

Traditional Wood Carving and the Economic History of Ekiti of Southwestern Nigeria, 1900 to 1960

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Abstract

The Ekiti people of Southwestern Nigeria have been known, from the colonial to the postcolonial periods, for their high agricultural potential and the, rather, fanatical embracement and ravenous assimilation of western education. These two attributes have made other groups in Nigeria see the people not only as prominent cocoa and other notable crop farmers, but also as acknowledged harbingers of knowledge. This was because of the initially unprecedented number of, particularly, higher degree holders in the state. Very unfortunately, however, while the agricultural and educational experiences were constantly echoed, as regards economic contributions, particularly in the colonial period, mind did not go to wood carving occupation which was part of the economic backbone of Ekiti Division at the period. This lucrative age-old, creative tradition was later promoted and internationalized by the missionaries who initially rebelled against the profession. They made it part of modernity; patronized by various traditionalists, homes, kings, churches, educational institutions, politicians as well as the elite in the society.

Introduction

The Ekiti people were well known and respected for their various types of art and industry during the colonial period. The colonial administration in Yorubaland also later capitalized on this in a way that helped boost the economy of the people. The main art types can be grouped into wood carving, textiles production, pottery, embroidery, mat making, beading, cane works, basketry, calabash carving and blacksmithing, among others. However, out of all these, wood carving was the most internationalized and economically most rewarding. It attracted the greatest price, having got its patronage across all social strata. The commoners, the middle class and the elite in the traditional societies, as well as churches, government and

educational institutions were all consumers of wood carving. This traditional art culture of the colonial period eventually became more financially benefitting both to the artists and the colonial economy.

Ekiti Traditional Wood Carving

The wood carving tradition of Ekiti, which was very dynamic during the pre-colonial period, acquired more professional vigour and economic viability in the colonial period. This was in spite of the initial culturally suppressive attitude of the Christian missionaries to the traditional art culture of Ekiti.¹ According to William Fagg, “of all the African tribes (ethnic groups) which have produced sculpture, the Yoruba are by far the most numerous ... they are also the most prolific in art...”² And to him, the Yoruba “have produced more sculptures (carvings)... than any other” African ethnic groups.³ This clearly shows that Ekiti, being a typically Yoruba society, was also very fertile in the production of various forms of art in the colonial period.

The aspects or types of carving that made a significant contribution to Ekiti economy, particularly between 1900 and 1940, included those art works that were used for religious, social, political, domestic or utilitarian purposes. Being the period that the Ekiti people were still greatly involved in their traditional indigenous religious practices, various images were purchased for religious or ritual purposes. There were religious images produced for, or bought by, either the communities, heads of family or individuals for their gods, deities, various bush, water, mountain and rock spirits as well as the spirits of the dead. Sacred images were neither sold openly in the market nor just produced by artists at will, since they had to be commissioned privately by patrons and at a very high cost.⁴

The above images were produced mainly for the cult of *Ogboni*, *Sango*, the god of thunder and legality; *Ifa*, the god of divination; *Esu*, the god of creativity, also referred to as god of mischief, and *Ibeji*, the spirit of the dead twins. However, unlike some religious images, the carvings of *Ibeji* were sold openly, in various Ekiti markets in their hundreds, since they also performed social functions. According to Iya Alaje of Oke-kere in Ikere-Ekiti, also popularly known as Iya *Oniwosiwosi* (seller of assorted goods), a set of two *Ibeji* carving cost five pence in 1945, the year she had her twin babies, while one cost

three pence, and this, according to her, depended on the popularity of the carvers.⁵

Unlike the wood carvings produced for secular purposes, the wood carvings for cultic or religious functions could be very expensive for some reasons. Such art images, when in use, were not quickly disposed of, because they could serve generations of devotees, therefore becoming once in a life time commission. A lot of propitiatory sacrifices were usually made by the carvers to ward off what the artists regarded as possible attack from the spirits which the images were to depict. Many of these religious images were produced secretly or in isolation since, according to Chief L. Olusawe, who is now a born again Christian, "it was a desecration of worship to let the uninitiated eyes see an idol (a carved wood figure) that represented gods or deities".⁶ In addition, many religious images were produced by the artists who were far away from where these figures would be used. All the above reasons made the traditional carvers charge very exorbitantly for their labour.

According to Chief M. Adelakin of Ise-Ekiti, also corroborating what Reverend Father John McCarthy said in 1958, in Ado-Ekiti, "artists were a group of the richest people in this Division (Ekiti) before the cocoa boom".⁷ Many of these traditional carvers "built very big houses known as *petesi* (storey building) because of the money made from art".⁸ In fact, what made the economic conditions of many artists, and therefore their families and other dependents, very promising was, among other things, the prevailing taboo or "spiritual or ritual code and belief that the prices of some commissioned religious art images must not be negotiated in order not to decrease the spiritual energy or life force which such images possessed".⁹ Even today, this belief still exists among many traditional priests, chiefs, kings and shrine devotees all over Ekiti. What this meant was that, in some cases, a person commissioning a piece of art would not, and never, attempt to negotiate the first price demanded by a carver in his own spiritual or ritual interest. The traditional carvers were, however, also aware of the danger of offending the gods, and were always very careful not to inflate their prices or cheat their patrons.

Though, between 1920 and 1940, especially, in Ekiti, serious and punitive Christian evangelization was experienced by the people, particularly from the Baptist and Roman Catholic Churches (RCM),

the Ekiti kingship tradition was so strong that it was very difficult for Christianity to eliminate or even seriously weaken all the cultural practices that required the use of art images and related ritual objects produced by the traditional artists. This cultural resilience ensured the economic sustenance of the carvers and the craftsmen generally. In the early 1930s, Reverend Father Lodgel of the RCM in Oshogbo, in the present Osun State, was one of the two-man delegation to Ado Ekiti to help assess how the Ekiti people were responding to Roman Catholic liturgical doctrines. The report of this delegation, while lauding the efforts of the local catechists and the Reverend Fathers in charge, stressed how the situation would have been more promising if “these (traditional religious) adherents who heavily patronize the daily production of idols and other profane images are carefully induced for conversion... and alternative careers found for these native carvers, particularly, those who produce pagan images”.¹⁰

It was very clear that the Christian missionaries were fighting a lost cultural/religious battle, considering the economic importance of wood carving. Though, as already stated, the pre-colonial Ekiti had professional wood carvers who depended largely on their art careers, it was not until 1895 when Captain Ambrose, the first British administrator, came to Ikere-Ekiti that the carvers of Ekiti clearly saw or realized how profitable carving could be. What happened was that when Captain Ambrose and his aids came to the palace of the Ogoga, the king of Ikere, they were amazed and even shocked by the great number of highly aesthetic images, especially carved houseposts, doors and free standing carved images that profusely decorated the palace. According to Professor G.O. Ojo:

As a general rule ... temples ... palaces and ... compounds of Chiefs (kings) were distinguished from others by their elaborately carved doors which were quite massive and often made from a solid piece of the trunk or the buttress of tree. The objects represented usually cover a wide range of aspects of Yoruba life and experiences. A notable example of a Yoruba sculptured door... is that of the palace of Ogoga of Ikere... now in the British Museum....¹¹

However, like a wild fire, the report sent to Britain about the palace art embellishment as well as the wood images seen in the palaces later visited by Captain Ambrose and his group attracted many European anthropologists, ethnographers or scholars to Ekiti. And by 1900, many areas of Ekiti, particularly Igede, Efon, Otun, Osi, Igbemo, Ire, Ogotun, Ikole, Ise and Emure, and many others, had been opened not only to the European administrators and missionaries but also to other tourists looking for what they considered “fine pieces of pagan images which they began to collect freely (or) at prices that were very attractive to many devotees and carvers”.¹²

However, Christian evangelization, which condemned the production and use of images, still encouraged traditional religious devotees to do away with their age-old images which were regarded as idols by the missionaries. Igede-Ekiti was a good example of this experience. There, in 1902, the Baptist missionaries from Illinois, USA, tried very vigorously to eliminate all the traditional religious practices that accommodated the use of images. The king of the town, Oba Aladesaru the 1st, while allowing his people to embrace the new religion, refused to destroy the wood sculptures in his palace. This was a bold action, since Igede had already been seen as the possible Headquarter of Baptist Church in Ondo Province.¹³ The implication of the above missionary activities or attitude to art images was that they naturally opened the wood carvings of Ekiti to the European and American art lovers or collectors. This had the unintended effect of boosting rather than diminish the carving tradition as expected by the Christian missionaries.

Between 1910 and 1920, the Ekiti people had overwhelmingly accepted Christianity, though many refused to accept the new faith and rigidly clung to their religious traditions. Again, the vast majority of the Christian converts refused to totally abandon their tradition, and thus became worshippers of two religions.¹⁴ By 1925, the Ekiti traditional wood carvers and other craftsmen had become the economic beneficiaries of this position. The more traditional art images were condemned, the more these were advertised by default, by some expatriates, thus making the images more popularly attractive to foreign “art hunters”. Before 1930, some Ekiti traditional carvers had been known internationally for their artistic efforts and

were financially well rewarded for these. The economic benefit of this situation also led to the increase in art apprenticeship all over Ekiti.

Triumph of Wood Carving in Colonial Ekiti Economy

It is instructive that the carved door panel of Olowe of Ise in Ekiti was exhibited at “the British Empire exhibition held in London in 1924”.¹⁵ The news of this achievement also encouraged other carvers to devote more attention to their art traditions. According to Gabriel Babalola:

Before Awolowo made cocoa the number one agric product in the early 1950s, when he was Head of Government Business (later Premier) in Western Region, the artists were some of the few people who could easily boast of having one hundred pounds (now two hundred Naira). You know in those days, fifty to sixty pounds could build a house. And in fact, one having one hundred pounds can be compared to today’s millionaire. And this is true..., apart from some traders and farmers blessed with very large land for farming, only few people were richer than the carvers.¹⁶

In fact, these carvers were not only rich, they were also well known far beyond the old Ekiti Division. Some of these very popular artists who undoubtedly contributed to Ekiti economy were Olowe of Ise-Ekiti who died in 1938, Agbonbiate from Efon-Alaiye-Ekiti, Areogun (also Arowogun) of Osi-Ekiti who died in 1954, Agunna of the Igbira near Ikole-Ekiti and Bamgboye of Odo-Owa.¹⁷ The excerpt of a letter from Father Sean O, Mahoney to Father Patrick Kelly in 1946 affirms the economic importance of the artists/carvers in the Ekiti economy during the colonial period. It says,

... our experiences in this (Ekiti) land have shown that the Catholic Church must re-examine its position about its attitude to what we have regarded as pagan idols ... which we have, for long, rebuked the people for. Not all the images produced in Ekiti have pagan intentions... Aspects of Ekiti art should be embraced.

Father Carroll and I have also discovered that the wood carving profession plays a very vital and noticeable role in the economic life of the Ekiti people, since, it has obviously become very powerfully attractive to foreign collectors and, naturally, the kings and powerful chiefs who see a highly artistically decorative court (palace) as symbol of power and prestige. ...The Superior Father, it has also been discovered in Ado, Ikole, Efon, Ikere, Ilawe, Ise and Otun, plus other areas, knows that major church and Sunday contributors are from the families of wood carvers. The attached with asterics is a proof.... It is our belief that the idea presented here will receive the Superior's understanding and consideration in the interest of our provincial evangelism.¹⁸

The above letter as well as other "consultative actions" confirmed the necessity to accept traditional artistic practices without pagan liturgy. This gave new and greater economic importance to art. Father Patrick Kelly eventually "decided to establish a Centre to study, among other things, the adaptation of African Crafts to Christian uses".¹⁹ Not only that, he "chose a site of this centre" in 1947 and placed this in Oye-Ekiti under Father K. Carroll.²⁰ Carroll was able to recruit or employ many carvers for the Oye Centre which was later popularly known as Oye School or Workshop. Many of them were already popular Ekiti carvers as well as others from neighbouring towns.

Those from Ekiti, already mentioned above, were Areogun who was born around 1880; Bandele, the son of Areogun, and Lamidi Fakeye, the apprentice of Bandele who was born in 1925 and died in December 2009²¹. Two of Bandele's children expectedly became part of the school. Though Areogun, because of his age, was not directly employed by the School, he was given heavy contracts to produce Christian works for Oye School.²² In addition, four of Areogun's apprentices, Abuleogun, Osamuko, Ogungbe and Arowogun also indirectly became part of the Oye School, and they made good money through contracts from Oye School. Other Ekiti carvers, whose services were employed to boost the political and economic objectives of the Catholic Church in Ekiti in particular and in other Yoruba areas

in general, included Agbonbiafe, Olowe and Agunna.²³ One of the few carvers employed from outside Ekiti by the Oye School was Otooro of Ketu who worked for a short period for the school. According to Otooro, he could not completely abandon his equally lucrative farming for the Oye School. He just wanted to make extra money through the school to invest in his farm.²⁴

However, with the institution of the Oye Art Centre, which was also popularly referred to as Oye Experiment, the economy of Ekiti took a more productive turn. For example, many of the earlier rebuked, denounced or rejected traditional artists were immediately recognized, employed and paid by the same people who had earlier rejected them. The carvers were also allowed to buy wood for the centre in addition to the ones commissioned out to people in different towns.²⁴ These were experts in locating good wood for carving. Many of those given these contracts also employed the paid services of others in villages and towns. At times, these villagers also secured the help of others who were equally paid for carrying wood from the interior or forests to the road. From these forests, many were also paid for carrying wood to various locations where they would be transported finally to Oye-Ekiti.

This was how the Oye Art Centre generated businesses, and therefore money, for the carvers, wood fetchers, escorts who were usually hunters, wood cutters, wood head-carriers, local truckers and professional motor drivers who had to transport many heavy woods to Oye from very distant places. Of course, many farmers were usually paid heavy compensations for the occasional destruction which wood cutting had caused to their farms. All these sources of revenue were in addition to the salaries, and stipends in some cases, which those employed by the Oye Centre received. This is not forgetting, however, that the employed carvers, apart from working for the Catholic Mission, were also allowed to work for and sell works to many kings, chiefs, rich individuals and European art collectors. Many Ekiti traditional religious devotees also privately or secretly commissioned ritual or shrine wood images from some Oye carvers who were to also keep some of their patrons secret. Such works were used for various mystic and spiritual purposes. This was why, according to Kevin Carroll, "there are many thousands of Yoruba

carvings in villages, not usually seen by the casual resident or visitor".²⁶

By 1949, the Oye wood carving centre had acquired fame far beyond its Roman Catholic denomination territory and had acquired such national and popular image that it was almost difficult for the Centre to meet up with various official commissions, not to talk of the private ones. 1949 to 1957, thus, marked the beginning of new and greater economic boost to the Oye Centre, and Ekiti benefitted enormously from this economic development, particularly through greater flow of cash among various art stakeholders and their relations.²⁷ For, according to Kevin Carroll, in 1949, the Bishop of Ondo Province, "Bishop T. Hughes asked us (the Oye centre) to make examples of our work to be sent to Rome for the 1950 Holy Year Exhibition of Mission Art".²⁸ With the financial support of Western Catholic Church, the Oye wood images were sent to Rome where, accordingly, they were exhibited. This was after they had been first exhibited locally in Ibadan and Lagos with the assistance of the British Council.²⁹

People, particularly those who strongly rejected any form of Yoruba carved images, were surprised and even disturbed about the way biblical themes had been interpreted with the traditional Yoruba features. For example, Christ, Mary, Joseph and other Biblical figures were represented as Yoruba people; with traditional Yoruba dresses and postures. What is more, these images were carved stylistically with body proportions usually given to the carved Yoruba gods. Imagine Mary carrying little Jesus on her back with girdle or Mary with well plaited hair? But the missionaries had no alternative than to accept their new Christian imageries which within a short period became part of Roman Catholic liturgy not only in Ekiti or in Nigeria but also all over the world. According to Father Onih, through Father McLoughlin of Annunciation School, Ikere-Ekiti, the Olubadan (king) of Ibadan and many of his chiefs saw the exhibition of the images with amazement and high regard. The exhibition was overwhelmingly viewed by "thousands of Christians from other denominations, Muslims and numerous school children; some mainly for curiosity reasons".³⁰ These exhibitions became an economic triumph not only for the Ekiti carvers, the Roman Catholics, particularly in Ekiti, but also for the Ekiti people generally.

For example, the exhibitions had so much advertised the products of the Oye Centre that various unprecedented commissions began to flow into the centre. Besides, many traditional Ekiti carvers who had taken carving as occasional occupation came back strongly to be a part of this income generating venture. In addition, many parents who had been dissuaded by the Christian missionaries from allowing their children to engage even in art and craft works began to change their minds, because of the career opportunities it provided. "Imagine the Otun people", according to Arowolo "commissioning the son of my friend, now dead, to produce two palace posts that cost Forty Pounds in 1953 – though not yet a big time Ekiti carver?"³¹

However, 1951 to 1956 can be considered a golden era of wood carving tradition in Ekiti, especially for the carvers of the Oye School. The Oye School found it difficult to cope with the flood of commissions from Catholic Secondary Schools, Catholic Teachers' Colleges, tertiary institutions, government agencies, town unions, Catholic churches, foreign collectors, powerful kings and chiefs. For example, works were produced for Annunciation (Secondary) School, Ikere, Aquinas College, Akure, St. Augustine's College, Ikere, St. Joseph's College, Ondo, Mary Immaculate College, Ado-Ekiti, St. Peter's College, Akure and Corpus Christi College, Usi, among others.³² These works were usually found in the chapels, libraries and open spaces regarded as holy in these institutions. Nearly all the big Catholic Churches in the major Yoruba towns patronized the Oye and other Ekiti carvers.

These included St. Patrick's Church, Ado-Ekiti, Catholic Cathedral, Akure, St. Mathew's Church, Ondo, St. Paul's Church, Yaba, Lagos and the Major Seminary in Ibadan. In addition, through Father O'Mahomey and Father Kevin Carroll, carved doors and other wood works were produced by the Oye Art Centre "for the Catholic Chapel at Ibadan University (and) Ibadan Cathedral", between 1954 and 1956.³³ The "Catholic community of Ikoro Ekiti was the first African community to ask our (Oye) carvers to carve Christian work".³⁴ A lot of works produced by Oye carvers were also bought by the Catholic Mission and taken to Rome for liturgical purposes. The Oye informal art school, however, still continued to be inundated with commissions, particularly between 1953 and 1956. Since the Oye Centre was also already noted for its very gigantic carved house posts,

which were generally figurative, the government became attracted by their architectural grandeur. For example, there were “some orders for large posts from Kenneth Murray, Head of the Department of (Nigeria) Antiquities, and Bernard Fagg of Jos Museum”.³⁵ With a huge amount of money contributed by the community, the Oye Centre also “produced large posts for the palace at Illa and for a pagan temple which the Antiquities Department intended to preserve at Epe”.³⁶ One of the most expensive commissions were the “very large pillars and doors for the Edena gate-house of the palace of the Oni of Ife, the religious head of the Yoruba people”.³⁷ The economy generating potential of wood carving in Ekiti was becoming unlimited, particularly through the Oye Art Centre. For example, according to Father Carroll:

... orders (for wood carving) had come to us from Europeans... (and when) African leaders gained control of the internal administration of the Region (Western Region)... they were not reluctant to pay for traditional art-work when it was suggested by the architects. In 1956, Lamidi Fakeye... was given contracts to carve doors, chairs, and thrones for the (Western) House of Assembly and the House of Chiefs in Ibadan, and a door and pillars for the Premier’s office. He also carved large pillars for the Independence Exhibition of 1960.³⁸

Lamidi later turned out to be the most internationalized of the Oye school products, even though he was an apprentice to Bandele of the same Art Centre. While some of these carvers were with the Oye Centre, they were at the same time encouraged to have their own private carving workshops with many aids employed to help in working on commissions.³⁹ Lamidi Fakeye, who later had a branch of his workshop in Ibadan, employed many carvers to assist him in his numerous art contracts. Most of the carved works of Lamidi were “for the Americans”.⁴⁰ However, by 1960, the wood carvers of not only Oye but also of Ekiti generally had made significant contributions to the economy of Ekiti, and this was well acknowledged by Father Carroll:

Since wood carving profession has changed to a large extent over the years from a strict devotion to pagan worship to the service of Christianity, the modern courts (palaces), foreign clients and the government agencies, etc., the value of art has appreciated dramatically and has helped create some new Ekiti modern elite, more than what cocoa, the main economic product of Ekiti, would have done for many people... though cocoa is no doubt the main and most valuable economic product of Ekiti, I am saying that if it is possible for the traditional carvers to equal the number of, or outnumber, the present cocoa farmers, wood carving would have definitely been the main economic product of Ekiti, particularly because of foreign patronage. Believe it or not, though with no official statistics at our disposal, our direct knowledge or involvement shows clearly that every carver around us makes not less than £2,000 (two thousand pounds) a year... more than a salary of 4 university graduates... remember that cocoa is seasonal... everyday is the season of a wood carver in today's Nigeria.⁴¹

This is not an overstatement, because even as late as the late 1960s, the salary of a University graduate was not up to £800 (eight hundred pounds) a year. Evidently, wood carving was just one aspect of art and craft industry that played a great role in the Ekiti colonial economy.

Conclusion

From the colonial period, Ekiti has been known mainly for its high agricultural potential in the areas of major and subsidiary crops production, like cocoa, kolanut, cotton, rice and tobacco. These were in addition to the production of various staple food, particularly; a variety of yam, among others that were heavily patronized and indispensable, especially in the Yoruba big cities like Lagos and Ibadan. Of course, cocoa, the main exportable crop of the Ekiti people, which put Ekiti on the economic map of Nigeria, made people unconsciously disregard other income generating areas; forgetting

that art, wood carving, was also part of the economic tentacles of the colonial Ekiti. It provided jobs for very many people, even making many not only self employed but also employers, instead of being employees. It must be stressed, and one should not forget, that before the age of the “oil (petroleum) boom” in Nigeria, and before and during the period of “cocoa boom”, there was also “art (wood carving) boom” that extended its economic promise from Nigeria to Europe.

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