Art features prominently in all aspects of life in indigenous African cultures partly because of its ontological significance and partly because of its aesthetic, social, political and religious functions. Its ontological significance derives from a widespread creation myth that identifies the human body as a piece of sculpture fabricated by a Supreme Divinity or an artist deity. The sculpture becomes animate after receiving a life-force or soul. One is alive so long as the soul remains in one’s body. Death occurs when the soul leaves that body to continue its existence in the hereafter. In short, this myth not only relates divinity, creativity and humanity in African thought, it makes the capacity to create and appreciate art an integral part of human nature, accounting for the aesthetic impulse in all aspects of life—from body adornment and architecture to the decoration of household/ceremonial objects and the use of sculptures and masks to embody and communicate ideas. Space limitations will not allow a detailed discussion of this phenomenon in different African cultures. Rather, I will concentrate on the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin in West Africa among whom I have conducted field research since the 1960s.

1. *The Yoruba*

Numbering over 25 million people, the Yoruba inhabit present-day republics of Nigeria, Benin and Togo. Most of them live in southwestern Nigeria. They have two traditions of origin, the mythological and historical. The mythological tradition claims that the Yoruba have occupied their present habitat since creation. The historical tradition, on the other hand, holds that they (or some of them) were immigrants...
from the “Northeast” led by one Oduduwa. After subjugating the abo-
riginal population of Ile-Ife (the town now regarded as the cradle of
Yoruba culture) during the first millennium of the Christian era, the
immigrants reportedly settled there, establishing a ruling dynasty whose
powers later spread to other parts of present-day Yorubaland.3

2. Worldview, Religion, Ethics and Aesthetics

Like many other African peoples, the Yoruba trace the origin of the
world to a Supreme Divinity called OLODUMARE—the Eternal One,
ELEDA—the Creator of All that Exists and ALASE—the source of ase,
the enabling power that transforms, creating something out of nothing,
changing materials from one state to another, imparting motion to the
motionless, and life to the lifeless. However, unlike the Supreme
Divinity of other African cultures, OLODUMARE seldom not create
directly, but acts through a host of lesser deities or nature forces known
as the orisa. Each orisa personifies an ase associated with a natural or
cultural phenomenon. Thus Obatala exemplifies creativity; Orunmila,
wisdom and clairvoyance; Oduduwa, divine kingship; Osanyin, curative
medicine; Sopona, diseases, especially smallpox; Ogun, tools, weapons
and warfare; Yemoja, water and motherhood; Orisa Oko, agriculture;
Sango, thunderstorm and social justice; Oya, tornado; Osun, fertility
and beauty; Osumare, rainbow; and so on. The deity Esu occupies a
special position among the orisa by virtue of his being the divine
messenger and distributor of ase. Yoruba religion focuses on the vene-
ration of the orisa, since they act as intermediaries between humanity
and OLODUMARE. It is to them that shrines are built and sacrifices
offered.

According to Yoruba cosmology, only the primeval waters
existed below the sky in the beginning. Later OLODUMARE
gave Oduduwa a chicken and bag of sand with which to
transform some portion of the waters into habitable land. Oduduwa
descended from the heavens with a chain, poured
the sand on the waters and released the chicken. The latter
scattered the sand in all directions, eventually creating the
earth and the rivers within it.4
The Yoruba word for art is *ona*, meaning “design,” “representation” or “ornamentation.” It began when *OLODUMARE* commissioned the artist deity *Obatala* to mold the first human image (*ere eniyan*) from clay. After completing the image, *Obatala* gave it to *Ogun*, the orisa of tools and weapons, who put the finishing touches to the form, clarifying and delineating the principal features, especially the face. The image turned into a living human (*eniyan*) when the *OLODUMARE* infused it with a soul (*emi*)—a form of *ase*. Since then, every image thus produced has been placed inside the womb of a woman and left to develop from an embryonic form into a normal baby. The following praise-poem (*oriki*) to the artist deity *Obatala* commemorates this archetypal event:

*Obatala*

He created the child and its mother  
After doing good to the father,  
He sent for the child to come and collect its own good…  
He molded the inner surface of the hand called the palm  
He molded the underside of the foot called the sole  
He molded the massive part of the body called the chest  
He created the refractive water ball called the eyes  
He molded the small pot called the skull…  
The-Orisa-has-made-a-work-of-art, Owner-of-choice-clay…

Yoruba text:

*Obatala*  
O da’mo, da’ya  
O se baba lo ore tan,  
O ranse si omo ko wa gba ore…  
Oun lo da pete owo,  
Oun lo da pete ese  
Oun la da aya j’anka, ti a npe ni igba aya  
Oun lo da omi lojolojo, ti a npe loju  
Oun lo da oru rebete, ti a npe ni Atari…  
Oosona, Alamorere…”

BABATUNDE LAWAL
From the Yoruba perspective, the variation in human appearance is due to Obatala’s unpredictable artistic temperament, earning him the epithet: “A da ni b’o ti ri” (He who creates us as he wishes). Besides, he is known for his occasional drinking bouts during which he creates cripples, hunchbacks, albinos and people with deformities. Thus it is customary for the Yoruba to greet pregnant women with the prayer: “Ki Orisa ya ona ire ko ni” (May the Orisa [Obatala] fashion for us a good work of art). The implication here is that, in spite of its biological aspect, procreation has an artistic dimension as well. The human body (ara), the handiwork of Obatala, is much more than blood and flesh. It is a kinetic sculpture, activated by ase, the vital force, concealing and revealing the soul in the physical world, enabling an individual to have iwa (physical existence). Iwa denotes both the fact of being and the distinctive quality or character of a person. Its preeminence in Yoruba aesthetics is clear from the following poem often recited by Yoruba elders to educate the younger generation:

If a child is beautiful but has no character,
He is no more than a wooden doll
Good character is the beauty of a person
A woman can be as beautiful as the Egbara, if she has no character
She is no more than a wooden doll
A man may be very, very handsome, like a fish in the water
If he has no character
He is no more than a wooden doll.

Yoruba text:

Omo t’o dara tiko n’iwa
Omolangidi ni i
Iwa rere l’eso eniyi
B’obirin dara bi Egbara, bi ko n’iwa
Omolangidi ni i
B’okunrin suwon, suwon, bi eja inu omi
Bi ko n’iwa rere
Omolangidi ni i.
In other words, the Yoruba idea of beauty (ewa) has two realities, namely, ewa ode (external beauty or visual appeal) and ewa inu (inner beauty or intrinsic worth). In human beings, inner beauty is assessed through iwa (character or moral worthiness) and, in artifacts, through wiwulo (functional utility or effectiveness). The reason for the stress on intrinsic worth is self-evident: physical beauty (ewa ode) is a natural endowment and depends, for the most part, on the whims and caprices of Obatala who, as mentioned earlier, “creates us as he wishes.” To over-emphasize ewa ode is tantamount to penalizing the physically unattractive for a biological fact they could not have personally prevented. The premium placed on iwa (character), as in popular sayings such as “Iwa rere l’eso eniyan” (Good character beautifies a person) and Iwa l’ewa (Character determines beauty), therefore, affords everyone an equal chance of living up to a moral ideal in order to be fully admired. Conversely, a physically attractive person with a bad character runs the risk of being categorized as an awobowa, that is “the outwardly beautiful, but inwardly ugly.” For even when the physical beauty of an awobowa attracts attention, the initial admiration will disappear as the inner ugliness of that individual manifests itself like smoke. On the other hand, a pleasant disposition has the potential of transforming the physically disadvantaged into a likeable person, or into what the Yoruba call an omoluwabi, that is, a role model or “the good-natured and internally beautiful person.”

Self-discipline thus becomes the key to social mobility, enabling an individual to make up for a physical deficiency or maximize the potentials of a natural endowment. As one Yoruba aphorism puts it: “Iwa l’orisa—bi a ba ti hu si ni i fi i gbe ni” (Good character is like an orisa—the more we cultivate it, the more it favors us). Simply put, ewa (beauty) in Yoruba culture is synonymous with “goodness” (dara, rere). It is not restricted to physical attractiveness, but can also be cultivated through refined behavior (iwa rere). Needless to say, ornamentation (oso) can enhance one’s iwa andewa. This is the gist of following song:

Take care of your character
Character is clothing, character is dress
If we live long, long, long on earth
And we become too old to walk
The day we die, it is character that remains
However, as I have pointed out elsewhere, while good character determines beauty in human life, it does not apply to the *orisa*. This is because the very fact of their divinity elevates the *orisa* above the concept of morality, the rules of conduct among mortals. Indeed, many of the *orisa* are noted for their idiosyncrasies. It will be recalled that the drinking habits of *Obatala* led him to create deformed persons. *Esu*, the divine messenger and agent provocateur is famous for his mischief. For instance, he delights in making enemies of close friends and even causing misunderstanding among fellow *orisa* if only to create an opportunity for himself to serve as a mediator. Also, *Sango*, the thunder-deity and guardian of social justice, “establishes a farm near the main road in order to foment trouble with passersby.” Yet the Yoruba accept the freakishness of the *orisa* with a kind of fatalistic resignation, while at the same time, using the lessons derived from it to regulate their own conduct. The popular belief is that the cosmos is an unfathomable mystery (*Aditu*) and there may be much more behind the actions of the *orisa* than ordinary mortals can ever comprehend.

3. Reenacting Creation through Art Making

Given the association of creativity with the sublime, art making in indigenous Africa involves much more than manipulating tools to give form to an idea. It is also a ritual process, reenacting the archetypal act of divine creation, linking the physical to the metaphysical and the human to the divine. In some African cultures, such as the Baule of Cote d’Ivoire, the Gola of Liberia and Kalabari Ijo of Nigeria, the traditionally-trained artist, particularly the carver, often seeks spiritual guidance before embarking on a work that would be used in a religious
context. Trances are common. Not only that, the artist often takes
certain ritual precautions both to ensure successful completion of a
given work and to neutralize the harm that might result from close con-
tact with extraterrestrial forces. 19

This is also the case among the Yoruba. One becomes a professional
artist (onise ona) after a period of apprenticeship. Training has two
aspects, the cultural and technical. The cultural aspect introduces the
apprentice to Yoruba cosmology, the rituals associated with the creative
process, taboos and the significance of popular iconographic motifs.
The technical aspect, on the other hand, familiarizes the apprentice
with the properties of various materials, elements of design and how to
execute them with tools. An apprentice learns by observing a master at
work, gradually assimilating the time honored Yoruba style in a given
medium as well as the iconographic conventions (asa). 20 The fact that
much of Yoruba art functions in a religious context has stabilized these
conventions, imposing some limitation on the extent of change within
the canon, but still allowing for creativity, innovation and the incorpo-
ration of new elements in time and place. An apprentice graduates after
demonstrating enough imò (mastery of time-honored conventions),
imòdóse (technical proficiency) and oju ona (lit.”artistic eye”) to practice
as a professional. Oju ona can be defined as “design consciousness” 21 or
the visual cognition that enables an artist to select and process images
from daily experience into schemata or templates (determined by the
Yoruba style) which are then stored in pictorial memory to be retrieved
and modified when needed to express a particular idea. As a result, a
well-trained artist does not need a life model or a preparatory sketch to
represent a particular subject.

The process of creating an image is called onàyíyá, which can be
etymologized as onà = art; yíyá = creation/making. Yíyá derives from
the root verb yá, meaning “to create, fashion or make.” The same verb
(yá) is implicated in “iyá,” the Yoruba word for “mother” and in the
aforementioned prayer for a pregnant woman. The fact that the female
body mediates Obatala’s creation has led some to interpret the Yoruba
word for mother as “someone from which another life is fashioned” or
the body “from which we are created.” 22 This metaphor may very well
be (partly) responsible for the taboo in the past that a woman should
not engage in sculpture because it might interfere with her procreative
power. Consequently, only postmenopausal women were allowed to do figurative pottery.  

In any event, the generic term for all artistic representations (in two or three dimensions) is *aworan*. A contraction of *a* (that which), *wo* (to look at), and *ranti* (to recall, that is, the subject), *aworan* is mnemonic in nature, identifying a work of art as a construct specially crafted to appeal to the eyes, relate a representation to its subject, while at the same time, conveying messages that may have aesthetic, social or spiritual import. The word *ere* generally refers to sculpture in the round, while *ara* denotes an intricate design or pattern, although *ara* is also used to describe a tour de force manifested in the visual and performing arts. By and large, an artist, especially the carver, works under the guidance of three deities, namely Obatala (creativity deity) who provides the imaginative power, Ogun (the orisa of tools and weapons), the tools for transforming the material, and Esu (divine messenger), the vision and *ase* (enabling power) that facilitate execution.

A naturalistic representation is called *àyájora*, a contraction of *à* = act of; *yà* = create; *jo* = to resemble; *ara* = physical body of the subject.

In the past, many Yoruba treated a naturalistic portraiture with mixed emotions for two main reasons. One derives from the myth, still current, that every living person has a spirit partner (a look-alike) in heaven called *enikeji* (heavenly double) who offers spiritual protection to its earthly counterpart. The creation of a human-made look-alike in art may therefore endanger this relationship, causing the heavenly double to withdraw its spiritual protection. The second reason hinges on the popular belief that through sympathetic magic, a naturalistic portrait could be transformed into a surrogate for the human body and then manipulated for positive or negative ends. As a result, most of the naturalistic representations in Yoruba art function in funeral ceremonies called *ako*, *ipade* or *ajeje*. Some time after the burial of the corpse, a portrait of the deceased would be commissioned, dressed in his/her best clothes and displayed indoors or in the open to allow friends, relations and well-wishers to pay their last respects. Marking the last physical appearance of the deceased on earth, the portrait is treated as if it were alive. In some cases, it is carried in a public procession round the town, accompanied by survivors, all singing and wishing the deceased a happy retirement in the hereafter. At the end of the ceremony, the
image is buried like a corpse or abandoned in the forest. Because it is costly, the ceremony is normally performed for an important person to allow him/her to carry over to the land of the dead the high status achieved on earth. Failure of the children to do so, it is believed, may cause the soul to haunt them in the form of a ghost.

A conceptual representation, on the other hand, is called àrọyá (a contraction of à = act of; rọ = to think/imagine; and yá = to create). It is either a prototype (like Obatala's creation) or an abstraction of a recognizable subject rendered in such a way as to make it look different while still communicating the essence of the subject. The literary equivalent of àrọyá (conceptual imagery) is àrọfọ (oral poetry)—a shortened form of à = act of; rọ = to think/imagine; and fọ = to chant/utter. Most of the images in this category are usually placed on altars to harness the powers of supernatural forces or to honor and communicate with the dead. The stylized form of a typical altar sculpture hints at the otherness of the sublime. The motif of a mother and child may be intended to remind the spirit/soul of a female ancestor of her maternal responsibilities to the living, while a lance-holding or an equestrian warrior figure may be aimed at obliging a male ancestor to play the role of a protector, and so on. Images with similar implications abound on altars dedicated to the orisa, who are themselves addressed as super-humans. Each orisa has a symbol or iconographic motif for characterizing its essence and for relating humanity to divinity.

A piece of sculpture (ere or aworan) is assessed on the basis of many aesthetic criteria. These include the degree to which the piece looks Yoruba (both facially and stylistically), good composition and symmetry (didogba), clarity of mass (ifarahon), relative straightness of posture (gigun), meticulous delineation (finfin), relative luminosity and delicacy (didon) and how well the work has succeeded in capturing the essence of its subject. Because of its impact on the eyes (oju), art is often described as ounje oju (food for the eyes). Thus a masterpiece may be said to fa oju mora (magnetize the eyes), ba oju mu (fit the eyes), becoming awowo-tun-ẹtọ (that which compels repeated gaze) or awomakele (that which moors the gaze). An image is called awoyamu (literally, “that which causes the viewer to gape”) if it manifests such an incredibly high artistic skill as to suggest the use of occult powers. The high regard for art in Yoruba culture reverberates not only in popular
names such as Onawunmi (Art fascinates me), Onayemi (Art befits me) and Onaniyi (Art generates honor and respect), but also in body adornment, textiles, embroidery, architectural decoration, pottery and household objects ornamented drums and gongs, insignia of leadership and ritual/ceremonial objects. In this context, art enriches life. It enhances and reinforces the visible self, conveying taste, social/economic status or political power. However, to the Yoruba, the ideal work of art should combine external with inner beauty. In other words, it is not enough for a carved stool to look artistic, it must be strong and comfortable to sit on—just as good character determines or adds to the beauty of an individual.

4. Divinity, Creativity and Humanity

According to Yoruba cosmology, the decision of OLODUMARE (the Supreme Divinity) to create humans was prompted by a desire to transform the primeval waters below the heavens into an orderly estate. Human beings are called eniyan (“the specially selected”) because they are the ones ordained “to convey goodness” to the wilderness below the sky. For the human body—a “masterpiece” by Obatala—localizes a special ase (enabling power), that generates life, simultaneously inspiring and sustaining the creativity reflected in the visual and performing arts and enabling the Yoruba to continually redesign their environment. It is therefore not surprising that some of the orisa allegedly assumed human forms in order to accompany the first humans to the earth. This makes it difficult to differentiate the primordial deities from mortals, given the Yoruba tendency in the past to deify culture heroes on the grounds that they were divinities temporally manifesting in human bodies. Ogun, the iron deity and one of these culture heroes, reportedly led the other orisa when they first arrived on earth, using his machete to cut a path through the primeval jungle, laying the foundation for Yoruba civilization. The popular name, Ogunlana (“Ogun paves the way”) commemorates this archetypal event, emphasizing the importance (first) of stone and (later) of iron tools in agriculture, urban planning, lumbering, architecture, warfare, and art. Yet the same Ogun is often identified as one of the children of Odudua and the warrior-king of the ancient town called Ire.
Since Obatala, the creativity orisa, also assumed a human form in order to accompany the first mortals to the earth, was the archetypal human image a self-portrait? Or, was Obatala originally a mortal who was subsequently deified for his phenomenal creative endowment? Or is he a figment of the imagination and a self-reflexion of the Yoruba artist? That Obatala was a deified culture hero, if not a self-reflexion of the Yoruba artist, is evident in the popular Yoruba saying: Bi eniyan ko si, orisa ko si (No humanity, no divinity). In other words, the worshipped depends on the worshipper for its existence; divinities are human constructs. Put differently, it is eniyan (humanity) who visualized and anthropomorphized the orisa (divinity), simultaneously inverting the process to rationalize its own creation and creativity. This act of self-reflexion not only constitutes the orisa into a sort of superhuman Other, an extension of the metaphysical self, but also provides a basis for involving them in the ethics, aesthetics, poetics and politics of human existence.

Because of their belief in life after death, the Yoruba regard a child born after the death of a parent or grandparent as a reincarnation of the soul of the deceased, returning to the same family to start a new life in a new body. Such children are usually called Babajide (Father has resurrected) or Babatunde (Father returns), if born after the death of a male parent or Yejide (Mother has resurrected) or Yetunde (Mother returns), if born after the death of a female parent. Thus, to the Yoruba, life is an eternal cycle of living, dying and being reborn on earth to start all over again. The body, as a work of art, mediates the cycle, exemplifying the interconnectedness of divinity, creativity and humanity in Yoruba culture and aesthetics.

NOTES

1 Although the Supreme Divinity bears many names in different parts of Africa, some of these names categorically declare this creator being as an artist. For example: Amma (the originator) among the Dogon (Mali); Daya (the fashioner) among the Gola (Liberia); Borebore (the carver) among the Asante of Ghana; Njambi (the inventor) among the Lele (Republic of Congo); and Imana (the potter) among the Banyarwanda (Rwanda); Musikavanhu (maker of persons) among the Shona (Zimbabwe) and Mwatuangi (the shaper) among the Akamba (Kenya).


7 Idowu, Olodumare, p. 72.

8 Idowu, Olodumare, p. 72. According to one myth, OLODUMARE first commissioned Obatala to create the earth. Unfortunately, he got drunk after receiving the sacred instruments of his commission and fell asleep by the roadside. Odudua then stole the sacred instruments, descended from the sky and created the earth at Ile-Ife. When Obatala woke up and discovered what had happened, he challenged Odudua and a fierce fight ensued. OLODUMARE later intervened and gave Obatala another commission—to mold the image of the first human.


11 Hence the popular Yoruba saying “Efin ni iwa” (One’s character is like smoke and cannot be concealed with body adornment).


22. Ulli Beier, *Yoruba Poetry: An Anthology of Traditional Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 19-20. Another Yoruba word for mother is “ye” or “iye,” which means, according to several field informants, “the one who laid me (ye) like an egg.”

23. While this taboo is still strong in rural Yorubaland, it is no longer honored by the Western-educated Yoruba in the urban areas, who now allow their daughters to specialize in sculpture in art school. Some Yoruba males now train as ceramists, whereas only females were potters in the past.


26. For details, see Lawal, “*Aworan,*” p. 503 and n.43. It has been suggested that some of the naturalistic terracotta and brass portraits excavated at Ife...

27 The carver Ganiyu Sekoni Doga of Imeko drew my attention to a cognate term is *arogbe* (a contraction of *a* = act of; *ro* = to think/imagine; and *gbe* = to carve).

28 For more details, see Robert Farris Thompson, “Yoruba Artistic Criticism,” in D’Axevedo, *The Traditional Artist*, pp. 19-61.

29 See also Lawal, “Awooran,” pp. 516-518.


31 See, for instance, Idowu, *Olodumare*, pp. 84-5.

32 Lawal, “*Awooran*,” p. 515. Polished stone axes and iron tools are sacred to Ogun, suggesting that the one preceded the other in his iconography.


35 See also Lawal, “*Awooran*,” p. 515.