are for sale, and also serve as a catalogue from which a patron may order. Traditionally, patrons order a specific type of devotional figure and do not suggest any modifications or additions to the image. This may not be true for some types of images. Gelede masks are said to be commissioned to the taste of the patron, and they may resemble him or some other specific individual, or reflect his occupation, or an incident in his life.⁵⁵

⁵⁵S. A. Salako, "Gelede Masks in Otta", (unpublished undergraduate thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, 1966), p. 11.



PLATE IX. A SHRINE CARVING EXECUTED
BY AKANBI'S FATHER

As Akanbi's working premises are not located where most tourists and élite Nigerians tend to pass by, he attracts their custom by reference from previous patrons, or by selling his work to traders for resale.

Types of Work

Akanbi carves specific images on commission for local patrons. E. Ola Odekunle, the other figurative woodcarver in Oyo, mentioned that he refers Yorubas who want to commission devotional images to Akanbi, as he is not interested in producing that type of object. Akanbi also works continuously on figures to be sold as art objects. These include traditional figures, such as Ibeji, Ova Sango, Esu, and also those which he has developed himself. He has made caricature figures of Europeans, masks, and trick pieces which have movable parts although they are carved from one piece of wood. He also carves wala (Arabic reading boards), ayo boards, and walking sticks. An interesting commission which he executed during the writer's second visit to Oyo was a walking stick with an eagle on its top. The eagle was modelled after a newspaper illustration.

Akanbi's son and other relatives in the compound make mortars, pestles, and bowls, and his son has done some image carving. His compound also supplied the Afin Oyo with the decorative posts outside the Alafin's office.

Wood

The wood which Akanbi prefers for figure carving is ireno (Holarrhena Wulfsbergii), which is a soft, white wood which is locally obtainable. He or his eldest son go into the bush for it. His father used the same type of wood for all of his image making. Mahogany is used for mortars, pestles, and dishes, and that too is brought from the bush. If a client requests a special type of wood for an object, Akanbi may buy a piece of it from the local timber mill, but he will charge an extra amount for doing so.

Most wood is used absolutely green: the underside of the bark still spurts juice when it is cut into. It has been suggested that carvers prefer to work some types of wood while they are green, as they are softer and can be worked more easily and rapidly in that state than when they are air dried.⁵⁶ However, Akanbi does have many logs and pieces of wood stored around his working area and by the time he uses them, many will have become partially seasoned through air drying.

Tools

All of the metal tools which Akanbi uses are locally

⁵⁶A. J. U. Ema, "Annang Traditional Wood Carving" (unpublished undergraduate thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, 1971), p. 17.

made. They consist of metal blades which were forged on commission by local blacksmiths. These blades are set into wooden hafts which Akanbi carved himself. Blades and hafts are interchangeable, and are frequently changed to suit the nature of the particular job in hand. Akanbi used odon, omo irin, and alope in the writer's presence. He also used a small, pointed, locally made knife, obe-ona, which consists of a blade set permanently into a wooden handle. All of the metal blades were sharpened before work began every morning, and frequently during work, on a piece of local granite. Water was used as the lubricant. The blades were removed from their hafts to be sharpened (with the exception of the knife blade) and were sharpened on one side, with a downwards circular motion against the stone. The knife blade was sharpened on both sides.

Other tools were pieces of broken glass, used during the smoothing operation, and sandpaper. A piece of string, measured against the figure being copied, was used to gauge the length of the new figure. Akanbi's working surface was a wooden slab, alegbe, which was placed on the floor. He had a set of clothes reserved for working in: a loose khaki shirt and a pair of shorts.

Carving Procedure

After looking at the figures in Akanbi's storeroom, the writer commissioned him to carve an Oya Sango. First, a section of log the approximate length of the figure to be carved was cut off a longer log with an edon (axe) (Plate X). A piece of string which had been measured against the original figure was used as a guide. Then, using two omo irin adze heads as wedges, he split the log in two by driving the blades into the grain of the wood with a pole (Plate XI).

He carried the smaller of the two pieces up to his working area. Sitting on a skin on the floor, with his back to the wall, on the open veranda of the building, facing the street, with the alegbe between his legs, under his knees, with the piece of wood to be worked on resting on it, Akanbi took up an adze. He began by using the omo irin blade. Although he could use the adze with his left hand (he demonstrated this for the writer) he preferred to work with it in his right hand and to use his left hand to steady the piece of wood.

Holding the flat, split side of the log away from himself, he began to remove wood in the base area from the round side (Plate XII). Then he flattened the bottom of the log so that it would stand upright (Plate XIII). He also began to



PLATE X. CUTTING A SECTION OF LOG



PLATE XI. SPLITTING THE LOG



PLATE XII. BEGINNING TO ROUND THE PEDESTAL



PLATE XIII. LEVELLING OFF THE BOTTOM OF THE PIECE SO THAT IT WILL STAND

flatten the upper area, so that the upper part of the log was flat and wide by comparison with the lower part, which was relatively slim and rounded (Plate XIV). The pedestal, with its upper and lower flanch ed edges was defined, and the section immediately above it, the body area, reduced in width (Plate XV). At this point, the composition of the finished piece, with its transition from a narrow and rounded base through the human form to a wide, flat, top had been established (Plate XVI).

Next, he reduced the jakuta area from the front, so that the head mass stood out in front of it as a separate mass, distinct from the body (Plate XVII). Arms were freed from the body (Plate XVIII), and the removal of wood which accomplished that also defined the head, neck, and shoulders more clearly. He roughly indicated hands at the back, and defined the waist. Again, one removal of wood served a double purpose: defining the waist set the proportions of the breasts too. Then he made the split between the legs (Plate XIX) and reduced the size of the feet (Plate XX). He incised the line between the calves and thighs. This completed the first stage of the carving, ona lile (Plate XXI).

He worked the entire figure over again with an adze, and refined and adjusted all of the proportions. The face was worked so that all of the main feature masses (eyes, nose,



PLATE XIV. SHAPING THE BODY MASS



PLATE XV. WORKING AROUND THE FIGURE



PLATE XVI. THE BASIC COMPOSITION IS ESTABLISHED



PLATE XVII. REDUCING THE BODY MASS



PLATE XVIII. THE ARMS HAVE BEEN SEPARATED
(NOTE THE ADZE BLADES AND HANDLES)



PLATE XIX. THE DIVISION OF THE LEGS



PLATE XX. SHAPING THE FEET



PLATE XXI. ONA LILE

mouth, ears) stood out from the head as raised areas (Plate XXII). When he divided the single breast mass, he indicated two distinct breasts. As he refined the arms, he left larger masses at the wrists. This brought the figure to the end of the second stage, aletunle (Plate XXIII).

During all of the preceding operations, Akanbi used two adze blades, omo irin, and alope, changing blades when the situation required it. At this juncture, he took up a pointed knife called obe-ona and began to pare the carving, smoothing and rounding the forms (Plate XXIV). He did use the adze (with the alope blade) again to make two larger adjustments. Once he straightened the top edge of the jakuta (Plate XXV). Then he trimmed the facial features (Plate XXVI) with the obe-ona. Returning to the adze, he reduced the neck area (Plate XXVII). This completed the didon stage of the work.

He then added all of the details, such as eyelids, nostrils, and lips to the facial features (Plate XXVIII). He incised fingers and fingernails on the hands, and completed carving the bracelets on the arms. A decorative pattern was cut on the jakuta (Plate XXIX), first on the front and then on the back, and facial markings were added to the cheeks. Akanbi did the detail cutting with the knife, but he also used a piece of glass during this stage to scrape the piece smooth. That completed the fourth and final stage, fifin.

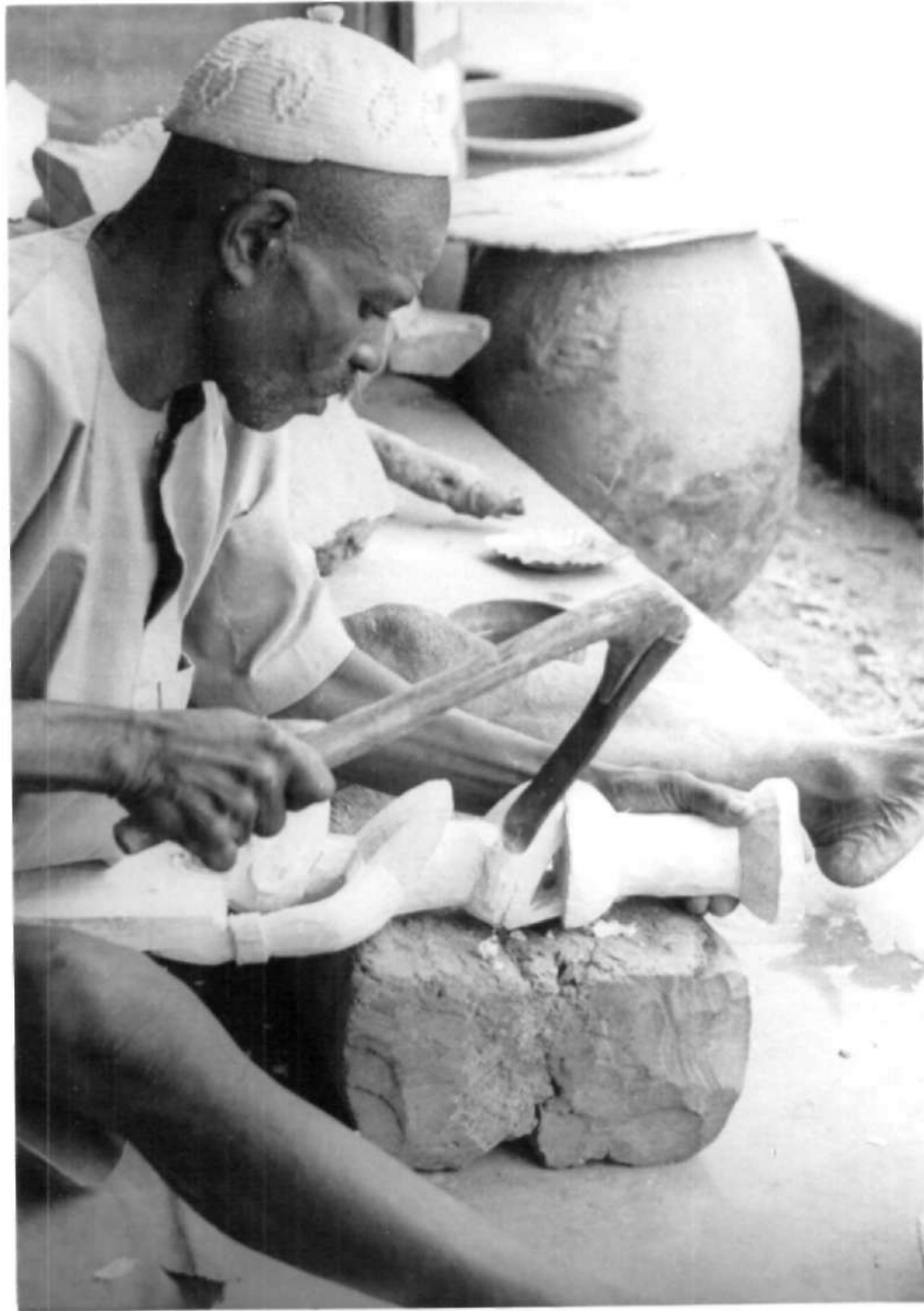


PLATE XXII. REFINEMENTS BEING ADDED
(NOTE THE BRACELET AND THE EAR)



PLATE XXIII. ALETUNLE

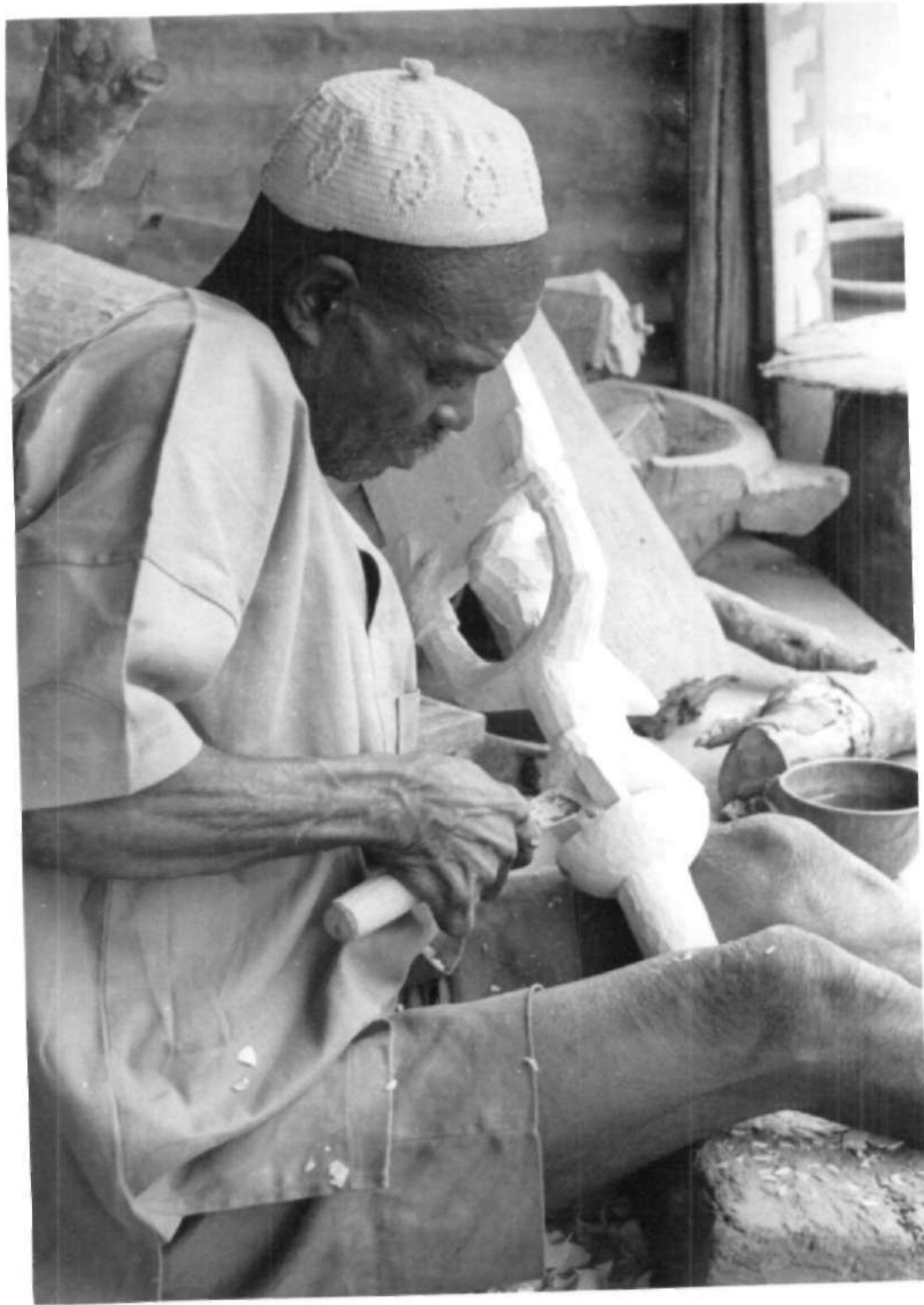


PLATE XXIV. PARING DOWN WITH THE KNIFE

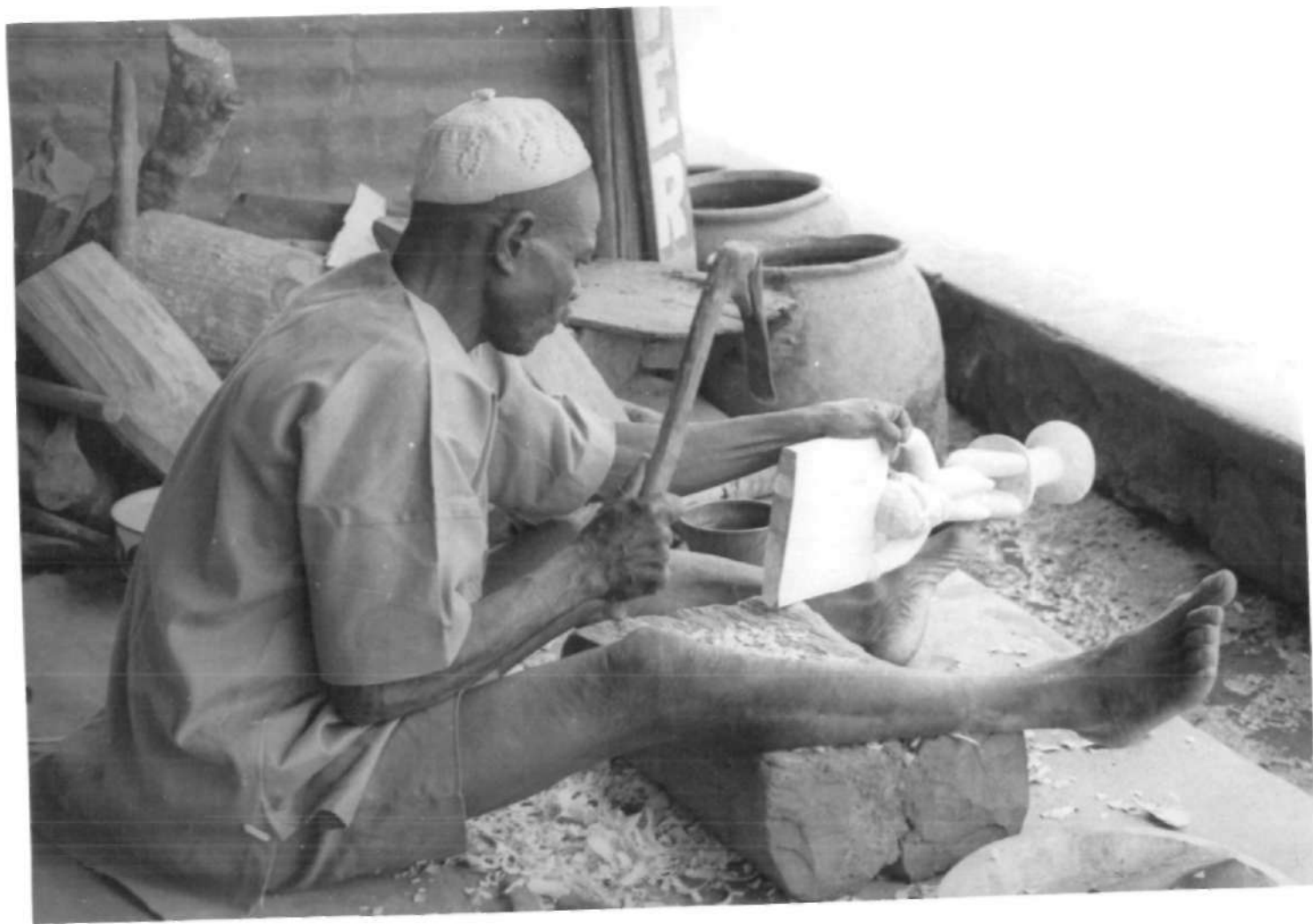


PLATE XXV. LEVELLING THE TOP EDGE WITH AN ADZE



PLATE XXVI. TRIMMING THE FACIAL FEATURES WITH A KNIFE



PLATE XXVII. ADJUSTING THE NECK PROPORTION WITH AN ADZE



PLATE XXVIII. "OPENING" THE EYES



PLATE XXIX. DECORATING THE JAKUTA

Finally, the carving was rubbed all over with sandpaper (Plate XXX), and then it was declared complete (Plate XXXI), and compared with its model (Plate XXXII). Any further finishing was left to the discretion of the patron. It is no longer usual for a carving to be painted by Akanbi, although he does sometimes do it by special request. It was suggested to the writer by Mr. Adeniji that she should finish the piece by steeping it in boiling water for a day, rubbing it with shea butter, boiling it again after four days, and applying shea butter again. She was assured that this would prevent the piece from cracking.

The entire job took approximately twenty hours, which were spread over five days. Akanbi often stopped during this time to greet friends and relatives, to chat with them, or to eat. He also went several times to study the carving which he was copying, although he never physically compared it with the piece that he was working on in the writer's presence. In general, his attitude toward his work was more relaxed than that which the writer observed at Odekunle's establishment.

Distinction between Commissioned and Pre-carved Sculpture

Akanbi's carving can be divided along the lines of patronage. All of the work which he produces on a commission basis for local patrons, whether devotional images or decorated



PLATE XXX. SANDING THE FINISHED PIECE

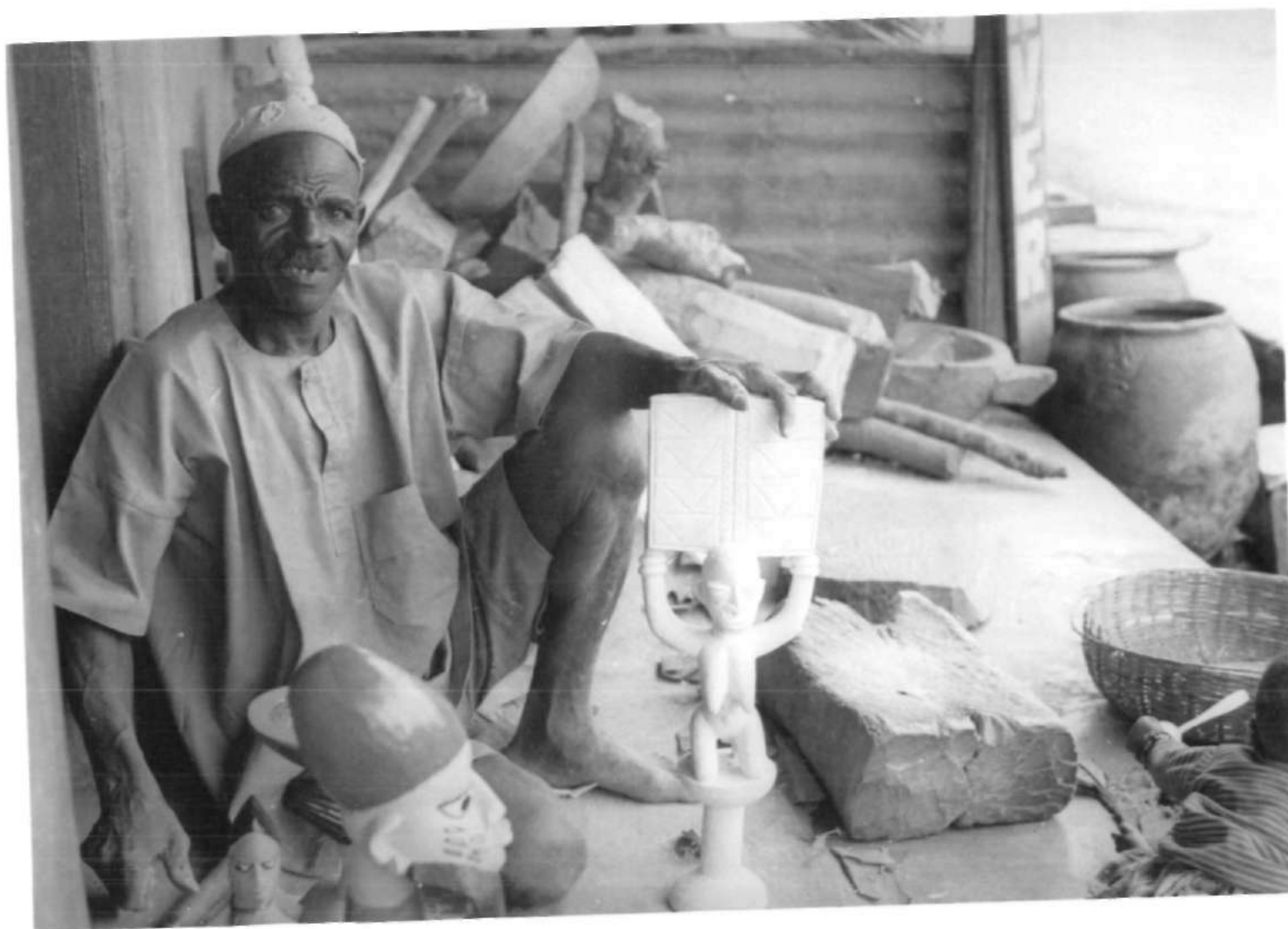


PLATE XXXI. THE COMPLETED PIECE



PLATE XXXII. THE NEWLY COMPLETED SCULPTURE (LEFT)
COMPARED WITH THE ORIGINAL MODEL

personal effects, is made to be used. It is functional, whether its function is ritual or secular. Pre-carved work which he makes for sale to an élite clientèle are status indicating art objects. They are to be admired for their physical and aesthetic qualities, and as such offer room for experimentation and innovation in form. This market also affords him an occasion to produce more familiar traditional forms which are desired by collectors for their formal merits. He produces, at his own pace, as much work as he can, for eventually he will be able to sell it all, and it costs almost nothing in capital to produce it. The wood he obtains himself; he has tools, work space, and storage space for as much work as he can produce.

CHAPTER VI

E. OLA ODEKUNLE AND HIS ATELIER

E. Ola Odekunle is the head of an extremely successful commercial wood carving studio, which is located in Qyq City. It produces sculpture for elite Nigerians and for foreign collectors. Work done by him and his assistants has been shown in Lagos, Ibadan, and Zaria, and has taken Western State Arts Council prizes for excellence.

Odekunle is able to command relatively high prices for his work compared to the fees collected by more traditional carvers because he has few competitors who offer what his studio does: traditional Yoruba motifs and stylistic treatment applied to a variety of subjects, both traditional and contemporary. These are carved in seasoned hardwood, they are highly finished, and they are oiled. His atelier deliberately aims at producing pieces which are small and light, convenient sizes to be packed in suitcases, and which will not crack or split after a few months in a different climate. The range of subject matter offered is limited: the same pieces are done

over and over.

The orientation of the shop is commercial: Odekunle has had business cards (Plate XXXIII) and an illustrated brochure printed for general distribution. He also offers T-shirts silk-screened with his name and address to anyone making a major purchase from him.

Biography

Odekunle is the son of a traditional carver. His father encouraged him to begin carving at a young age, and he showed special aptitude for the work. After he had completed his formal education, he joined Father Kevin Carroll's workshop under the instruction of G. Bamidele Areogun (who also trained Lamidi Fakeye), and spent the years between 1960 and 1963 working there. In 1968 he opened his own sculpture studio in Oyo, and he is still located in the same premises today.

Employees and Apprentices

The number of apprentices working for Odekunle varies, as some of them are still attending school, and only come to him during the holidays. Usually there are between three and five boys and young men working with him. His only employee is Boade Fawole, a relative of his from Ibadan, who began an apprenticeship under him in 1971 and completed it in 1976. He had completed Primary Six before beginning his apprenticeship.

PATRONIZE:-

E. OLA. ODEKUNLE

NIGERIA TRADITIONAL SCULPTOR

FOR YOUR BEST CARVINGS OF:

ARTISTIC STOOLS, DOORS, STATUES,
PANELS, WOODEN, BOWLS ETC.

Workshop

Beside Shell Garden,
Ibadan Road,
Owode - Oyo

Postal Address

c/o J. A. Awolowo
Abiodun Atiba Mem. Inst.
P. M. B. 1009. OYO.

PLATE XXXIII. Odekunle's Business Card

Odekunle has trained two other apprentices, who have set up their own independent workshops. Fawole, however, is still working as his assistant and is still learning to carve some of the pieces in Odekunle's repertoire. As his apprenticeship is now finished he is paid a percentage of the price of every piece that he does. He usually carves relief panels, although he can execute some three dimensional pieces, such as Ibejis. Although he has developed some original relief designs, he is most interested in continuing to learn the atelier repertoire, and that is why he has stayed on. At present, most of the tools which he uses are owned by Odekunle. He does own a knife and a chisel, and he plans to eventually buy his own set of tools.

Location of the Studio/Shop

Odekunle's premises are located just off the main Oyo-Ibadan road, Trunk road A1, on the southern side of the city (Plate XXXIV). There is a signpost at the roadside which says 'Sculpture' and some room in front of the studio/shop for cars to park. There is a welding shop on one side of the establishment, and a private dwelling on the other. The area, in general, is a mixture of private residences, hotels, eating houses, small businesses, and other commercial premises. Odekunle's building consists of two rooms: one which functions



PLATE XXXIV. A MAP OF OYO SHOWING THE LOCATION
OF ODEKUNLE'S ESTABLISHMENT
(from Atanda, *The New Oyo Empire*, p. 111)

as a public display and work area, and another private room for the apprentices' use and the storage of carvings and wood. In the public room, the upper wall space is covered with finished works on display: shelves hold three dimensional pieces and the reliefs hang from nails hammered into the shelves' edges. The lower wall area forms part of the room's work space. A client coming to the studio/shop can see pieces being carved in addition to viewing a selection of finished work.

Atelier Style and Subject Matter

Odekunle has established both a uniform atelier style and a series of themes and motifs which are unique to his establishment, in addition to offering traditionally inspired pieces. Many of his subjects reflect religion, whether Moslem, Christian, or Traditional, while others are drawn from daily events like palm wine tapping, or food preparation. Sometimes subject areas overlap, and some pieces are illustrations of written works, such as the Bible. His major sculptural interest is in the stylized human form, although animals and plants too appear. Planes are usually enriched with a variety of non-representational geometric pattern, and this lends texture and variety to the work. One's impression of his work is of severe, static form enriched by varied surface

treatment. The types of work which the atelier produces can be classified in five categories: decorative relief panels consisting of one scene (Plate XXXV), relief panels which stand on a base so that both sides can be seen, door panels carved with several relief scenes on one side only, full figures meant to be seen in a relief context (that is, with one side against the wall, i.e. Christ crucified), and free standing fully three dimensional pieces (Plate XXXVI). The relief panels produced by this studio differ from traditional Yoruba relief because the panel is pierced through: one can see through the piece so that the wall in effect forms the lowest background layer of the relief while at the same time providing a colour contrast to the wood. Although this achieves a more complex visual effect, it is much easier and faster to carve this type of relief.

Apprenticeship and Division of Work
in the Studio

Frank Willett has said, "Traditional carvers achieved perfection by repeatedly carving the same subject",⁵⁷ and it is from this stance that apprentices' work in the atelier is arranged. The same small series of set subjects is carved over and over again: it is the apprentices' work to eventually

⁵⁷Willett, p. 247.



PLATE XXXV. A DETAIL OF A RELIEF PANEL:
A BABALAWO TREATING A PATIENT



PLATE XXXVI. TWO FULL FIGURES: A WARRIOR ON HORSEBACK AND A WARRIOR RETURNING FROM BATTLE

master the stages in their execution so that they can ultimately carve the pieces themselves. Usually, a more experienced worker will block out the piece with an adze and set its basic proportions. The smoothing will be left to a less experienced carver. Then the piece will be returned to one with greater experience for the detail work, and again given to someone with still less experience for the final sanding and finishing.

Apprentices begin by sharpening tools for others in the workshop, cleaning the working area, and doing other menial jobs. Then they are allowed to sand completed pieces, next to smooth partially completed ones, then to cut detail, and finally to block out and proportion the basic masses from the beginning. An apprentice is promoted from one task to the next when his skill is deemed sufficient. As he is always working on pieces to be sold, he cannot be allowed to attempt that which he cannot successfully complete: mistakes are too costly in a system where there is no possibility of practice pieces. From the beginning, he is assisting in real work. Proficient carvers can execute a piece from beginning to end, and those who, like Akanbi, cannot afford assistants, do so.

The apprentice pays a fee at the beginning of his term of apprenticeship, which is usually between three and five years in duration, and in return he is provided with room and board in addition to being taught the skills involved in

woodcarving. Tools will be provided for him during the period of his service by his master and it is his responsibility to care for them. Odekunle's apprentices work from about seven in the morning until sunset, six days a week. Sunday morning they all attend church, and Sunday afternoon they resume work.

Tools

The tools used in Odekunle's atelier range from locally made adzes and knives to imported European chisels, gouges, and knives. It is Odekunle's feeling that while the adze is superior for beginning the carving (ona lile), chisels, gouges, and knives are much more efficient for the remaining stages of carving. According to him, they can be manipulated more exactly and easily, they allow a higher standard of surface finish, and they keep a sharper edge longer than locally made tools. All of the tools were sharpened on imported artificial oilstones, using oil as a lubricant, and this was usually done in the morning before carving had begun. Generally speaking, it was a job for the more inexperienced boys. Sandpaper was used to smooth the finished carving. The actual working surface was a wooden block (alegbe) which was placed directly on the floor. A pencil was used with a carpenter's square for a straight edge to mark lines indicating basic divisions of the figure on the wood, and a crosscut saw was used to cut

appropriate lengths of wood for specific carvings.

Wood

The wood used in Odekunle's atelier is supplied by the large sawmills in Ibadan, and sometimes by the Oyo sawmill. The types of wood which he uses are omo (Cordia Millenii) and apa (Afzelia africana), as they are easy to work, commonly available, relatively inexpensive, and capable of taking fine detail. Odekunle buys wood in advance of need and allows it to season for six months to one year before it is worked to ensure that the completed piece will not crack. Most of the wood is bought in normal timber form, either as 12" x 2" x 12' planks, or as 4" x 4" x 12' beams, although some larger blocks are cut to order for larger work.

Carving Procedure

The writer commissioned an Ibeji, and a completed figure was chosen as a model. The piece to be copied was measured against a beam, and a piece of omo of equal length was cut from it (Plate XXXVII). Using the original figure as a guide, the base and head areas were indicated with pencil lines which were carried around all four sides of the block to ensure an accurate division of the piece. Using a small adze with his right hand, Fawole began to define the head mass (Plate XXXVIII). Then he took up a chisel in his left hand, and held



PLATE XXXVII. MEASURING THE WOOD



PLATE XXXVIII. BEGINNING TO CARVE THE HEAD WITH AN ADZE

a wooden mallet in his right hand. He began to incise the neck line by cutting a V-shaped trough following the pencilled line (Plate XXXIX). First one side was cut with the chisel from the left, and then the other side cut from the right, thus freeing a small wedge of surplus wood. He also used a veiner chisel to clear out surplus wood. He defined the head on both sides and in the front in this manner. He alternated using the chisel and using the adze in order to reach more difficult areas (Plate XL).

While working, the carver was seated on a piece of cardboard on the floor of the studio/shop, occasionally using the wall behind him as a backrest. He worked next to an open door, which was on his left, and which provided the light for his work. The piece itself was set on a slab of wood (alegbe) which rested on the floor and functioned as the working surface. He either braced the wood between his legs, or held it steady under one knee.

The head area was reduced until two ear masses protruded, and these were then reduced on their lower halves, so that they tapered toward the jaw (Plate XLI). The backs of the ears and the transition from them to the back of the neck were made, and then the back of the neck was indicated with a channel. Next, the carver incised a line to differentiate the hair area from the top of the forehead. The top-knot mass was



PLATE XXXIX. INCISING THE NECK LINE WITH A CHISEL



PLATE XL. REDUCING THE HEAD AREA WITH A CHISEL



PLATE XLI. REDUCING THE HEAD AREA WITH AN ADZE
(THE EAR MASS IS LEFT RAISED)

also indicated. The ears were trimmed down, then the front of the head mass was rounded off, and the ears were further reduced. While the piece was held under the carver's right knee, he rounded off the back of the head. Then he began to increase the definition of the top-knot, ears, neck, and face areas by using a pointed jack-knife to incise them more deeply. He held the knife in his left hand and both guided and steadied it with his right. (Plate XLII).

Basic horizontal and vertical definitions such as arms, knees, waist, and breasts were drawn on the block with a pencil (Plate XLIII). The carver referred to the original piece to set his proportional system. Using the chisel and mallet he incised the top of the base area, and then defined the front of the knees by removing wood from below the kneecap (Plate XLIV). Then surplus wood at both the back and front of the knee area was removed with the adze (Plate XLV).

Both the front and the back of the waist and the chest area were indicated with the chisel. The leg/torso area was cut away so that the upper limbs stood out distinctly from the body mass. The same wood removal served two purposes: it clarified the chest and stomach masses in addition to defining the arms. Then the arms were reduced, first one side and then the other, and the chest mass made smaller by splintering wood off by striking with the grain.



PLATE XLII. DEFINING THE EARS WITH A KNIFE



PLATE XLIII. DRAWING LINES IN PENCIL TO INDICATE
BODY MASSES USING A SQUARE AS A GUIDE



PLATE XLIV. WOOD HAS BEEN REMOVED FROM THE BACK
OF THE LEGS WITH AN ADZE



PLATE XLV. SHARPLY DEFINING THE BASE WITH A CHISEL

The original carving was referred to again: its base was compared with that of the figure being worked on. Feet were indicated on the piece, and the space between the legs was made. Wood was removed from the front first, but the hole was cut through from the back (Plate XLVI). The actual piercing was done with the jack-knife. The feet were slightly undercut, and the split in the buttocks was made. All of the basic body masses and divisions had been created.

Grooves were made to indicate the backbone and the division between the upper arms and the body. The chest was flattened with a chisel, and a definite separation created between the chest and the stomach. The genitals were drawn on the figure in pencil, and the carver began to describe them with the knife. Then the thighs and calves were pared down. The piece in progress was compared with the original, and its hands, feet, heels, shins, and ears were trimmed (Plate XLVII).

With the model Ibeji in front of him, the carver began to define facial features (Plate XLVIII). First the chin line was made sharper and more definite, and wood was removed from the facial plane so that an undivided mass containing the future mouth and nose stood raised above the chin, which formed a recessed ridge below it. The division between the upper lip and the nose was marked with an incised line, and the mouth



PLATE XLVI. REFINING FORMS WITH AN ADZE



PLATE XLVII. SHARPENING BODY DIVISIONS WITH A KNIFE



PLATE XLVIII. CREATING FEATURE MASSES ON THE FACE

mass was reduced. Wood was cut away from the bridge of the nose, and the nostrils were begun with a chisel. Then the nose was worked over in detail with the knife. Eyes were indicated as raised masses which were made by cutting away wood in the area with a chisel, and that was followed by a sharpening of detail with the knife. Delineation between the hair and the forehead was increased, and the ridges in the hairstyle were indicated with the knife (Plate IL).

The chest mass was divided into breasts with the chisel, and the feet, legs, torso, back and shoulders were trimmed with the knife. A knife with a smaller rounded blade was used to clearly separate the arms from the body, and to undercut the hands. The genitals were trimmed with the larger (pointed) knife, as were the mouth, nose, eyes and forehead.

The base was scraped smooth with the pointed knife. The detail work in the hair was completed. Bracelets were cut on both wrists (Plates L and LI). Using **first the** chisel and then the knife in opposite directions, diamond patterns were incised on the base (Plates LII, LIII). Fingers were indicated and the ears and eyes completed (Plates LIV, LV, LVI). The entire piece was sandpapered, linseed oil was brushed over it, and the completed piece was set in the sun so that the oil would penetrate the wood more quickly and thoroughly (Plate LVII). The piece took approximately five



PLATE II. CUTTING THE HAIR PATTERN



PLATE L. BEGINNING THE BRACELETS



PLATE LI. ROUNDING OFF THE BRACELETS

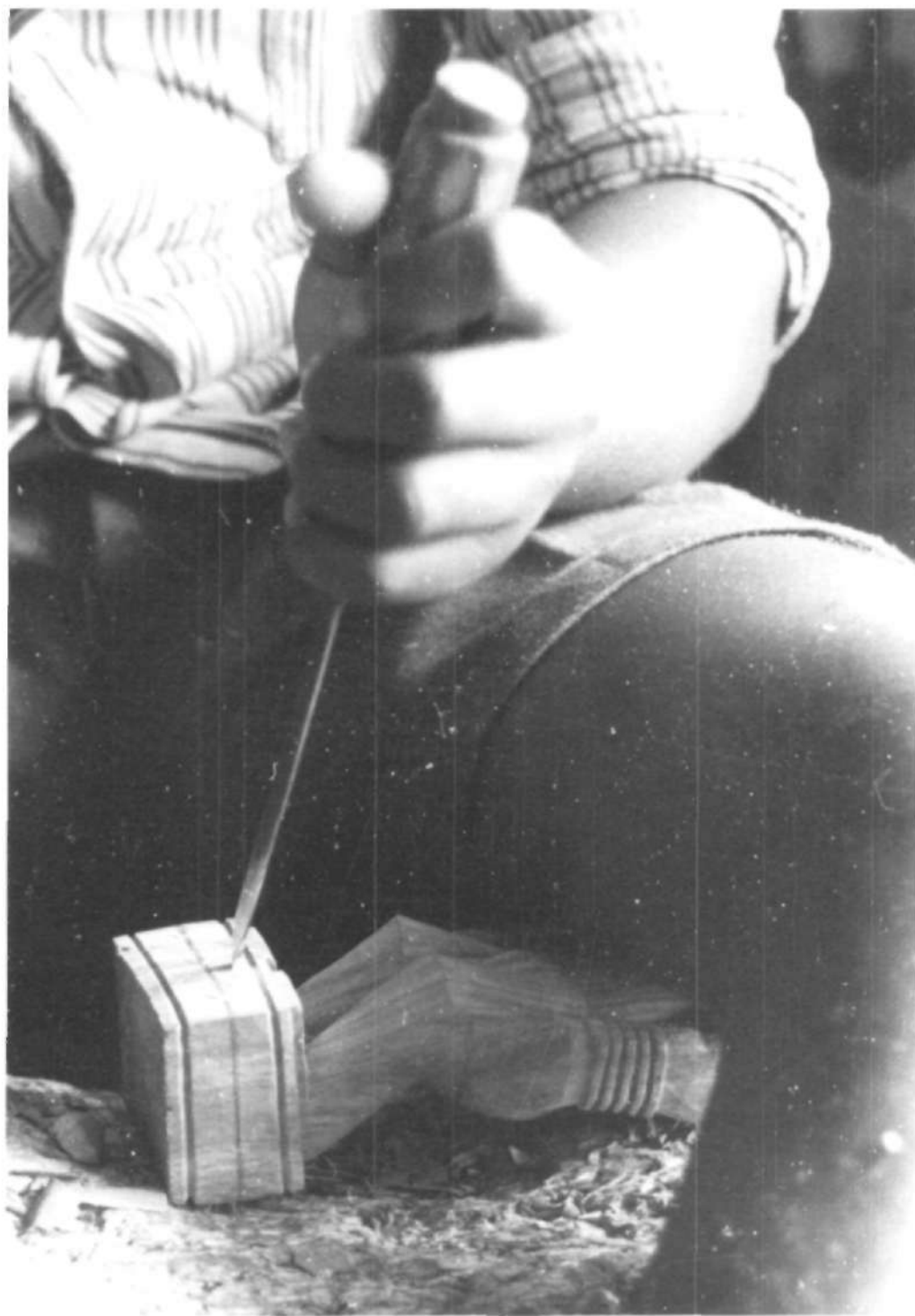


PLATE LII. FOLLOWING PENCILLED LINES AS GUIDES TO CUT A
DECORATIVE PATTERN ON THE BASE, USING THE CHISEL



PLATE LIII. HOLLOWING OUT THE DIAMOND PATTERN



PLATE LIV. SEPARATING THE FINGERS



PLATE LV. HOLLOWING THE EARS



PLATE LVI. "OPENING THE EYES"



PLATE LVII. THE COMPLETED IBEJI

hours to complete.

To summarize the carving procedure: the carver used a total of five tools for the actual subtractive work. They were: an adze; a chisel; a veiner gouge; a pointed jack-knife; and a smaller knife with a rounded blade. Supplementary materials were a crosscut saw, sandpaper, a pencil, a brush, and linseed oil. The carver blocked out the head and set its proportions by defining the neck, ear, and hair areas. He divided the remaining wood into basic masses: body; torso and limbs; and the base (ona lile). Then he broke the body down into component areas: chest; stomach; hands; feet; and buttocks (aletunle). As the entire body area was continuously reworked, it assumed finer proportions, and details were gradually added. Facial features were suggested, but left in a massive condition. The body area was pared down for the last time (didon). Decoration was added to the base, ornaments to the arms, and the eyes and mouth were opened (fifin). Throughout the carving process a definite head/body distinction was developed and observed: head and body were not worked on simultaneously, but separately, as discrete units.

Sales Considerations

Although Odekunle accepts commissions for special pieces, such as doors or large figure groups, he receives most of his

CHAPTER VII

AKANBI AND ODEKUNLE: A COMPARISON

Location and Language

The relationship between the locations of the carving premises of Oke Akanbi and E. Ola Odekunle and that of the Afin Oyo is indicative of many of the differences between the two establishments. Akanbi's compound is located in the centre of Oyo city, in the Alafin quarter, and it is close to both the main market and to the Afin, the traditional source of both secular and divine power. Yoruba is extensively spoken in this quarter of Oyo, and few adults speak English. Through his physical location, Akanbi is still focused on and within his immediate community.

Odekunle, on the other hand, has located his premises on the outskirts of the city, directly on the main route through Oyo, where he can attract business. He speaks excellent English, and his employee and apprentices speak it quite well. Through location and language his establishment is oriented toward the elite Nigerian and the foreign collector. His focus

is outwards, and this is also indicated by the number of exhibitions which he has held in major cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, and Zaria.

Training Apprentices

In training apprentices, Odekunle has departed from the convention that woodcarvers should only be drawn from specific lineages and that a son should be trained by his father without payment. However, the actual practice (although formerly confined within the family) whereby an experienced carver trains inexperienced youths falls within traditional practice, as does dividing the work into stages, some of which are reserved for more experienced workers to execute. These divisions are geared toward maximum productivity for the group, and might be described as the division of skilled and unskilled aspects of the procedure for the sake of greater efficiency. Therefore, Odekunle's apprenticeship practices seem to fall in middle ground: the way in which he recruits trainees and their payment of apprenticeship fees seem innovative, but the roles which they actually play in the labour process are typical of the conventional Yoruba system of training carvers.

Akanbi, who has followed the traditional dictates concerning the training of carvers, trained his eldest son, who shows little aptitude for figure carving, to be a mortar

carver, although he mentioned that he had had to compel his son to take up carving at all. His three younger sons are still too young to be trained. It seems unlikely that Akanbi will be able to train them when they are old enough, due to his own advanced age. Therefore, by following the traditional practices with respect to training carvers, Akanbi's highly specialized knowledge will not have been passed on to other carvers. Because he works alone, the volume of work which he is able to produce is much reduced, as he must do every stage of the work himself, instead of relegating some stages to a less skilled assistant.

Wood and Finishes

Odokunle and his apprentices use only seasoned omo and apa wood purchased from a lumber dealer, and give all of the completed pieces several coats of linseed oil. Both of these steps help to produce a dark, handsome, "natural" finish on the wood which plays up its grain and which guards against splitting or warping of the carving. By contrast, Akanbi uses only green (unseasoned) ireno wood for his figurative carving. It is soft and easily worked, and its light colour allows a variety of finishes to be applied with success. The writer was informed that most local (Oyo) people who commission carvings take them away unpainted, just as they are carved, as

they prefer to add the finish themselves. However, Akanbi had pieces on display which were painted with glossy enamel paints, and others in his storage room which were stained with shades of red, blue, black, and brown. Colour seems important to him while it is ignored in Odekunle's workshop, and here too he conforms more closely to the traditional practices with respect to finishing.

Tools and Carving Practices

Adzes and knives are used in both workshops. The chisel and mallet are used in Odekunle's atelier but not at all by Akanbi. The working posture, with the carver seated on the floor using an alegbe as his working surface is the same in both establishments, although in Odekunle's studio carvers want or need to be near the wall so that they can use it as a backrest. All of the carvers change their tools frequently to suit the particular needs of their work.

It was most interesting to note that Akanbi starts his work from the bottom and works upwards, while Fawole works from the head down. Akanbi never marks out divisions on the wood, although it is a common practice at Odekunle's workshop to draw guidelines on the wood with a pencil. Akanbi works around his pieces, developing forms evenly before beginning to sharpen them or to add any detail to them.

The approach at Odekunle's atelier is less structured, and often a great amount of attention is focused on one area, the head, for example, before any other forms are developed. Detail too is added before forms are fully developed. One can see some disintegration of the set stages traditional in Yoruba woodcarving beginning, although a great deal of distinction between some of the stages is still made. Blocking out, for example, is still reserved for an experienced worker.

Forms

Both Odekunle and Akanbi draw on traditional Yoruba subjects and style in creating their sculpture. Akanbi has a more immediate link with traditional style and subject matter because he is still carving votive images for actual use, whereas Odekunle's atelier is producing art objects. Pieces depicting traditional subjects like "Sango on horseback" can be found at both establishments, although they are more common at Akanbi's.

Both men are innovators too. Odekunle's relief panels are pierced, although traditional relief panels are solid (they were often used as doors), but his range of subject matter, scenes depicting aspects of daily life or events of particular interest, is quite traditional. Akanbi carves grotesque masks, and satirical figures, and draws on a variety of sources, including newspapers and dreams for ideas

for new pieces.

Conclusions

Many technical aspects of Yoruba woodcarving are fast disappearing. Fawole cannot give the Yoruba names of his tools, and he is highly dependent on imported tools, as are all of the carvers in Odekunle's workshop. With increasing specialization of function in an industrializing society, woodcarvers are beginning to depend on commercial sawmills for their wood, instead of cutting it themselves. They no longer commission tools locally according to their specifications, but buy them in the shops.

The practice of setting out proportions generally before embarking on detail work is one which is starting to be ignored, at least by Fawole, but it seems inevitable that more experienced carvers with developed senses of form and balance will continue to find it invaluable as a viable method of producing compositionally strong work.

The logic of traditional form is beginning to disappear too, as figures which were designed to be brightly painted and seen in motion under natural light become motionless, "naturally" finished art objects, often displayed by artificial light. As their patrons are, for the most part, not associated with the religions for which Yoruba sculptural forms were

created, contemporary carvers feel freer to alter forms, as there is no code insisting on their conformity to group values as expressed through sculptural form. The carvings are moving further away from their original functions.

These conclusions are generalizations based on the data which the writer collected while working on this thesis. She hopes that future researchers will carefully document other carvers working in Yorubaland, especially the older men. As Seiber notes:

In the face of the rapid disappearance of artistic modes and forms over the last half century, it now appears that many of the art forms of traditional Africa are vanishing faster than they are being recorded.⁵⁸

Further research might form a firm basis for our comprehension of the style of carving of Yoruba culture. The relationships between individual style and creativity, town style, and traditional techniques and tools could then be compared within this framework.

The tradition of figurative carving is still being carried on in Oyo, but the transitional values and technology effecting all of Nigeria are clearly reflected in woodcarving practices and motifs. Father Carroll has commented of Yoruba woodcarvers in the past:

⁵⁸Roy Seiber, "Ede: Crafts and Surveys", African Arts, IV, No. 4, 1973, p. 45.

Constant suitable work is necessary for the full development of a carver's abilities. It was the group of carvers in a district - repeating the same themes and only gradually introducing new ones - which built up a cumulative genius capable of supporting the less gifted carvers...If sufficient carvers could be similarly employed - and fully employed - in modern conditions, the artistic level of the whole group would rise and individual geniuses would emerge.⁵⁹

If the atelier school of sculpture, rather than the individual-oriented western model is to succeed in Yorubaland, it must be self-supporting, and to be truly vital, there must be enough competition between establishments to ensure high standards of work. Odekunle has proved that atelier-style carving can remain economically viable: the future of Yoruba figurative carving rests on local demand and initiative.

⁵⁹ Carrol, p. 91.

APPEXDIX A

A GLOSSARY OF YORUBA WORDS

USED IN THIS TEXT

Afin	Palace.
Agbaila	One of <u>Ajibogunde's</u> officials.
Ajibogundo	The head woodworker of a city.
Alafin	The King of Oyo
Alegbe	A thin wooden slab used by carvers as a working surface.
Ayo	A mathematical board game.
Babalawo	Traditional doctor and priest.
Didon	Shining; the third stage of woodcarving.
Efun	Chalk.
Egungun	Masquerade for ancestors.
Epa	Masquerade concerned with increase.
Erinpin	Rough loaf used as sandpaper is.
Esu	Trickster deity.
Fifin	To decorate with fine detail; the final stage of woodcarving.

Gbe-igi-gbe-igi	Carving wood.
Gbe-ona-gbe-ona	Carving art.
Gelede	Masquerade to placate powerful female elements.
Ibeji	Twin
Ifa	A method of divination and prophecy.
Ijala	Song or chant.
Ile	House or home.
Ise pupa	Seeds used to smooth and burnish painted surfaces.
Jakuta	<u>Sango's</u> double axe symbol.
Obi	Kola nut.
Oba	King.
Odo	Making the subject look young.
Ogun	God of iron; patron of woodworkers.
Olorun	God.
Ona	Art, artistry.
Ona lile	Planning stage in woodcarving.
Oriṣa	A deity.
Oriṣanla, Oriṣala	A higher deity.
Osi	The direction left; one of <u>Ajibogunde's</u> assistants.
Osun	Camwood.
Oti	One of <u>Ajibogunde's</u> assistants.

Oya	A river in Yorubaland; also <u>Sango's</u> favorite wife.
Sango	God of thunder and lightening.
Ukan	A traditional chisel.
Wala	Arabic reading board.

APPENDIX B

SOME YORUBA PROVERBS MENTIONING WOODWORKING

All of the proverbs mentioned below are taken directly from Isaac O. Delano's book, Òwè L'ẹ̀sìn Ọ̀rọ̀.

112. A ẹ̀ se àlápà l'ọ̀sọ̀ kó fẹ̀, a ẹ̀ se ohun gbogbo fun igi o yẹ̀ igi.

Translation: We decked up the ruin but it did not care; we did all we could for the piece of wood and it added beauty to it.

Use: A person cannot be improved unless he has the right character to start with.⁶⁰

163. Aruko ori aka ni, ẹ̀rú ake ori aka ni, aka nikan n'igi ti mbe ninu igbo bí?

Translation: If you want to make a hoe handle you must use aka wood to make it; if you want to make an axe handle you must use aka wood; is aka the only tree in the forest?

Use: This is said when some individual in a family or a club gains such a reputation that everyone turns to him whenever some job has to be done or some problem has to be solved.⁶¹

⁶⁰Isaac O. Delano, Òwè L'ẹ̀sìn Ọ̀rọ̀, (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 34.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 50.

490. Ologbon ko tẹ ara rẹ n'ifa, omoran ko fi ara reye
 joye, obe ti o mu ko le gbe eku idi re.

Translation: The clever man cannot initiate himself into the Ifa cult, the man of affairs cannot appoint himself chief, the sharpest knife cannot carve its own handle.

Use: There are many things in this world for which people require the help of others.⁶²

⁶²Ibid., p. 148

APPENDIX C

SOME TYPES OF WOOD USED FOR YORUBA CARVING

Unless it is otherwise noted, the information in this appendix is drawn from J. M. Dalziel's book, The Useful Plants of West Tropical Africa.⁶³

Ahun or Awun (Alstonia congensis) The wood is yellowish white, light, uniform in structure, and soft. It is used for bowls, toys, spoons, plates, masks, images, and musical instruments.⁶⁴

Ako ire (Funtumia africana) This wood is white and soft with a fine grain. It is used for carving stools, bowls, figures and doors.⁶⁵

Apa (Afzelia africana) The wood of this tree turns dark brown when it is seasoned, and it is often handsomely figured. It is tough, hard, and extremely strong. It has been classified as an African mahogany, and is commonly used for building purposes, doors, mortars, and bowls.⁶⁶

Araba (Ceiba pentandra) This is the largest African tree and may reach one hundred and twenty feet in height and

⁶³J. M. Dalziel, The Useful Plants of West Tropical Africa, (London: Crown Agents, 1955)

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 366 - 67.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 371.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 172.

six feet in diameter. The wood is white, open, and coarse grained. It is light, easily worked in the green state, and brittle when dry. It is used for furniture, drums, figure carvings, mortars, doors, and trays.⁶⁷

Arere (Triplochiton scleroxylon) This wood has been classified as "soft satinwood". It can be stained,⁶⁸ and it is used for boxes and interior construction.

Emi (Butyrospermum Parkii) This wood is red, heavy, termite-proof, and difficult to work.⁶⁹ The oil extracted from its kernels is used to finish carvings done in other types of wood.⁷⁰

Emido (Manilkara lacera) This wood is very hard and red and it is used for house posts.⁷¹

Erimado (Ricinodendron africanum) This wood is light, dull white or brownish, and soft. It is easily carved and is used for carving masks, spoons, and drums.⁷² It may be the wood referred to as "erin maneo", which is said to be the first wood grown on earth in Yoruba mythology,⁷³ and may also be the wood referred to as ogbogbo by Houlberg, which is used to carve Ibejis.⁷⁴

Ireno or Ire Ibeji (Holarrhena Wulfsbergii) This wood is whitish or pale yellow and is used for carving images,

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 119-21.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 111.

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 350-54.

⁷⁰Interview with T. Adeniji, 9/76.

⁷¹Dalziel, p. 357.

⁷²Ibid., p. 159.

⁷³Adeniji, 9/76.

⁷⁴Houlberg, p. 10 .

combs, matchet handles, and household utensils.⁷⁵

Iroko (Chlorophora excelsa) This wood darkens to brown when it is seasoned. It is hard, durable, ant proof, and resistant to water. It is used for mortars, pestles, and stools.⁷⁶ It is also used for posts, doors, bowls, and Ifa trays.⁷⁷

Ogan or Ogan Pupa (Diospyros monbuttensis) This wood is whitish and very hard. It is used for walking sticks and tool handles.⁷⁸

Oganwo (Khaya grandifoliola, Khaya ivorensis, Khaya senegalensis) These woods, known as Lagos mahogany, are brown when seasoned and have coarse, open grains. They are used for image-carving, doors, and house posts.⁷⁹

Omo (Cordia Millenii) The heartwood of this tree is brownish and used for bowls and drums.⁸⁰ Adeniji suggests that it is used for posts and large images, and he notes that it does not crack easily and that it polishes well.⁸¹

Osun (Pterocarpus osun) The heartwood of this tree is red and quite hard. The branches and small stems are used for making walking sticks and drums are made from the trunk.⁸²

⁷⁵Dalziel, pp. 372 - 73.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 274 - 76.

⁷⁷T. Adeniji, 9/76.

⁷⁸Dalziel, pp. 348 - 49.

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 324 - 26.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 425.

⁸¹T. Adeniji, 9/76.

⁸²Dalziel, p. 258.

APPENDIX D

SOME YORUBA TOOL NAMES

- Aha, Ahan, Awa: Scraper (lit. tongue).
Alope, Alupe: Adze blade (Plate LVIII).
Apaya: Wedge used for splitting logs.
Awon, Awun, Awon nla, Ahon kekere: An adze blade used for
 ona lile (Plate LVIII).
Boro, Ake-boro, aboro, aboro nla: The widest adze blade.
Edon, Edo: An axe.
Ipin: An axe.
Obandu: A sledge hammer.
Obe-adun: A small knife with a pointed blade.
Obe-nla: A larger knife with a rounded blade.
Obe-ona: A small knife used for fifin.
Omo-irin: An adze blade (Plate LVIII).
Ukan: A locally made chisel.
Iso: A pick-like adze blade (Plate LVIII) (lit. nail).



PLATE LVIII. OKE AKANBI'S METAL BLADES

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