

The Concept of Ori in the Traditional Yoruba Visual Representation of Human Figures

BABASEHINDE A. ADEMULEYA
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Traditional African artists, as prominent members of their communities interpret their people's thoughts and conventions through their expressive forms: hence their interpretations of nature rather than its imitation in their works. This phenomenon may account for the deliberate distortion of forms particularly noticeable in the traditional African sculptures. These forms of distortion vary from society to society, as do the philosophies or beliefs they attempt to interpret. Among traditional Yoruba artists, the disproportionately large visual representation of the head in human figures is a common feature in their sculptures and understanding this distortion requires a focus of attention on the indigenous beliefs and philosophical concepts of the Yoruba people, which give meaning to such representation. The purpose of this paper is therefore to identify and use appropriate oral traditions in unveiling the mystery surrounding the Yoruba sculptors' deliberate disproportionate visual representation of the head –*Ori* – in human images.

Keywords: Oral traditions, Yoruba, Ori, Africa, Sculpture

INTRODUCTION

In all societies, a people's belief and philosophy constitute their system of thought and have always served as the basis for their attitudes towards life. This belief system deals with virtually everything that a people perceives and desires, everything they can imagine. These attitude, wishes and imagination are often conveyed in a people's system of verbal communication, be it oral or written, and through the arts. To gain a good understanding of the arts (verbal or visual) of a people, it is therefore necessary that we focus our attention on the indigenous beliefs and philosophical concepts of such people. This appears to be essential: as noted by Laude (1973: 11), no subject can be studied and appreciated without some knowledge of its history.

The magnificent pyramids, sphinx, tunnel-tombs, and the depiction of the Pharaohs at the height of their power could not have been properly understood and appreciated if isolated from the ancient Egyptian system of thought and specifically from its concept of the "hereafter". To understand the traditional arts of Africa South of the Sahara it is very necessary to have a grasp of the traditional African system of thought, from which such art emerges. African arts are known not to be art for art's sake as in Western culture. The visual figure

representation of the human images and specifically the distortion of certain parts of human form, e.g. the navel, female breast or male genital organ, does not imply inefficiency on the part of the artists but is deliberately done for directional emphasis. The figure in which the head is made disproportionately larger than normal, especially among the Yoruba people, the focus of this paper, is indeed symbolic and representational. Its meaning could only be understood and better appreciated when viewed in the cultural context of the whole complex that produced it and the spectacular ensemble for which it was made.

Since verbal communication in the traditional Africa was orally oriented, there exist no written records to reveal why the representation of human figures were so depicted. There also exist no written records telling the meaning of the forms within their context. Oral tradition therefore remains the most hopeful tool for a better understanding of this whole complex and its implication for the disproportionate representation of the head – *Ori* – in Yoruba human sculptures. The aim of this article is, therefore, to gain a more realistic view of the use of the Yoruba world view and sculpture.

1. ORI AND ITS CONCEPTUAL MEANING AMONG THE YORUBA PEOPLE

The Yoruba referred to in this paper occupy the savannah and tropical rain forest of the Western part of Nigeria. This population speaks numerous dialects of the same generic language called Yorùbá; and practises similar cultures and subscribes to similar systems of thought.

Man has often been described in terms of ‘body’ and ‘soul’. The Yoruba call man or the human being *eniyán*. The human body – *ara* is made-up of the head – *ori*, neck – *orun*, trunk - *iyoku ara* and extremities – *apa* and *ese*. The outer covering of the body consist of the skin – *awo*, and its necessary appurtenances, hair – *irun* and nails *eekanna*. These body parts, together with the flesh and bones covered by the skin constitute an aspect of the human entity which is perceptible to our senses and described analytically in anatomical terms.

The African idea of the soul has been conceived and described in different ways. In some African societies the soul is associated with more than two distinguishable spiritual forces in man. While for some it is ‘ego’ or ‘soul stuff’, ‘man’s double’ or ‘over soul’, others do not have a word for describing what others term the soul. However, that there is a kind of transcendental self in man, which is real, is generally held among African people.

For our understanding of this transcendental self-named ‘soul’ in Yoruba, it is here necessary to explain some Yoruba words, which have been inaccurately translated as ‘soul’. These are *emi* and *okan*. *Emi* is invisible and intangible; it is closely connected with breath, which may be thought of as residing in the mouth and nose. But breath is not *emi*, which in Yoruba is *eemi*. *Emi* is that which breathes in man, and it can best be described through its causal functions as that which gives life to the body (Idowu 1996: 179) – thus when it ceases to

function, man ceases to exist, for the body becomes lifeless. Yoruba would say *emi re ti bo* 'his *emi* is gone', meaning he is dead. On the other hand, *Okan* literally means the heart. In a physical sense, the heart is closely connected with the blood. But for the Yoruba, the heart is more than a blood machine: it is the seat of the emotions and of psychic energy (Idowu 1996: 180). Thus, a brave man is said to possess a strong heart – *o lokan* – and if a man is known to be weak in his thoughts and action, i.e., a timid person, the Yoruba would say, *ko ni okan* – 'he has no heart'. It suffices to note, however, that none of the two concepts described above constitutes the soul to the Yoruba. The soul, to the Yoruba, is the "inner person", the real essence of being – the personality. This they call "*ori*".

The word "*ori*", in contrast to its English meaning as the physical "head", or its biological description as the seat of the major sensory organs, to the Yoruba connotes the total nature of its bearer. A critical study of the term in Yoruba belief reveals the intrinsic meaning and value of the object it is identified with – that is, the physical head – and carries with it the essential nature of the object associated with it – that is the man. To the Yoruba the physical "*ori*" is but a symbol – a symbol of the "inner head" or "the inner person", the "*ori-inu*" (the inner head).

Ori in Yoruba belief occupies the centre of sacredness, and how it is conceived is embedded in the Yoruba myth concerning the creation of man and the role played by his creator, *Eledaa* (He who created). The Yoruba word for man – *eniyan* – is derived from the phrase *eni-ayan* (the chosen one). The divine oracle, *Ifa*, according to Ajanaku (1970) reveals that:

... <i>a wa gegebi eniyan,</i>	... we as human beings,
<i>a wa ni Olodumare yan</i>	we are the God's elect,
<i>lati lo tun ile aye se,</i>	designated to renew the world,
<i>Eni -a yan ni wa...</i>	We are the chosen ones.

Among the Yoruba people, it is generally acknowledged that *eniyan* is a special creature (*Eda*) of God – *Eleda* (the creator). While *eniyan* or *eni* (person) functions in the Yoruba language as a common noun for human beings, as different from other creatures, *ori* serves as that 'umbilical cord' connecting man with his God. To the Yoruba it is the ruler – God who creates and governs the universe – while the responsibility of managing and controlling man's individual affairs before, during and after his existence is believed to have been left to his '*ori*' (the inner person). This entity called the '*ori*' is equally believed to be created by God. This explains why the deity *Eleda* is also referred to as *Orise*.

Ori in *Orise* means the essence of being, while *se* means "occur", 'originate from' or emerge. *Orise* therefore means the source from which the being originates (Idowu 1996: 57). While *Orise* refers to the Deity (God), the originator of man, *ori* refers to the very essence of being, the personality or soul. However, it should be borne in mind that these terms or words are frequently used interchangeably; while *Eleda* is used at times as the 'unseen' *ori-inu* in the Yoruba saying...

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<i>Ori lo da mi</i>	The Deity is my Creator
<i>Eniyan ko o</i>	It is not man
<i>Olorun ni</i>	It is God
<i>Ori lo da mi</i>	The Deity is my Creator

Ori here refers to the Deity – the creator himself, whereas in another of the Yoruba sayings: *Bi aji ni kutukutu-ka di Eleda mu* (when one wakes up early in the morning, one should hold on to his Eleda). Eleda here assumes the position of *ori-inu*, the essence of being.

2. *ORI* IN YORUBA CREATION MYTH AND ORAL LITERATURE

It is, however, not clearly stated in the oral traditions what the pre-existent state of the person is before he comes into the world. However, that there is a predestination of man before he arrives in the world, no Yoruba person doubts. Various stories in Yoruba myth concerning the creation of man further establish this fact.

In Yoruba myth as narrated by Wande Abimbola (1977), *Obatala* who is equally referred to as *Orisa-nla* (the arch divinity), who is said to have been charged with the responsibility of sculpting the human being *eniyan* and designing only the physical features: hence his appellation *a-da-ni bo ti ri* (he who creates as he chooses). This portrays him as one who creates as he likes, making man shapely or deformed in his features. After finishing his work, *Olodumare* (the Deity-God) would give the body *emi* (life). The *eniyan* then proceeds to *Ajala – Irunmole to o nmo ipin* (the divinity who moulds *ipin*) to select for himself his *ipin* (portion), also referred to as *ori-inu* (inner head) – that which he so desires to be on getting to the world. In Abimbola’s explanation, this *ori – inu* or *ipin* – means destiny (Abimbola 1977: xiii).

Idowu (1975: 177), in another variant of the Yorùbá creation story which *Awolalu and Dopamu* (1991: 161) equally describe as “popular”, paints a picture of a “complete person” kneeling before *Olodumare* (the deity) to have his destiny conferred on him. In this, man obtains his *ipin* (destiny) in one of three ways; by kneeling down and choosing his destiny *a-kun-le-yan* (that which one kneels to choose), by kneeling to receive *a-kun-le-gba* (that which one kneels to receive), or by having his destiny apportioned to him *a-yan-mo* (that which is apportioned to one).

The differences in these variants notwithstanding, all acknowledge the Yoruba belief in predestination and also establish the belief in *Ipin* (portion) as a person's destiny which he chooses during his pre-existent state. It is this destiny that is seen as metaphysically constituted in *ori-inu* (inner head) and it is this that man comes into the world to fulfil. This belief manifests itself in the maxim *Akunle-yan ni ad’ aye ba* (the destiny chosen is that which is met and pursued).

When man comes into the world at birth, he forgets everything about heaven and his destiny. It is only his *ori* that remembers the course and content of his chosen destiny, and pursues this accordingly. It directs a man's affairs in this world. To the Yoruba people, the "*ori*" is invisible, and is therefore referred to as *ori -inu* (the inner head), destined to become the person's instructor, his 'guardian angel', which is equally referred to as "a semi-split entity", the "man's double". This is further established in the Yoruba saying:

<i>Ori-inu eni nii ba nii s'aye eni</i>	One's <i>Ori-inu</i> makes his life for him
<i>Eda aba-waye, ohun l'ori eni</i>	The creature that accompanies one to the world is his <i>ori</i>

Explaining this new role, Awolalu and Dopamu (1991: 158) stress that it is *ori-inu* that helps and guides life (*emi*) at birth, sees the man through life and into death, leads him back to the creator and gives an account of a man's conduct while on earth. This justifies the reason for the diviner's advice to the individual that he always turns to his *ori* for assistance whenever he is in need or in time of trouble: hence the maxim '*ori*' *eni nii gbe ni* (it is one's *ori* that abides with one).

Ori in Yoruba belief is the man's personality soul, his guardian angel and his personal deity, which is elevated to the level of a divinity, and thus worshipped by a man for things to be well with him. For a man's designated role in life – his destiny – to be well fulfilled, it becomes necessary for him to be on good terms with his *ori*. This demands its being kept in good condition, well respected, and propitiated from time to time. As the Yoruba would say:

<i>Ori laba bo</i>	<i>It is Ori</i> that needs to be worshipped
<i>Ti a ba fi orisa sile</i>	And not the deities
<i>Nitori oogun lo ni ojo iponju</i>	For charms are for the troubled days
<i>Ori eni l'oni ojo gbogbo</i>	Only one's <i>ori</i> stands by man everyday.

For the Yoruba people *Ori* in its totality is an object of worship. The physical head, just like any sacred objects, is but a mere symbol, a shell that houses the 'real' head (*ori-inu*), the spiritual counterpart of man on earth. For the Yoruba *ori* is the most important part of man.

3. THE CONCEPT OF *ORI*: ITS IMPLICATIONS ON VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF HUMAN IMAGES

Artists are known for representing a powerful mouthpiece for their respective societies, and their works express whatever is obtainable or in vogue at a particular period in the life of the people. Despite the absence of written documents, the events and intentions of the Stone Age people are known today through the products of the artists of that time. Art tells stories about the state of a nation and the thoughts of a people. The unwritten historical beliefs,

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philosophical concepts and cultural traditions of African people are all loaded in African arts, whether deployed as oral or as visual narratives.

All aspects of art are culturally determined in terms of techniques, the choice of subject matter and point of emphasis. The functionality of a social attitude towards art and the artist are cultural in character. The above explanations of the intrinsic meaning and value of *ori* among the Yoruba people gathered from the various oral traditions (e.g. the creation myth, the Ifa corpus, proverbs and other brief expressions) have provided the basis on which the largeness of the head in Yoruba sculptures may be better understood

When viewed from the Western perspective of realism or naturalism, the Yoruba carved images, the twin figure - *ere ibeji* (Plate 1), the Bronze figure of an Ooni of Ife and wife (Plate 2), the human images in several Epa headdresses of Bamgboye of Odo-Owa in Ekiti (Plate 3) and many other traditional Yorùbá sculptures would seem not to be proportionally correct. This is because the figures are represented in a ratio one to three or one to four with respect to the head and the body, which is contrary to the Western idea of accurate proportion whereby in the average human figure the head-body ratio is one to seven or seven and a half.

Until very recently, the notion popularly held among Western art critics was that the traditional African artists are not knowledgeable enough in representing human anatomy correctly (NERS: 119). Leo Frobenius and some other early anthropologists regarded the disproportionate representation as a child-like trait (Willett 1975: 35). However, with the archaeological discovery of the classical art works of Ife (Plate 4) and the Tada seated figure (Plate 5) and some field studies of artists at work by some Africanist art historians, it has become known that distortions noticeable in Yoruba sculpture and generally in African figural sculptures are indeed deliberate. Frank Willett (1975: 227), commenting on the artistic representation of traditional African human images, confirmed that block of wood are divided up into separate parts by sculptors at the outset with the deliberate establishment of the features specifically representing the societal convention.

The societal conventions as noted here consist of the societal ways of reinforcing a system of thought. It may be useful to reiterate here that, unlike the Western idea of art, African art is not produced solely for aesthetic ends. It is not art for art's sake but deeply reflects certain accepted thoughts and shared values, at the same time reinforcing and symbolizing them. The artist should be seen as belonging to the category of persons whom Mbiti (1970: 88) refers to as specialists. Being an integral member of the community, like the medicine man or the rainmaker, the traditional sculptor is equally versed in the values, commonly held traditions and the indigenous fundamental concepts of his community, and he is trusted with their interpretation as such.

The largeness of *ori* as depicted in Yoruba human sculptural pieces goes beyond the representation of proportion in the physical sense; rather, it is the representation of *Ori* in the metaphysical sense. The proportion depicted reflects the unquantifiable and unmeasurable attributes of *ori*, while its physical

largeness symbolises its largeness in content. In Yoruba sculpture, the human figure, be it for ritual purpose or as royal portraiture, the head is usually depicted to reflect the expressive meaning of *ori*. In the Bronze figure of an Ooni of Ife and wife (Plate 2), despite its closeness to naturalism the head is depicted in the same proportional size as that of the twin figure, *ere ibeji* in Plate 1, which is indeed symbolic and expressive. It needs to be noted however, that while human figures are treated in this manner, this is not the case when what is being portrayed is just the head.

The use of symbols, in art as in language, implies a body of common understanding among the members of a society and also carries the implication that this understanding is transmitted from generation to generation. The size of *ori* in Yoruba sculpture was a device in the traditional past to educate and to reinforce knowledge of fundamental traditional belief – the belief in *ori* as orally transmitted. The size is the artist's visual interpretation of what *ori* means to the people.

Yoruba sculptors, as revered members of the community, have learnt from tradition not to be interested in depicting man in his realistic form. And by virtue of their position in the community, traditional Yoruba sculptors are aware that their carved images are to serve as constant reminders to their people of certain aspects of belief patterns and philosophical thought. Their works are therefore seen as instruments of effective communication. Through the carved figures, they translate the coded systems of thought, as received from tradition, into visual realities.

Like the traditional court historians, traditional sculptors are conscious of the fact that their carved images are agents through which the ideas, attitudes and values of their people are explicated. They are aware that the efficiency with which their images communicate depends on the degree to which the conventions and symbols as used are understood and appreciated by the members of their society.

Being knowledgeable in the traditions and their people's system of thought, the Yoruba sculptors carve the human figure, depict *ori* (head) to reflect the content of the form and not to look like the form itself. To the sculptors and their people, the content is much more important than the form itself, it represents a phenomenon that is larger than the man himself.

Lamidi Fakeye¹ a neo-traditional carver whose work can be seen as a prominent link between the Yoruba traditional art and present day practice, confirmed in discussion that the head is depicted as large because it is believed to be the very essence of man, which is considered bigger than the rest of the body. In his words, "the burden it bears makes it bigger".

¹ Lamidi, Fakeye 2004 Personal communication Ile-Ife.

4. CONCLUSION

From the point of view of our unlettered ancestors revealed through the Yoruba creation myth, the Ifa literary corpus, proverbs, maxims and other forms of oral traditions, the intrinsic meaning and value of *ori* (head) among the Yoruba people have been unlocked. Its position as man's personality soul, his guardian angel and personal deity, which ranks it to the level of divinity, has also been revealed.

Traditions also present *ori* as the spiritual accomplice of a man who kneels to choose the man's *ayanmo* (destiny), which it is equally entrusted to protect and to help fulfil. Therefore, for a man to have his destiny fulfilled well, he has to be on good terms with his *ori* and propitiate it from time to time. To the Yoruba people, *ori* in its totality is an object of worship: hence the saying *ori-apesin*, meaning one who is worthy of worship by all.

As an integral member of the community, the traditional sculptor has been revealed as a communicator and interpreter of societal ideas, philosophical and religious belief and concepts. In his depiction of human images, he explains the intrinsic meaning of *ori*. The disproportionate representation of *ori* is therefore deliberate. It is to signify a point of emphasis in the people's belief about the existence of man and his *eleda*, and not to copy the nature. The size is to create an impression in the mind of the viewers of the place-value of *ori* in Yoruba belief. Since the artist is an essential member of his community's specialists, he is conscious of these belief and concepts, which he attempts to translate into visual realities in his works. Understanding this artistic representation therefore demands a good understanding of the indigenous philosophical concepts of the existence of a man's '*ori*' among the Yorùbá, where the traditional sculptor is not just an active member of society but also a specialist.



Figure 1. *Ere Ibeji* (wood).



Figure 2. *Ooni & wife* (Bronze).

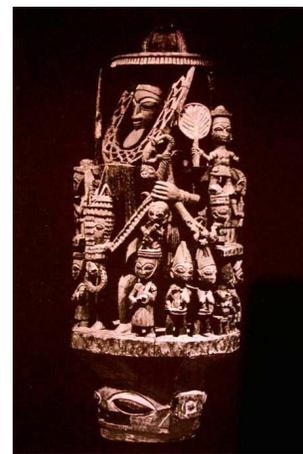


Figure 3. *Epa Headdress* (Wood) by Bamgboye, Odo-Owa.



Figure 4. Ife Bronze Head



Figure 5. Tada seated figure (Bronze)

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About the author: *Babasehinde Augustine Ademuleya* is a BA Ed. Fine Arts, MA, PhD African Art History (Ibadan). He is a teacher of Sculpture and African Art History at the Department of Fine Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.