

## CONCEPTUAL KINGS AND THE CROWN: ECOLOGY AND ROYALTY IN YORUBA GOURD CARVING

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ABSTRACT: The history and significance of the motifs used in Yoruba gourd carving in Nigeria has thus far been of very little concern to scholarship on the art. The repertoire of the motifs is very large and includes eight categories: geometric, texts, anthropomorphic, anthro-zoomorphic, man-made object, zoomorphic, skeumorphic and floral, the last three of which are preferred for important commissions and are of particular interest to this work. Premised on the socio-historical significance of the motifs, this art historical exercise examines their entire range, iconological significance and history. The history of the motifs is sought in contemporary practice, the functions of carved gourds, oral tradition and the art history of Old Oyo, the kingdom from where the art originated in Yorubaland. The paper classifies the development of the motifs into three chronological periods of pre-1836, post 1836 to 1960, and 1960 to the 1980s. It observes that the zoomorphic motifs allude to the ecological reality in Yoruba homeland. The animals are also regarded as kings in their various typological and zoogeographical contexts and are therefore, with the crown and *markhamia tomentosa*, symbolic of kingship. Significantly, the motifs and their development attest to the participation of Yoruba art in the general education, stratification and political mobilization of the society.

Keywords: African art; Yoruba culture; Carving; Nigeria; Oyo.

Contemporary Yoruba gourd carving is very rich both for its prodigy and variety of motifs. The motifs have been categorized into eight types.<sup>1</sup> These

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(1) KALILU, R. O. Rom. *Crisis on African Art and Yoruba Gourd Carving: A Need for Historical Concern*. (Unpublished Manuscript).

types are the geometric, the texts, the skeumorphic, the anthropomorphic, the anthrhopo-zoomopfic, the zoomorphic, the floral and the man-made objects. The various motifs, which for purposes of clarity shall be discussed here, have been mentioned elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

In the geometric category are; the interlace, circle, concentric circle, semi-circle, rectangle and triangle. The text motifs are Yoruba, English and Hausa words and phrases rendered in Yoruba and English alphabets. The skeumorphic motifs are two; the Edo ivory mask – the symbol of the 1977 international Festival of Arts and Culture and the Nigerian coat-of-arms. The anthropomorphic motifs are also only two. They are human hands, and human figures used as symbols of the zodiac signs of Gemini and Virgo. The half human-half horse and the half human-half fish figures, which are respectively the zodiac symbols of Sagittarius and Aquarius, are the anthro-po-zoomorphic motifs.

The repertoire of the zoomorphic motif in its own case is replete. The notable ones in this category are lion, leopard, elephant, viper or python, hare, peacock, goat, fish, crab, scorpion and ram head. Contrariwise, the floral motifs are only two; the foliage of *Akoko*, *Markhamia tomentosa*, and an unidentified flowery plant. The man-made objects are; cruciform, book form, string of collar beads, wedding bell royal horse-tail whisk, royal staff of office and crown.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the motifs are of relatively young age in the art, but the majority of those in the zoomorphic category and one each in the floral and man-made object categories are of some antiquity in the history of Yoruba gourd carving.<sup>4</sup> The development of the relatively new motifs have been assigned to certain periods between the post 1836 and the 1980s. But the older motifs have pre-1836 origins.<sup>5</sup>

While it may be obvious that the inspirations for the introduction of the relatively new motifs can be attributed to the twentieth century mass acculturation and the factor of divergent patronage,<sup>6</sup> the inspiration for the emergence of the older motifs is not in any way obvious.

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(2) *Ibid.*

(3) For details see *ibid.*

(4) KALILU, R. O. Rom. The Origin of Gourd Carving Among the Yoruba and the Implied Whereabouts of the First Domicile of the Oyo Rulers. In: *The Nigerian Field* 56 (1991), 105; KALILU, R. O. Rom, *Old Oyo in West African Art*. Doctoral thesis, University of Ibadan, 1992, p. 124-132.

(5) KALILU, R. O. Rom, (Unpublished manuscript) *op cit.*

(6) *Ibid.*

Regrettably, historians of Yoruba art usually overlook the importance of the history of motifs. Consequently, meaningful in-depth study of the history and the reasons for the origins of the motifs in Yoruba gourd carving however appears thus far to have been of little interest to the growing analytical art historical scholarship on Yoruba gourd carving.<sup>7</sup> This study is consequently an attempt to cater for this short coming.

Of particular interest to us are the lion (figs. 1-8), the leopard, the elephant (fig. 2), the viper or python (fig. 3), the peacock (fig. 4), the foliage of *Markhamia tomentosa* (fig. 3) and the crown (fig. 5) motifs. These motifs fall into the category of the older generation of motifs in Yoruba gourd carving. The motifs are more traditional to the art. They also appear to have some curious affinity. They also appear to occupy an important and prestigious positions in Yoruba gourd carving, being preferred for important commissions.

One most obvious and intriguing thing about this art is that other than the foliage of *Markhamia tomentosa* and the crown, the majority of the motifs under discussion are derived from ferocious animals that are not in any way common around the towns where Yoruba gourd carving centres are now extant. A study of these motifs is highly necessary because it partly holds the keys to a better understanding of Yoruba gourd carving and similar motifs in other arts of the Yoruba. Significantly, it help us to appreciate the dynamic inter-relationship between the factors of function(s) and patronage vis-a-vis the origin of motifs in the arts of the Yoruba people.

The history of these motifs are becoming almost unknown even to the majority of the carvers, particularly the contemporary young generation of carvers. As late as the late 1990,<sup>8</sup> the few old hands in gourd carving also only

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(7) Some of such works are: OLAPADE, O., Calabash Carving: An Indigenous Yoruba Graphic Art of Nigeria. DESIGN JOURNAL 26, (1990), 71; T. A. Alamu, *Contemporary Calabash Carving in Oyo*, Master's dissertation, University of Ibadan, 1990, KALILU, R. O. Rom (1991), *op. cit.*, p. 97-108. Other less analytical works on same subject are: MURRAY, K. C., Calabash Carving: A Beautiful Nigerian Art, *In: NIGERIA* 10 (1937), 72; NEWMAN, T. R., *Contemporary African Arts and Crafts*, New York, Crown Publishers Inc, 1974, p. 147-164; OYELOLA, Pat, *Nigerian Crafts*, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan Educational, 1981, p. 57-63.

(8) None written information for this work was collected through direct field research conducted in Yorubaland between 1988 and 1992. Some of the carvers interviewed are: Chief Ayinde Adedokun (late), Alaodi compound, Oyo, September, 1988; Ajamu Emmanuel, Alakia Compound, Ogbomoso, June, 1988; Chief Raimi Amao, *Baale Afingba*, The Chief Carver, Afingba compound, Iwo January 1889; Alhaji Raji Aderoju Lawal, *Baale Afingba*, The Chief Carver, Bola Compound, Oyo, July 1988; Pa Olawore, Chairman of Oyo Calabash Carvers' Association, Aareage compound, Oyo, January 1989; Akindele Salawu, Aroja compound,

merely recall the iconography of the motifs as directly decipherable from the Yoruba names of the objects represented. Such names are kinniun, lion; eerin, elephant; okin, peacock; etc. At times, the iconography is deciphered also by the description of the carved gourds in relation to the motifs. Some of such descriptive names are *alade*, crown bearers; *eleye*, bird bearers; etc. The historical origins and the inspirations for the motifs are however not so recollectable to the carvers.

Nonetheless, Yoruba gourd carving itself has a deep-rooted history in Yoruba artistic landscape. Its origin has been linked with the pre-fourteenth century Old Oyo kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Some of these motifs have also occurred in some arts in other media that were contemporaneous with gourd carving at Old Oyo kingdom.<sup>10</sup> In fact similarity in the use of the “... *sumptuous surface ornamentations effected by the use of gritty background patterns used for emphasizing the motifs or vice versa*” between the styles of gourd carving and some arts in other media has even been observed, for example.<sup>11</sup> This “... *style is even more characteristic of and largely used in gourd carving ...*”<sup>12</sup> Since the art and these motifs are carry-overs from the Old Oyo kingdom. Consequently, the history of the motifs can be sought in an art historical deductions on the Kingdom.

Contemporary written records and traditions on the kingdom recount the occurrence of the lion, the leopard, the elephant, the viper or python, the peacock and the crown motifs among others. Some of the extant art objects associated with Old Oyo also have some of the motifs, particularly the snake depicted in similar manner as in the present day gourd carving.

Clapperton observes that at Oyo-Ile, the capital city of Old Oyo kingdom, “... *figures of men and women ... are various ... but principally of the boa snake ...*”<sup>13</sup> were depicted on house posts and door panels. And particularly on the wooden posts supporting the verandahs and the wooden doors of the king’s and the chiefs’ houses are “... *figures representing the boa killing an ante-*

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Oyo, July 1988; Olusola Adebayo, Akesan market, Oyo, March 1992; Ganiyu Onawole, Akesan market, Oyo, February 1992.

(9) KALILU, R. O. Rom (1991), *op. cit.*, p. 100; R. O. Rom Kalilu (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 95, 179; KALILU, R. O. Rom (unpublished manuscript), *op. cit.*

(10) KALILU, R. O. Rom (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 126-129.

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 158.

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 157.

(13) CLAPPERTON, H., *Journal of a Second Expedition Into the Interior of Africa From the Bight of Benin to Soccatoo*, London, John Murray, 1829, p. 48.

*lope ...*"<sup>14</sup> Richard Lander also observes that on the Sango shrine at Oyo-Ile<sup>15</sup> were

*"... immense figure of a giant bearing lion on its head ... About twenty-six or twenty-seven figures in bas relief... On the heads of the small figures are wooden images of tigers ... snakes ..."*<sup>16</sup>

On a wooden house post excavated from Oyo-Ile (fig. 6) and supposedly carved by Are Lagbayi in the eighteenth century,<sup>17</sup> the viper or the python is depicted in a pose similar to those on the twentieth century gourd carving. Also on an undated ancient wooden door panel (fig. 7) associated with Old Oyo Kingdom,<sup>18</sup> among other motifs are snakes one of which, probably a viper or python, tried to bite or swallow a lizard.

The animals: elephant, lion, leopard, viper, and peacock after which the motifs are formed must have been part of the actual experience of the Oyo-Yoruba for them to have their recognizable forms represented with much significance as motifs in the peoples arts. Such animals and birds abound more in the savanna in which the core of Old Oyo kingdom was located.<sup>19</sup> The brothers Lander observes that around the northern part of the kingdom, particularly the capital "*... abounds plentifully ... animals ... such as the lion, the leopard, the elephant, the wild ass ... buffalo ...*"<sup>20</sup> Tradition also claimed that *Alaafin* Abiodun, the traditional ruler of Old Oyo between 1774-1789 kept buffalos, lions, leopards and elephants as domestic animals in his palace at Oyo-Ile. This is the reason that *Alaafin* Abiodun is described in his praise-name, *oriki* poem as:

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(14) *Ibid.* p. 58.

(15) I have identified the hut shrine that Lander described as Sango shrine. See KALILU, R. O. (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 128; KALILU, R. O. Rom, Traditional and Record: A search for the Legendary Wood Carvers of Old Oyo, *In: UFAHAMU* 20, 2 (1992b), p. 58.

(16) LANDER, R., *Records of Captain Clapperton's Last Expedition to Africa*, London, Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830, p. 197-198.

(17) KALILU, R. O. Rom, (1992b), *op. cit.*, p. 58.

(18) This wooden door panel is museum of the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ibadan.

(19) KALILU, R. O. Rom, Leatherwork in Oyo: Access to Material as a Factor in the Origin of an African Craft, *In: AFRICAN NOTES* 15, 1 & 2 (1991b) 111.

(20) HALLET, R., (ed.) *The Niger Journal of Richard and John Lander*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955, p. 100-101.

*Oba o ge'ranko ni iwo*

*O ge'fon ni baraidi*<sup>21</sup>

*The king that rides on the horn of animals*

*And rides on the fleshy buttocks of the buffalo*

The existence of such animals in the vegetation zones in which the Oyo-Yoruba lived may not be the only reason for their use as motifs in gourd carving and arts in other media. Further explanation is in the concepts, which these animals symbolize. Let us therefore examine the animals for their symbolism.

The leopard is the symbol of royalty among the Oyo-Yoruba. The reason for this is not certain but it may not be unconnected with the fact that Sango, the third *Alaafin* of Old Oyo kingdom, since his deification is the symbol of good kingship among the Oyo-Yoruba. A tradition claimed that his father, Oranmiyan left Torosi, his wife pregnant before he left for a war. While in labour and in the absence of her husband, the woman died when she delivered Sango. The baby was consequently thrown into the bush where he coincidentally fell to the care of a nursing leopard which breast-fed him alongside its own cubs for three days. Oranmiyan returned from the war and retrieved his son and a cub leopard on the third day. Sango is for this reason, till date, referred to as "*Omo ekun*", the leopard's baby.<sup>22</sup> Also, the leopard is feared for its ferocity but admired for its agility and habit of willful killing of all encountered lesser animals with impunity. A privilege that belonged rightly to only the royalty in Yoruba culture. It also alludes to the awesome nature of the *Alaafin*.

The peacock and the viper are regarded in Yoruba zoology as kings in their typological domains. Okin, the peacock is regarded as the king of the birds hence the saying "*Okin l'oba eye*", the peacock is the king of the birds. The viper, being the most poisonous in the Yoruba vegetation experience, is considered the king in the snake domain.

The elephant and the lion, in their own cases are regarded in Yoruba zoogeography as the kings in the two vegetational zones in Yoruba country. The core of the Old Oyo kingdom was located in the guinea savanna zone while some of its provinces and the other parts of the large empire it controlled were located in the forest zone of West Africa. The elephant is considered the king of

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(21) OJO, S., *Itan Oyo at Afijio*. Saki Bamigbade printing press, n.d, p. 48-49.

(22) KALILU, R. O. Rom, (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 130.

the animals in the forest while the lion is taken to be the king of the animals in the savanna hence the Yoruba saying:

*Eerin j'oba ninu igbo,  
Kinniun j'oba ninu odan*

*The elephant is the king in the forest  
The lion is the king in the savanna.*

The elephant is considered to be majestic in its pre-eminence hence the saying, "*Ajanaku koja mori n kan firi, ibi erin ba gbe koja tigbo tiju ni o m'ola erin,*" the passage of an elephant attracts more than a glimpse, wherever the elephant passes both the bush and the forest (all and sundry) will experience its majesty (eminence). Apart from being known as the leopard's baby, Sango is also known as the elephant. He is referred to in his numerous praise-names as "*erin ola rin,*" the elephant who walks with dignity and "*... erin k'owo ija lori, ekun baba Timi ...*" the elephant that raises his pugnacious hands to the head! the leopard, father of Timi.<sup>23</sup> In fact the Oyo royalty is till date known amongst other cognomens as the elephant, Erin, and which is the traditional title of their praise-poem.<sup>24</sup> Ewe-akoko, the foliage of *Markhamia tomentosa*, in their own case, are used in coronation among the Oyo and the other Yoruba, groups at large.<sup>25</sup>

When the entire range of the lion, elephant, leopard, viper, peacock, and crown motifs are considered panoptically, it is obvious that they are all connected with conceptual kingship and royalty in Yoruba thoughts. Since these animals are conceptual typological kings, the conclusion must be, that in addition to their being the results of the ecological contemplations of the Yoruba, they are undoubtedly represented more for their royal attributes. This stands to reason because when the art of Yoruba gourd carving started, it was originally employed for the services of the royalty.<sup>26</sup> The representation of these motifs certainly allude to the ecological and historical experiences of the Oyo-Yoruba in their old kingdom.

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(23) LAWAL, B., Yoruba Sango Sculpture in Historical Retrospect, Indiana University, 1979, p. 149, 151. (Doctoral thesis).

(24) KALILU, R. O. Rom, (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 130.

(25) *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

(26) *Ibid.*, p. 130.

Some of these motifs like the leopard and the elephant motifs are not peculiar to gourd carving or the Yoruba. They are found represented in some other Nigerian art traditions. The leopard is represented in the Benin and Owo<sup>27</sup> art traditions. The elephant is also depicted in the Nok and Ife art traditions. In these other art traditions, these two animals are equally associated with royalty. But in both the Nok and Ife; only the representation of the head of the animal is made but are represented with elaborate strings of collar beads on them. In fact at Ife it is represented with an elaborate headdress of beads.<sup>28</sup> This is unlike the Yoruba gourd carving. Coincidentally, the kingship dynasties of Oyo, Ife and Benin are traditionally linked.<sup>29</sup> But the occurrence of some of these motifs in their art traditions is not by itself enough to substantiate such claims but is a pointer to the fact that similar cultural ideas underlay some of their artistic practices.

However, Yoruba gourd carving is still peculiar. Other than the representation of the leopard in Benin and Owo, it is only here that such animals are represented in full pose. The occurrence of the motifs derived from objects with royal attributes is also significant in Yoruba art history. It is the only Yoruba art form with the most replete repertoire of motifs on conceptual kingship and royalty.

It is evident by this exercise that the development of motifs in a given art of given area cannot be fully comprehended without evaluating the history and the functions as well as the patronage of the art. This in-depth study of the history of these motifs outline their origins and challenges the much taken-for-granted tacit assumptions that historical deductions on the Yoruba through their art, especially those in wood, is limited by their lack of representation of vegetation.<sup>30</sup> But while vegetation is not represented in landscape form, it is represented by the implications of motifs partly derived from ecological contemplation and which when carefully deciphered could be of immense importance to Yoruba historiography.

These art historical deductions coterminate in the inspirations for the invention of some of the motifs in gourd carving and especially the participa-

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(27) DREWAL, H.J. and PEMBERTON III, J. with ABIODUN, R., *Yoruba Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. New York, Harry N. Abrams Inc. 1989. p. 97, see illustration 97.

(28) *Ibid.*, see illustration 54, p. 52.

(29) JOHNSON, S., *The History of the Yoruba*. Lagos, C.S.S. Bookshop. 1921. p. 8-9, KALILU, R. O. Rom, (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 10.

(30) For an expression of such view see CARROLL, K. F., Art in Wood, *In: BIOBAKU, S. (ed.) Sources of Yoruba History*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973, p. 168.

tion of the artists and their works in the process of social stratification of the society and political mobilization. The motifs are important among others because significantly, they were raised to deal with the mobilization of consciousness in the Oyo-Yoruba politics. They have been constant reminders of the dignity and the supremacy as well the majesty of the Oyo royalty – the initial effective patrons of the art, and the effectiveness of their authority over their subjects.

Figure 1



The lion motifs on a carved gourd.

Gourd, local white chalk, pencil. Carving and engraving. Ht. 25.5 5cm.  
Oyo 1990 Photograph by the author. R. O. Rom Kalilu (1992), pl. 51.

Figure 2



Elephant motif on a carved gourd. By Ayinde Adedokun. Gourd, local white chalk, pencil. Carving and engraving. Dia. 44.3 cm Oyo 1988. Photograph by the author. R. O. Rom Kalilu (1992), pl. 52.

Figure 3



The viper motifs on a carved gourd. The gourd shows two vipers intertwined head to tail and vice versa. Gourd, enamel paint – blue, black. Carving, engraving and painting. Dia. 47cm. 1992. Oyo Photograph by the author.

Figure 4



The peacock and concentric circles motifs on a carved gourd. By Adeniyi Adedokun. Gourd, enamel-blue, black. Carving, engraving, painting. 1992 Oyo. Photograph by the author.

Figure 5



The crown, royal staff, horse-tail royal whisk, etc, motifs on a carved gourd. By Ade Olaniyi. Gourd, local white chalk and pencil. Engraving. Dia. 47.5cm. 1992. Oyo. Photograph by the author.

Figure 6



A close up view of a house post from Oyo-ile. The central and the lower friezes, shows a poorly preserved snake motifs among others. Wood. Ht. 191cm. Museum of the Department of Archaeology, University of Ibadan. 1990. Photograph by the author.

Figure 7



Carved door panel decorated with a snake motif among others. Wood. Ht. 280cm Museum of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. 1990. Photograph by the author.

Figure 8



Gourd decorated with lion motifs and some geometric motifs. Gourd, local white chalk and pencil. Engraving. Oyo. 1990 Photograph by the author.

RESUMO: A história e o significado dos motivos utilizados na escultura em gourd (em formato de cuia (aproximado) oca) yoruba tem por muito tempo despertado pouco interesse nos estudos sobre arte. O repertório e as notícias são muito variados e indicam oito tipos. Levado pelo significado histórico-cultural dos motivos, este pequeno exercício de história da arte quer examinar suas variedades, seu significado iconográfico e sua história. A história dos motivos é analisada desde a perspectiva contemporânea e funcional, a partir da tradição oral e da história da arte da região do antigo Oyo, o reino que originou a arte na *Yorubaland*. O texto classifica o desenvolvimento dos motivos em três momentos cronológicos: pré-1836, entre 1836-1960 e entre 1960 até os anos 80. É possível constatar que os motivos zoomórficos fazem referência à realidade ecológica da terra natal dos Yoruba. Os animais também são representados como reis nos vários contextos tipológicos e zoo-geográficos, levando assim suas coroas e *markhamia tomentosa*, símbolo da realeza. Significativamente, os motivos e seu desenvolvimento atestam o papel da arte yoruba na educação geral, na estratificação e mobilização política da sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Escultura; Arte africana; Cultura yoruba; Nigéria, Oyo.