
The Impact of the Environment on the Creation of Yoruba Art Forms

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ABSTRACT

It has been widely observed that environment plays a major role in influencing or rather determining the types of activities or events of a particular area. This is evident in the area of Agriculture where a particular soil determines a particular crop to be planted and in transportation where the surface of the earth (in that environment) determines its means of conveyance. Sharing the same view with regard to art practices in Yoruba land, this paper examines and relates the sources of materials used for producing Yoruba art works to their art practices and drew out possible prospects.

Keywords: Environment, Art Materials, Yoruba Art Forms, Sources, Practices, Agriculture

Aims Research Journal Reference Format:

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1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Nigerian art dates back years before the Nigerian man conceptualized such creations as art. However, the recorded history of Nigerian art can be traced to less than two hundred years of expression. There are numerous traditional artwork and origins, Nigerian arts and craft, only ancestors are the humans who can tell how it started. The list of traditional art and their origins are endless. Art itself is an expression of the author/artist/artiste's imaginative activities. Art can be visual, audio and performed. There is art in every life form. Art is the most unexplainable concept as its meaning varies among individuals. It has been instrumental in pushing the boundaries of innovation, particularly in the digital era where in digital art virtual reality have presently influenced artistic creation and expanded the potentials of artistic expression (Simanjuntak, 2023).

With different styles and techniques, Nigerian art has evolved from ancient yet remained same at the same time. Nigerian art has always been daring and crafty, with deep cultural meaning just like Yoruba art of today. The only difference is in the stories they tell. The Yoruba is deeply rooted in the lfa literary corpus, indicating the orishas Ogun, Obatala, Oshun and Obalufon as central to creation mythology including artistry. This in turn affects their arts forms in terms of subject matter and materials used.

The use of materials in the Yoruba art is tied to the functions, either man regarding or spirit regarding which enables the traditional artist to carefully source for items that would best represent works in the context or purpose it should serve. In the earliest period, the Yoruba artists had developed a refined and naturalistic sculptural tradition in terracotta, stone and copper alloy - copper, brass, and bronze - many of which appear to have been created under the patronage of King Obalufon II, the man who today is identified as the Yoruba patron deity of brass casting, weaving and regalia. The dynasty of kings at Ife, which regarded the Yoruba as the place of origin of human civilization, remains intact to this day.

According to Adande et al (2009) in the history of creativity, *“Much of the art of the Yoruba, including staffs, court dress, and beadwork for crowns, is associated with the royal courts. The courts also commissioned numerous architectural objects such as veranda posts, gates, and doors that are embellished with carvings. Other Yoruba art is related shrines and masking traditions. The Yoruba worship a large pantheon of deities, and shrines dedicated to these gods are adorned with carvings and house an array of altar figures and other ritual paraphernalia. Masking traditions vary regionally, and a wide range of mask types are employed in various festivals and celebrations.”*

There is no gain saying the fact that most art forms are the exclusive products of such (art) environments. This is evident in the indispensable role played by environment in the determination of Yoruba Art. Along this line, Schiuma (2017) views the arts as a catalyst for technological advancement as they foster an environment where technology and creativity are fully integrated. To drive this point nearer home, it is necessary to state briefly the concepts of environment, the Yoruba people and dwell a little more on people's views on art.

2. ENVIRONMENT

Environment in view of Kumar (2018), is believed to have originated from the word 'Environ' derived from the French work Environner which signifies "to surround" or "to encircle". He goes further that the term generally refers to natural surroundings, meaning that it encompasses the physical surroundings occupied by all living beings and include air-space, water, land, plant, wildlife and flora-faina, etc. The Third-New Webster International Dictionary (1976), also defines it as the surrounding conditions, influences of forces that influence or modify the whole complex of climatic, biotic factors that act upon an organism or an ecological community and ultimately determine its form and survival. In the same direction, the New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1991) sees it as "Surrounding, especially the material and spiritual influences which affect growth, development, and existence of a living being".

3. YORUBA

The Yoruba, according to Alapo (2021) are one of the largest ethnic groups in Southern part of the Sahara Desert. Established as a collection of diverse people bond together by a common language, history and culture, the tribe dominates the western part of Nigeria. Sharing similar view, Kalilu (1996) describes the Yoruba as a patrilineage society that constitutes one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa South of the Sahara and occupy the South Western Nigeria i.e. Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, parts of Kwara States, Togo and Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey).

He states further that they share boundaries and cultural ties with the Borgu to the North, the Edo to the Southeast, the Apoi and the Ijaw to the East and the Nupe to the Northeast. Of a relatively cultural homogeneity, he posits that their settlement is dialectally organized and grouped as the Ekiti, the Ondo, the Ijesa, the Yagba, the Igbomina, the Awon, the Egbado, the Ife, the Ijebu, the Egba, the Oyo, the Ilaje and the Akoko.

4. ART

Davies (2015) sees art as very complex based on different perspectives at which it is viewed. He arrives at a hybrid definition: something is art if it reflects skill in achieving significant aesthetic goals, falls under an established and publicly recognised art tradition or if its primary intention of analysing it as art is appropriate and realised at the end. Sharing similar view, Isrow (2017) sees defining art as a difficult task. He also sees it as a riddle which artists, theorists, critics, etc are still trying to tackle by looking for best approach to its understanding. In view of this, he describes it as a creative phenomenon that undergoes constant changes based on its continuous creation. Further on views from different perspectives, while Uzoagba (1978), sees it as human conception made manifest by the skillful use of a medium, Talabi (1979), describes it as the expression of the characteristic attitude of a group of people in a particular period. However, Lee (2022) and Woodbridge (2017) summaries their views on art as "a human creativity directed towards goodness, beauty and truth".

Generally speaking, works of art have been in existence since the time of creation and if critically studied, these works came into existence as a result of the religious belief, philosophy-and the needs of the society. This fact can be attested to by the famous discoveries of pre-historic art works in some parts of the world, most importantly, in Africa.. Working within the framework above, the next line of thought is the source of materials used for these art works. This leads us to the core of the discussion because it has been observed that the art form and practice of a place is usually determined by its environment as vividly reflected in Yoruba Art. Along this line,, Akinmolayan (2023) submits that Yoruba's outstanding and unique artistic tradition as vividly reflected in its art forms include woodcarving, sculpture, metal work, textiles and beadwork. These forms .come under three broad categories namely, vegetation, minerals and animal raw materials.

Vegetation

Prominent here is wood carving while others are, calabash/gourds, straw, grasses, raffia and others.

- i. **Wood:** Wood is the most favourable material used by the Yoruba carver due to its cheap accessibility arising from favourable forest zone and conformation in the area of shape formation. The rich vegetation provided by the environment offers the artist a wide variety of choices of his selection. The physical structure, nature or composition of wood in term of hardness or softness, the form or shape and the size are all necessary variables in determining the type of work to be produced. Often, hard, termite-resisted woods that can also withstand weather conditions like Iroko (chlorophor excelsa), Ayan (African satinwood), obony and mahogany series are preferred for figures or statues, drums and so on while masks like Gelede, Epa and others are preferably carved from soft and light wooded tree trunks like Omo. Based on the ritualistic functions of these masks, their relief impressions are usually made pronounced to engender extraordinary, terrific and awesome looks some out of pot-like, helmet-like shapes or simple face coverings hung on the head.

As mentioned earlier, the shape of wood or tree trunk dictates the form of the work in question. Generally speaking, typical Yoruba statuary is characteristically cylindrical based on the cylindrical form of the trunk material with which the artist works. Armed with the tools mainly the cross cutting axe (the adze) and knife, the artist brings out his (desired) form(s) by carefully chipping off the unwanted areas. Thus we have one figure in one wood and as many as twenty-figures on one head-dress or a mask and even more in a carved house posts as these figures are arranged in tiers in sympathy and conformity with the rule. Mention must also be made of palm oil for bathing these figures as ritual offering to many of the deities carved in figures and other items attached (especially to the masks) such as shrubs of herbs, cowries, glass beads, pieces of glass animal horns, skulls and teeth in an attempt to attain the highest level of realistic appearance. At this juncture, it is necessary to mention the fact that the forms represented by Yoruba artist are derived solely from contact and close study of nature. Critical observations reveal that his entire repertoire is made of human features and of other familiar creatures of his immediate environment. Parts of details of this are ibeji figures, mother and child, animals like ram, leopard, antelopes, birds, dogs, monkeys and all other activities going on within the Yoruba environment.

- ii. **Calabash/Gourds:** Calabash is known as igba in Yoruba language. Igba is known to be one of the important utensils found in a typical Yoruba home and besides, it Features prominently and frequently in their proverbs and riddles. Igba is got from the plants of cucurbitaceous family and found in some parts of Yoruba land e.g. Oyo, Ogbomoso and Iwo. When the fruit is ripe, it is soaked in water until the seeds and pulp rot out and then scraped and left to dry. When it hardens, it can then be incised, scratched, engraved or burnt with hot iron, carved or even painted. There are different types of species meant for different purposes and a particular species may be adapted to serve variety of functions depending largely on shape and size. For instance, a large calabash for washing clothes or carrying loads (lower half), a basket shaped calabash and a ladle can be got from the bottle gourd species (*Lagenaria vulgaris*) while containers for sundries can be got from other species like the ribbed gourd (*Luffia acutangula*) and snake gourd (*Trichosanthes onguina*).
- iii. **Raffia Palm:** Raffia palm termed *Raphia Vinifera* are grown along the valleys and swamps of the rain forest of Nigeria. Its condition of growth includes lots of water, sun shines and niarchy clay/loamy soil. The dispersal of its seeds are aided by man, animal and water for spread and continuity of growth. Fibres from these raffia palms are woven into various articles like sacks, bags, hats and rainproof covers while the palm are constructed into a myriads of crafts such as baskets, beds, seats, services, toys, masks, bird-cages and so on. Similarly, cane, bamboo, coconut, shell among others are constructed into some utilitarian and artistic items e.g. chairs, hand bags, belts, wall hangings, flower vases and cups.
- iv. **Straws:** Mats are essential household articles that are commonly used for a variety of purposes such as seating, bedding, fencing, screening, covering of floors, ceiling etc. They are produced mainly from different cylindrical plants 'grown naturally within die swampy coastal lowlands and riverine marches of the valley sides. Prominent among these plants are phrynium plant which is about 10 ft high and *Cyperus Articulatus* (Sedge grass used for encore) that grows to an average height of about 4ft. Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that the mat used for sun-drying cocoa is woven with either pith or the hard outer layer of the palm branches: Prominent among the centers noted for mat weaving in Yoruba land are Erin-Ijesa, Efon-Alaaye, Aramoko-Ekiti, Okemesi, Ipoti, Erinmo, Ipetu, Ikeji-Oke Erin-Oke, Ogotun, Ikogosi, Ilaje and Ikorodu.

- v. **Cotton/Wool:** Discussing the art of weaving without preceding it with fibre processing will be baseless like a building without foundation. Two types of fibre namely cotton and silk abound within the Yoruba environment. The former is grown while the latter is gathered or collected from Anaphe cocoons - a typical caterpillar that produces it. Silk fibre though suitably classified as animal raw material will be discussed here (under the same heading) with cotton fibre to entrench good follow-up and facilitate comprehension. There are as many as three varieties of indigenous cotton plants with different characteristics of texture and colour ranging from white, across tawny to pale pink. Variation is not explained through species grown alone but also by the differences in soil condition throughout Yoruba and neighbouring allies (Eicher 1976). An overview of cotton processes involves ginning, carding and finally spinning before a yarn or fibre is produced. In producing a silk fibre, the weaver has to gather a large amount of larvae in a container in order to produce enough cocoons which will undergo the processes of de-gumming, washing and finally spinning. Varieties of silk fibre come from *Anaphe infrecta*, *Anaphe venata* or *Anaphe moloneyi*: caterpillars and their hues vary in accordance to the type of tree the larvae feed on. These threads are then woven into cloth before dyeing or vice versa. The concept of weaving emphasizes the simple mechanism of interlacing warp and weft yarns to produce a predetermined or calculated pattern depending on the type of loom used. Among the Yoruba people, two primary types of weaving done on two types of loom are common and each of the sexes is indigenously associated with each of them i.e. men noted for the horizontal loom while the women use the vertical. On the average, 4 ½ inches and 21 inches respectively are the common widths produced by these looms the products of which are sewn together to serve the desired purpose. It is quite interesting to note that all the materials used to produce the loom itself and all other materials used for the fabric production i.e. the bars used for erecting the loom, ropes, shuttle boat, bobbin, heddles-etc are the products of the immediate environment.

5. MINERALS

The various art practices that rely solely on minerals are stone, clay, mud, (metal; copper), aluminum, dye.

- i. **Stone:** Despite the availability and abundance of wood within the beck and call of the Yoruba for their sculptural pieces, they still carve and use stone as one of their sculptural media. Though, this practice is limited to few areas based on the scarcity of workable rocks and the relative cheapness and access to other alternative materials. There are granite or gneissic granite, quartz soapstone (steatite) generally classified as hard and soft stones and found mainly in Ife and Esie as exemplified by their rich stone sculptures. Examples are the impressive monolith, *Opa Oranyan*, objects such as Ogun's staff, a ram head, a fish, a tusk, an idena figures and some anvil-shaped stone all of granite and Esie soapstone human figures discovered in 1934.
- ii. **Clay:** Green (1972) explains clay as more useful to man than any other single substance, and the ease with which it can be shaped has led to its use for an astonishing variety of purposes in almost every community. Clay is one of the cheap materials found within the confinements of various Yoruba settlements and its artistic functions are broadly categorized into two namely clay mud sculpture and terra cotta. Some figures of sub-deities and other similar figures among the Yoruba are exclusively represented with clay mud for religious and socio cultural purposes. These figures which are popularly referred to as *sigidi* are hardly fired which make them highly friable. On the other hand, terra cotta is a fired clay form and its representations cover a wide variety of areas ranging from figures to household utensils produced mainly for religious, socio-cultural as well as economic

- purposes. Clay work is practiced in most parts of Yoruba land like Ilorin, Osogbo, Oyo, Ife, Ijebu-Ode, Igbara-Odo, Erusu-Akoko, Ipetumodu and Isan-Ekiti among others.
- iii. **Beads:** Bead work is one of the famous arts practiced by the Yoruba. Its development is not unconnected with the effective demands made by Obas and Chiefs for their regalia as it stands as the principal distinguishing symbol between them and the commons. Though, the production of beads these days is carried out within and outside Yoruba land in places like Ife, Igbo-Ukwu, Bida and Upper Volta but the origin has been reportedly traced to Ife by eminent scholars. For instance, (Ojo 1990) declared that "there is abundant evidence in the form of bead making crucibles. Some found in archived logical context prove that the beads used for making the head gear were made in ancient Ife". The major constituents of beads are variety of quartz sands which are resistant to fracturing gins lead as modifier in the case of Ife and richly coloured glasses melted and sharpened into desired forms. Despite the importation of some types of beads and the production of some outside Yoruba land within Nigeria, the art still flourishes prominently among the Yoruba because of its invaluable and inevitable role in their hierarchical system.
- iv. **Metal:** The art of bronze and brass casting, Iron mining and smelting were practiced and are still practiced in some parts of Yoruba land. It has been reportedly established that the constituents of these art are located within some areas in Yoruba land. Good examples are tin and copper located at Ijero in Ekiti State and Iron ore found in Otta and Oyo area (Ojo, 1966). Other centres noted for these arts are Ife, Osogbo, Ijebu, Owo, Ekiti Ibadan, and Abeokuta. Various objects such as figures' head, bracelets, chairs, necklaces, ear-rings etc produced in brass or bronze usually undergo the lost wax (cire perdue) method while the ones like hoe blades, cutlasses, knives, rods, chains, armlets, adzes, etc. produced in iron normally pass through a long process of extraction, heating, pounding, sifting, washing and finally smelting colour.
- v. **Dye:** Dyeing, as practiced by the Yoruba, illustrates a developed use of materials found in the environment for the adornment of clothing (Ojo, 1966) which was always highly valued by the people. Dyeing has become a legacy of the Yoruba artists. Although synthetic dyestuffs are in vogue now but the locally produced dyes especially indigo is still very much in use because of its outstanding qualities of richness in shades and its long lasting effect. Varieties of this (indigo) are indigo feraarrecta, indigo ferasuffricotosa, indigo feratinctoria and loncho carpuscyanescens. Their plants grow but sometimes cultivated and are mostly found in the bush fallow of North-Western Yoruba land at centres such as Iseyin, Uaro, Otu, Shaki and Ago-Are among others. The process of preparation involves either sun-drying the leaves or pounding, fermenting and drying the fresh parts. The result obtained is then made into balls of different sizes and kept or strung on a rope in a dry place till any desired time. When the need for use arises, these indigo balls are placed in a pot underneath another perforated pot which contains ash. Water is then pored into the top which filters through the perforated holes into the one underneath and fermentation occurs gradually. Intermittently, the dye is stirred until the desired shade is formed. Once this level is attained, the sediment (or shafts) of the indigo are removed and the cloth either plain or starched (or paste-resisted to create patterns) is dipped in the dye for varying lengths of time until the desired tone or shade is achieved.

6. ANIMAL

Under animal raw materials, horn/tusk, leather, cotton/wool, skin fur, are the materials used in making art forms in Yoruba land.

- i. **Horn/tusk:** In the traditional Yoruba art, ivory is another important medium of art expression. This is because elephant tusk possesses the qualities of uniformity and elasticity, the pivotal factors on which its value rotates and asides its significance in the symbolic authority of the kings, the status of elephant among animal is deep-rooted. Ivory carving is practiced mainly in Ekiti, Owo, Ife and Oyo where there are denser distribution of elephants but the density is gradually reducing by now. Its conical shape determines the overall form of the objects like wands of Ifa divination, swords, bracelets, cuffs, various ceremonial costumes, attachments and even equestrian figures are interestingly carved supposedly to meet the demands of the various socio-political and religious groups in the society. Mention must also be made here of the bone and horn carving of the Yoruba. These are got from other animal's besides elephant and their level of artistry is not as high as that of ivory. Horn carving in particular is widespread nowadays because of the daily slaughtering of cows for human consumption. These horns are carved, shaped into interesting and utilitarian forms like key holders, hair clips, belts, bracelets etc and finally polished to give shining effect.
- ii. **Leather:** Leather is another important material used for creating art forms in Yoruba land. This is made possible due to the availability of animals, both domesticated and wild within the environment whose skins are flayed and processed locally. Originally, locally processed leather were used as hunters' dresses and mats found in every Yoruba home but later developed into forms like bags, scabbards sandals, -wall hangings, bracelets etc. In addition, there are other forms of different sizes that serve socio-cultural and other functions and the creation of these forms and their purported functions is largely determined by the needs and Creative intuition of the artists.

7. CONCLUSION

So far, this paper has examined and discussed the various ways by which environment determines traditional Yoruba art. It also highlighted the values of local materials within the Yoruba environment as buttressed by the merit award conferred on the Oye-Ekiti artists (organized by a group of catholic missionaries) at the African Religions Arts Exhibition in Rome in 1950 which was so conferred not only because the standard was high but because the output was prolific; covering a wide range of art forms and most importantly the materials derived from the immediate environment. Worthy of note here is the simple fact that the above point emphasizes the role of local materials in achieving the merit which clearly correlates and complements the core of this paper. Again, this paper has emphasized the importance of local materials in Yoruba art as clearly seen the incessant flight of art works produced with local materials in Nigeria which has made such materials a hallmark and unrivalled the atmosphere of cultural heritage. Finally, since materials determine the arts of the Yoruba people, the emergence of new materials will definitely create new ideas and new format (since shape of materials determine shape of art form) and this will ultimately enhance and enrich Yoruba's (African's) contribution to world cultural heritage.

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