

# Museum, Memory and Discursivity: The Praxis of African Tradition

by

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to trace determinant memories shaping elements of Yoruba artistic culture within African tradition and perspectives of art and the artists as they influence shared meanings in the tradition. To achieve this, notable iconology and dexterity of portraiture signifying the people's traditional ingenuity are considered. This is done with particular attention to a selection of Yoruba art sequestered in museums. Identified are some objects of *Ifa* divination like the *opon Ifa* (*Ifa* divination tray) and *iroke ifa* (*Ifa* divination tapper) which exist as museum objects. These objects are closely examined and analyzed in context of their current relevance and the historical knowledge they hold in relationship to the socio-political life of the culture they represent. They are also examined in context of site, discourse and historical influence, both on spatial and temporal levels. The styles of these products of memory are also analyzed perhaps to justify their allotted spaces within the museums where they are displayed.

**Keywords:** Memory; Art objects; Tradition; Yoruba art; Discourse and *Ifa* literary corpus

## Introduction

Examination of selections of Yoruba art sequestered in museums today provides an effective means of establishing the historical development of an African traditional existence. Art constitutes a body of material and tangible assemblage consciously put together, to transform an idea from the mind into real or physical form; the plan as inseparable from the resultant material. For centuries, African art was not recognized by the West as art, but as curios of primitive extract. Studies of traditional and contemporary African art and current global discourse however paint a different picture of this situation.

Persuasions within this context point to African art as a product of conscious thought process. Since “painting is in the mind, not in the hand”, perhaps the strength, advancement and realization of the potential of African tradition is best served through due consideration of her surviving art.

Various surviving artistic and archeological evidences of Africa point to her strong and expressive art traditions, both religious and secular. One of the places where these are readily located and systematically accessible today is the museum. The development of the museum as they are presently constituted in Africa arose from a series of activities by Western explorers. These were spurred on by the rulers of their respective homelands who were interested in the economic potentials held by Africa. New found marine power and navigational capability to access the straits of Gibraltar into West Africa in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century drove the search for bounty. The explorers brought back to the homelands, slaves, gold, ivory and spices from their travels but in the early days they seemed very rarely to have brought back works of art or even craft.

Rulers, nobles and priests had been known to collect art and outlandish objects which they kept in palaces and temples since ancient times for various reasons, most important of which were for display of power, influence and aesthetic pleasure. Industrialists, entrepreneurs and other adventurers joined these later, accumulating vast works. The word museum assumed prominence in fifteenth century Europe through its use to cover art ‘collections consisting of paintings, sculptures, coins, curios, and natural objects like ostrich eggs’. Frank Willett states; That where African objects are concerned,

‘probably some of the first art-works were those objects in hybrid styles carved by African workmen after the European models in the sixteenth century. Examples of these Afro-Portuguese ivories surviving are elaborate salt-cellars, hunting-horns often decorated with European animals of the chase, spoons and forks. The spoons and forks are, apart from the decorative handles, essentially of sixteenth-century European form, and the arms of Portugal occur on the hunting-horns’ Willett (1993:81-84).

The created past in Africa exists in immediate human surroundings. Her documented origins according to KojoFosu, date way back into “the period of the green Sahara between 8000 to 6000 B.C.” Fosu (1996). The Neolithic period engravings and paintings formed the earliest art proofs as found in African caves. The tomb paintings of Egypt and Nubia followed, and then the sculptures of this same era, about 3000 B.C. Then we have the celebrated wood and bronze sculptures ranging from about the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C. These West African sculptures were identified among the Ife / Yoruba, Nok and Benin. African art survived within the spatial and temporal dimensions, making investigation of her past through archeology perhaps the most important legacy.

Countless salvaged African art objects found their way into regulated institutions/ museums as donations for fame, or acquisitions for gain of the collectors. The renaissance in nineteenth century Europe which emphasized knowledge, reason and cultural achievement assisted the development of the museum institution. That era and its fascination for the strange, the sensual and the exotic, all encouraged the growth of the museum, and this culminated in an acceptance of both the building, which houses the art collections, and the art objects themselves as what is termed the Museum.

Promotion of the mode of display in the museums was established by various countries as a way of attracting visitors. Helpful towards the propagation of regional or national supremacy, display of national wealth, ownership and control as keenly promoted by capitalism, the museum collections may be said to represent a 'freeze' in time of earlier memory, preserved for posterity. There developed various types of museums like the art, war, natural history and science museums. They may largely fit into two categories, the large national museums and the regional ones like the Obafemi Awolowo University Ile- Ife's Martin Aworinlewo Odeyemi Museum and the University of Ibadan museum. The regional museums tend to serve the interests of their specific locality for example as may be observed from the content of those mentioned above. Lazzari and Schlesier say they not only preserve

“the Yoruba culture in Nigeria, but also vigorous meeting place... where new breakthroughs in political crafting as well as domestic and industrial crafts were invented. This model works better with African peoples' traditions of visioning and thinking, and ways of praying, planning, speaking and doing things; of organizing socio- politically and of exploiting the natural resources of their environmental setting”

Lazzari and Schleisier (2008)

## **The Context of Memory in Museum**

Memory is that “storage bank wherein knowledge, wisdom and understanding are deposited and retrieved at will. Memory is also the obligation and invention of every society and a reflection of local cosmologies that keep changing... that there are no recollections which can be said to be purely interior... preserved only within memory” Halbwachs (1992). Whereas art exists as a major conservator and it employs memory whose existential capacity is within the universal function of the mind. Edelman in Negash 2004, states that “art is the fountainhead from which political discourse, beliefs about politics, and consequent actions ultimately springs”. From the foregoing contexts therefore, the museum presents a veritable container or showcase of those captures or images frozen in time which would otherwise have remained in memory.

But Nora (1989) opines that “history is always a problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what is no longer... a representation of the past”. Furthermore, memory ceaselessly “reinvents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins and myth”. In memory may one also appreciate the role that oral traditions play in archiving collective memories, histories and myths as means of understanding cultural origins and heroes. These characteristics of memory and its influence upon art, is supported by Negash’s claim that “in the constant challenge to understand phenomena that confound us, art offers an alternative to scientific endeavours, or at least complements them”.

In summary, museums hold memories and tell stories through the numerous objects in their collections that are emblematic to the communities of their origin. In a way also the objects present a continuous demonstration of how the producing artists are embodiments and reflectors of the particular ideologies displayed in the art forms. The objects are shown as inheritance from their societies. The current trend of scholarship in art and the history behind the art provide significant proofs of the positive contributions of museums. The development of the museum has more than anything else, probably elevated art historical studies and criticism, and promoted philosophic, critical and other discursive practices.

## **Yoruba Memory**

Art being one of the ways we remember, offers a way through which we find out about things which were lost to decay, destruction and fading memories in our heritage, particularly when the revelation of old art is assisted by archeology. The Yoruba heritage as an African archetype was formerly entrapped in oral tradition and therefore fated for oblivion. Some of this fading memory is recognized today as the intangible Yoruba heritage, the most prominent genre of which is the *Ifa* literary corpus.

The study of the *Ifa* literary corpus as source of Yoruba history is far from being a neglected course. It has provided significant insight into meanings of traditional Yoruba art and assumed a role of great authority and symbol of knowledge in mythology, history and philosophy. It has attracted in particular the detailed consideration of Bascom (1969), Abimbola (1975), Abiodun (1975), Ogungbile (2001), and Adejumo (2001). While this present effort is not a review of these works, observable gaps in the insights and perspectives provided by the former are to be filled. New information access through the artistic products of memory and new ways of looking at the art evidences which seem to be generally overlooked are envisaged.

Some of the established facts of the earlier studies concerning *Ifa* are; “it is an important source of information about the Yoruba indigenous cultural values and belief system...the repository of all the myths and moral tenets of other divinities” (Abimbola 1975:389). “Of all the Yoruba divinities, *Ifa* is the most esoteric in nature; he acts but has no physical form” (Abiodun 1975:421); “It has the supremacy over other deities in Yoruba society” Adejumo (2001:101).

A summary by Ilesanmi (1984) asserts that: ‘the advocates or devotees of the other *orisa* seem to limit their pontification to their individual *orisa* while the *babalawo* goes beyond *Ifa* to legislate on all the ramificated aspects of Yoruba life’. The *babalawo* is the custodian of the paraphernalia of *Ifa* divination (he can also be referred to as curator of *Ifa* literary corpus). The Yoruba systems of divination (*Ifa*) geomantic systems are enshrined in symbols and symbolic messages. Adekola (2011) some of the *Ifa* paraphernalia that carries *Ifa* symbolic messages are *iroke* (tapper), *irukere* (flywhisk), *osun* (ornamental stick), *apaadi* (potsherd) and a host of others.

The art of the Yoruba enjoys significant visibility as a regional genre in Africa due to several reasons. Yoruba speaking peoples derive cohesiveness from the accepted consciousness of being one nation with a dominant head. They speak a mutually intelligible language and generally accept the singular source of divine kingship in Ile-Ife. This divine kingship is rested on the acceptance of Oduduwa as the eponymous father of the race and in recent times it has become the focus of Yoruba nationalism with all Yoruba seemingly believing that they are children of Oduduwa. Though Oduduwa is a household name, few Yoruba probably know what it signifies. The temerity behind the general agreement among the Yoruba concerning language, culture and ethical concepts has been founded perhaps upon the stability and power of documentary information in *Ifa* religion and its oral scriptures. Examples abound in the form of the spherical shape of most energy patterns which is said to be “represented in *Ifa* divination through the use of a two dimensional circle in the form of a tray (*oponIfa*)” Fatunmbi (1992: 3). Apart from the description of *ifadida* (divining by the *Ifa* process) resulting in ‘an image that is a two dimensional representation of a three dimensional reality’, the production of the *oponIfa* (divination tray) itself engenders iconographic codification. Fatunmbi also opines that “Yoruba culture has used the *Ifa* paradigm of the cosmos as the basis for building their major cities”. This is explained with the circular formation of the city around a core and nucleus of the circle which stands as the *oba* and his palace. Location of the abodes of paramount chiefs, councils of elders, traditional, professional and craft guilds and shrines of the kingdom are also related in like manner. Further explanation regarding the influence of *Ifa* upon town planning and establishment of structures is provided in the information on an old Yoruba astrological form known as *Gede*. In this astrological form, “*Ile* (earth) was considered a reflection of *orun* (heaven) and the layout of Yoruba cities was designed to make them mirrors of the cosmic order” (Fatunmbi 1992: 15- 16). An examination of aerial images of some major Yoruba cities like Ile- Ife, Owo and Oyo perhaps will provide some insight.

## **Prevailing Discourse and Analysis of Museum Selections**

By the very origins of the institution known as the museum, it is presumably inevitable that their operational mode will be Western. Hitherto the contents of museum buildings and their mode of presentation address that original Western influence steeped in the expectations of Western audiences. Some prevailing trends of discourse hold views to the end that the history of Yoruba art encapsulates layers of identity which are interrelated and have gone through a lot of revisioning over the centuries.

The contact with the West, colonialism and recently independence, led to new artistic explorations which have produced latitudes within which museum selections are done. Examples of these are the neo- traditional art, of which is the Yoruba wood carving tradition/ experimental workshop art promoted by fathers Carrol and Mahoney. Here Lamidi Fakeye features prominently. There are also contemporary art works of the *Ona* artistic genre by Kunle Filani et al. There furthermore are the recent sculptural art types categorized as installation arts. Many surviving traditional Yoruba art and artifacts are of carved wood and they form a sizable part of collections of art-works in Nigerian and foreign museums. The philosophical and valued ideas underlying the Yoruba art-works perhaps determined the painstaking attention to detail in their execution and subsequently their stand in contemporary museums both in Nigeria and the Diaspora.

The progressive erosion and attrition of the underlying values giving rise to the exquisite art is perhaps traceable to subtle changes of thought and suffusion of Western materialism. This also is probably responsible for acknowledged critics of African Art like Ulli Beier giving high recognition to this genre of art. Where the art producers are concerned however these critics hold various views. Beier for example regarded the University trained artist as one needing an identity or reconstruction of a forced identity. Okediji (2002) while discussing some of the critical views on the museum artistic content and mode of selection, differs from Beier's position that the university trained artist has a problem founded upon having "to proclaim his cultural highbridity to the European audience... he establishes his newly gained identity in the art galleries of Europe more often than in the villages of Nigeria". Okediji in conclusion submits that (a) those who truly need information on the artistic development of the Yoruba are the Westerners and (b) "the new African artists address Western audiences because fiscal and hegemonic negotiations are being done in the galleries and conference centres of Europe and the United States rather than at the shrines of Africa". Okediji(2002:49).

Though the renowned African traditional artistic genre described as sacred art takes prime position in most Western museums, there is also evidence of the movement towards new pressure points of aesthetic experiment. There is also an intensified revision of attitudes towards national pride which may be found in the development of and the content in the African museum selections. One good evidence of this predisposition can be found in the factors leading to the emergence of a complete UNESCO affiliated Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding in Osogbo, near Ile-Ife, Osun State of Nigeria. The archival works of Ulli Beier while pursuing his avid interest in Yoruba art and culture from 1950 through the 70s form the nucleus upon which this centre is established. The centre possesses images and other documents on Yoruba traditional, sacred art and it comprises of a museum, gallery, conference auditorium and other facilities of international standard. Several of the Ulli Beier images collection portrays Yoruba sacred art in performance. Examples of the traditional and sacred type of art are those categorized by Trowell (1997) as Spirit Regarding art objects. Among these are the *Ose Sango*, *odo Sango* and *laba Sango*. Outside the collection however are the Ifa divination materials, *oponifa*, *irokeifa* and *agereifa*. Other considerations include that of the emblem of tirelessness *osamasinmi*, of the Owo and Benin ancestral altar.

The 'Spirit Regarding' Art works of the Yoruba in particular do not necessarily show the message it carries plainly to the uninitiated eye, and this is characteristic of many African art objects. Spirit Regarding Art is described as any art specimen produced to invoke spiritual forces by people in order to obtain spiritual assistance in the period of distress. It may also be an art object or symbolic representation used by people to celebrate their ancestral spirits. The major feature of the spirit-regarding art object is its sacredness. The notion is that the ultimate essence of the sacred is about power which is very inherent in the Yoruba hierarchical system. This in itself is said to relate not only to the conventional terms of domination or suppression, but to how the spirit-regarding art object may generate an experience of *orun*, the other worldly realm. This may be of spiritual transformation by being possessed or manifest through the display of superhuman power. This form of art rarely embodies spiritual power in its own right; rather it must be activated (Hackett 1996:46). The process of activating spirit-regarding art depends on which spirit the art is dedicated to. This in turn, is perhaps responsible for the type of material and colour used for the objects. Usually, these objects are produced by initiated professionals, family or lineage, schooled in the very spiritual requirements and essence of the artistic expression for which they are commissioned.

## Oponifa

The divination medium is the major pivot of Yoruba traditional religion and it comes with a very complex system within the culture of the people. *Oponifa* is a divination tray used by the *babalawo* (*Ifa*diviner) during the divination process. It is a tray or flat container in which *iyereosun* (white powdery substance) is spread for divination. This tray or the use of it varies from priest to priest, but the more common and durable type which inevitably parades greater artistic expression is made of wood. It occupies an important position within the Yoruba artistic space and world view. The producers of *oponifa* endeavour to capture the societal essence while directing same towards the use of the art object. The object, though a product of memory, supports Yoruba traditional religion in providing standards of life. It also acts as a prop in the interpretation of *Ifa* literary corpus towards achieving the expectation for harmonious life within traditional Yoruba society.

The foundation of *oponifa* comes into focus perhaps viewed through an analogy by AwoFa' Lokun Fatunmbi. He describes the spherical form or sphere of the *oponifa* as likeable to the spherical arena of nature upon which energy patterns form. In manufacture, it is made to always reflect the unity of the Yoruba cosmos mainly of four major sections and five other adjoining ones. The sections are invoked with the tray placed flat in front of the seated diviner, in opening each consultation. The *oponifa* (*Ifa* divination tray), has the head (*ori*) or North, furthest from the diviner. A bottom (*odi or eseopon*), or South, nearest to the diviner. There is also a left (*onamunu*), and a right (*onaoganran*). The spherical arena on the tray which is the largest section is *ojuopon* (face of the tray).

The others are the quadrants of the tray on both sides. The *oponIfa* is also home to all forces of expansion and contraction of the smallest atom to the largest star. Within its “two dimensional circle in the form of a tray”, it embodies the imagery of the art found thereon, ‘two dimensional representation of a three dimensional reality’ Fatunmbi (1992:3).

This dimensional reality perhaps has a parallel in the several discoveries of scientific precision relating to the location and design of various elements on the Egyptian pyramids of Gizeh. In a presentation by the National Geographic institution on this and other minor pyramids of Egypt, ducts positioned on the faces of the pyramids were discovered to have existed for reasons contrary to those centuries earlier ascribed. These are found to serve purposes of admitting sun light in to the pharaohs’ burial chambers to aid the soul passage to the ‘skies’. The ducts were positioned and directed for admission of sun rays at particular angles for precise required intensity and precise light volume due to calculated duct size. There are astrological connotations and coded systems of knowledge relating to this and reposed in the attendant priesthood.

The artistic representations on the *oponifa* are closely related and the carved- on images are often meant to be understood and seen as images in the mind’s eye Drewal (2009). They portray a link of the visible tangible world of the living and the invisible other worlds, spiritual realm of the ancestors and deities, determining the visualizations or conceptualizations that are formed on the *oponIfa* (Ifa Divination tray). Though this concept of visualization is also found in some other Yoruba art but on *OponIfa* there is a raised figured border on the circular wooden flat surface. There is also a smaller flat circle upon which the diviner, *babalawo* imprints his readings of the *Ifa* divination process. The images that are represented on the raised outer surface of the *Ifa* wooden tray are usually clustered around the perimeter of the tray.

There are dialectical interpretations of the memorial images, depending on the area of Yorubaland of its manufacture. The flat inner circular tray of the *oponifa*, the powdery surface on which the diviner inscribes, is the functional part. The marks made at the end of the day look like broken intermittent lines and these are symbols of the *odu*, thrown up by the *opele* (Ifa divination string). These lines become perhaps intersection lines deployed by the artist, though in a manner which do not exactly fit the crisscross fillers / patterns common to most Yoruba art objects, carvings and artifacts. The lines are significant because they are open channels of communication revealing the forces at work in the readings of the *odu* for any particular family, group or community. The image within the *OponIfa* captures the interrelationship between Orunmila (deified native founder of *Ifa*) and *Esu* (its divine messenger or activator). The *Ifa* paradigm of the cosmos and systems of divination offer those who dwell in the world (*alaye*), access to the forces at work in their specific situations. It also offers opportunities of influencing specific situations through supplication and or sacrifice. This perhaps is reason for the recurrence of iconological symbols of particular animals used in sacrifice on the art representations on *oponifa* all over Yoruba land.



The *oponIfa* (ifa divination board) is segmented into units. Images of figures or motives that are deployed on it convey various messages as placed in unitary segments. However, each unit operates in historically prescribed orders and though they are interchangeable, the circular tray presents a form that is multi-focal. This *oponIfa* (Plate 1) stands as one of the most exquisite versions of the *Ifa* paraphernalia and assemblage of tools and implements. The outer-most circumference is filled with regular and finely finished birds. These birds are portrayed with wings outstretched in flight. There are thirty-one birds gathered around this outer perimeter of finely carved divination tray. These birds are said to represent witness to the consultation with Orunmila. The birds perhaps represent the Yoruba metaphorical mothers (*awoniya*), who are aged women of the society, custodians of supernatural powers. Often times the birds are linked with witches, powers that control the favor of members of their congregation mostly to the disfavor of non-members who are found wanting. These are also associated with female power deployable in aid or against diviners. If they do not give spiritual support or approval to the diviner or are found in contradiction of the diviner, confusion ensues both for the diviners in practice of the trade, and the populace.

The iconography of the inner level or plane of the artistic perimeter of the *oponIfa* depicts various recognizable objects of local iconography of the Yoruba world. There are the popular emblems of the mudfish, sentry image with all seeing eyes similar to that of the chameleon at the top part of the tray and figures smoking pipes. The eyes identified or similar to that of the chameleon perhaps represent that of *Esu* another divine messenger who transforms the human sacrifices into foods for the gods. At the bottom of the inner circle, the carver or producer of the *oponIfa* places a crab; a creature like *Esu*, imbued with power to move in marginal realms. On either sides of the tray is a face with arms that extend from its nostrils looking like the popular reptilian projection from the nose of the ram heads on Owo ivory arm bands known as *ubowo*. This composition of the *oponIfa* and its detailed finishing suggests the Yoruba segmented art style found on various other art objects like the *opaase* (royal scepter) and the *ade* (conical crowns). They portray competing elements of art in a composite environment.

## **IrokeIfa**

*IrokeIfa* is an instrument of divination used by *Ifa* diviners. When *iroke* is tapped on the divination tray, it produces the sound that accompanies the rhythm of *Ifa* poem as chanted by the diviner. The rhythm produced by the tapping of *Iroke* is important because it helps the diviner in recollecting the long but appropriate *eseIfa* (verses of the *Ifa* literary corpus). Generally, *iroke* is carved from wood or ivory. It is slightly curved in arc shape following the natural shape of a tusk. The theme of the image carved on *iroke* depends on the artist's iconographic depth coupled with the request of the user, *babalawo*. *Iroke* is no doubt an indicator of the honour and prestige enjoyed by an *Ifa* priest who has gained professional success and consequently has enhanced his economic stature through its use (Abiodun 1975: 444). *IrokeIfa* can be kept inside *Odu* (spiritual calabash) along with *ikin* when not in use.

The divination tapper, *iroke* or *irofa* is also known to assist the *babalawo* in creating the motions and repeated tapping that bring back *Ifa* verses from memory and also “invite the presence of the spirit of Ifa” Sheba E.A (2001). Since so much of *Ifa* literally corpus is transmitted through commitment to memory and recitations, the *Iroke* are therefore an indispensable tool or implement. The theme of the image carved on *iroke* depends on the artist’s iconographic depth coupled with the status and request of the user, *babalawo*.



**Plate 1:** *Opon Ifa*, Ifa divination tray of Owo origin. (Source: Drewal & Schildkrout 2009)



**Plate 2:** *Iroke Ifa*. (Ifa divination tapper). Source: Abiodun 1991:110.

## Conclusion

There are a few conclusions to be drawn from the development of the museum, its role/ usefulness in the display of the arts and its role in bringing the memories they encapsulate to the fore. Some of these may be found in the analysis of artifacts like the two pieces analyzed. Though the artifacts are by unknown artists, like most traditional African art in the museums today, they are still of considerable benefit in providing access to the stylistic study of the specific art, period, life and culture.

They are of help in shaping socio- cultural ideas about the concerned people, making their experiences vivid for the arts and to “clarify and deepen for us emotional incidents of familiar situations” Negash (2004). The various museum pieces arrest our senses and provide us with virtual socio- cultural and other insights which enrich our previous knowledge of the concerned culture, if any. Some of the museum encounters even from empirical studies, have benefited students in refocusing their otherwise cloudy concept- formation research processes by providing observable concrete evidence, analysis and even meaning.

The museum is a proud setting for engaging with art, which in turn brings back memory and generates discourse on various levels. The museum presents artistic details to us, which is engaged in stimulating our senses, imagination, imagery and expressive capabilities towards effective portraiture of our shared meanings. It may also be said to be an attestation to the power of artistic memory in engendering new centres of study with commitment to cultural studies, rejuvenation and pursuit of intensive cultural interaction between Yoruba and other African cultures and arts.

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