

Lamidi Olonade Fakeye: the Carver as an Enigma

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Abstract

This paper examines the life of Lamidi Fakeye, a traditional wood carver, his early life, influence, style and analysis of his works. Secondary data on Lamidi Olonade Fakeye: pictures and other information were obtained from published books, thesis and dissertations, journal articles, magazines, newspapers and internet sources. The data is analysed using historical, formal, and stylistic methods. The paper avers that canons of his style include large spherical heads, wide convex eyes, short legs and hands at diagonal angles. The paper concludes that the art of Lamidi Fakeye has influenced modern-day carving and that his influence transcends national boundaries.

Keywords: Carving, Wood, Traditional Wood Carving, Religion

Introduction

Carving is the systematic chipping of unwanted parts of a log or a given surface to create a unique effect on the given surface (Gloria, 1996). Carving is the process of, chipping or scraping a block of material such as wood to remove unwanted pieces until the block takes on the form that the sculptor has in mind. Carving has been examined to be as old as the world history. Man has part of history has been able to fashion different objects according to the availability of materials, among which is wood because it is abundant in nature and can be found anywhere. Early articles on wood carvings are very rare, but being easier to work with than other materials, wood must have been very evident and used.

Lamidi Fakeye Olonade, born in 1928, in *Ila-Orangun*, Oyo State, Nigeria. Lamidi needs no introduction to the Nigerian and international art scene. His middle name *Olonade*, which means, "the carver has come" signifies that he hails from a family of wood carvers. He learnt the art of wood carving from Bamidele George Arowoogun at a workshop organized by Father Kevin Carroll (a Roman Catholic) in Oye Ekiti. "Both his father and great grandfathers were wood carvers respectively. It was from the workshop that Lamidi came to the limelight" (Oligbinde, 2013). Lamidi was employed as a wood carving Instructor at Obafemi Awolowo University in 1978. Lamidi's father was a good carver who passed on his skill to Lamidi, who later devoted much of his time to learning this art form. Since then, he has not known only among the local people but among other Nigerians and even in the United States of America, Britain and all the places he has visited at one time or the other. "From the early sixties, he has produced a good number of carvings including masks, carved decorative doors, verandah posts and a host of others, some of which can be seen at the National Arts Theatre, Lagos" (Abati, 2016).

Lamidi Fakeye's works have been discussed in about twenty-one books, chief among them being Frank Willett's "African Art" and Father Carroll's "Yoruba Religious Carving". These authors have watched Lamidi carve and in their different ways have written what they think about his works. Frank Willett in his book has noted the similarities between Bamidele's works and that of Lamidi, and has this to say "It is very difficult to show which doors are by Bamidele and which by Lamidi, apart from the slightly greater depth of Bamidele carving. The ridge over the forehead often continuing round the eye socket is found in both, and the facial profiles and ear forms are also similar". When Frank Willett visited Fakeye in 1960 discovered that the artist had four apprentices

Buraina Akinlabi, Amusa Akande, Joseph and Ganiyu Fakeye, who were carving twin figures from a model their master made. Willett noted the similarities and noticed that the apprentices begin by helping with more or less mechanical aspects of the work and as their skill increases more and more is entrusted to them.

Lamidi is regarded as the best-known of the Oye Ekiti workshop carvers. It was this repetition with slight variations which ensured the certainty of the toughness of the old African masters. Father Kelvin Carroll wrote a biography of Fakeye in his "Yoruba Religious Carving". He did not find it difficult to work with Lamidi Fakeye not being a Christian, he even allowed his carved pagan themes. Father Kelvin Carroll says of this "Lamidi was a practising Muslim and does not take part in pagan rites, but many Yoruba Muslims make a syncretism of both religions and there is tolerance of divergence from strict orthodoxy". It is a mistake, to compare the work of carvers only with the most powerful works of the old days and then accuse them of weakness or decadence. The works of Bamidele and Lamidi should be compared with average or poor work as well as the work of outstanding carvers to obtain a true picture of their relative merit. Father Kelvin (1966) opines that "more recognition should be given to traditional carvers like Fakeye to preserve the professions".

His early development

Lamidi Fakeye's father had a lot of tools and wood in his workshop where he taught his son to use all of them. He taught him the basic techniques of wood carving but was not allowed to practice it until the age of eight. He started by sharpening tools and placing them in order on the table where it would be easy for his father to pick them while carving. By this, he got to know the different tools and their uses. At the age of eight, he was given tiny bits of wood with which he practised and made *omolangidi*, a wooden doll. This was his first carved object. Oligbinde (2013) observed that "after he carved his first object, he started carving wooden spoons (*Ipon Obe*); the main tool he used at this stage was the adze (*ake boro*) which is one of the most important tools. In this way, Lamidi carved his way to the wood carving profession".

When Lamidi was twenty years of age, his brother thought it would be good to send him to school, it was during the process he became a student of Reverend Father Kelvin Carroll. This was at the catholic Craft School at Oye Ekiti in Ondo State. While in school, he learnt more about the techniques of wood carving which helped him later in his artistic expertise. He was in this school for nine years between 1946-1955. He was apprenticed to one Bamidele Arowoogun who was also under Father Kelvin Carroll. He left the craft school when it was closed in 1955 after he moved to Lagos and secured his first job as an art instructor at "Holy Cross School".

The Artist and his materials

Lamidi was very much used to his materials. The way he handled them and his familiarity with them was very important. He handles them with ease. "He knew just the right wood to use for a particular sculpture and knew how to get it" (Adepegba, 1995). He has chosen his favourite woods; *Apa*, *Iroko*, *Ahun*, *Iro* and *Omo*. He uses *mahogany* occasionally also. He gets his wood from a sawmill. These woods have their typical characteristics. These are soft and hardwoods. There are white, brown, black, grained and ungrained ones. There are small, medium and large ones.

Some trees cannot grow beyond one foot in diameter while some grow beyond five feet. Some are insect-proof while others have to be chemically treated against insects. Some grains run horizontally or vertically while others curve in irregular shapes or lines. The direction of the grain determines the direction of his tool as he carves. If he carves from the opposite direction of the grains, the wood can crack. "When the wood cracks, he will have to fill the crack with wood bits or

sawdust but if the crack is deep, he would have to break it off completely or mend in other ways and eventually the design will have to change” (Kwame, 2011).

Choices of Wood

The choice of wood, according to Fakeye, depends on what he wants to carve and the purpose of the carved sculpture. He uses the following types of wood:

- (1) **Omo** is a hardwood tree which can grow up to four feet in diameter and is brown in colour. The wood is very durable. It does not crack or rot easily. In the sixties, he carved masks and verandah posts from it.
- (2) **Ire** is a softwood which is the smallest of the five types of wood used by the artist" (Tajudeen, 2009). It does not exceed one foot in diameter. During the olden days when lots of people still consulted oracles, the artist would ask his client what type of wood he was to use for a particular sculpture. The wood was frequently mentioned by these clients who had already consulted the oracle, especially in carving twin figures (*Ere Ibeji*). Combs, dolls and some other small objects could also be carved from *Ire* wood. Later on, Fakeye does use this wood very much now, because it is not very durable and because the demand for twin figures has declined.
- (3) **Ahun** is a white soft wood which the artist used extensively when there was a demand for wedding trays, plates, spoons and some other household utensils which he carved. Nowadays, it will be a strange thing to see anyone eating from a wooden plate with a wooden spoon. (Ajayi, 2013) noted that "Fakeye abandoned the use of this wood when the demand fell because of preference for glass wares and metal spoons".
- (4) **Apa** is a hardwood which has different shades of brown and does not lose its colour. Out of all these woods, *Apa* is the most dependable in terms of its colour. It has always proved useful for the artist, it is insect-proof and does not crack easily. He carves door panels, verandah posts, standing figures and other big sculptures from it. He still uses it.
- (5) **Iroko** "is the most used by the artist because of its much advantage over the other woods" (Oyetola, 1976). It is a hardwood which is very durable. It can be cut down and left in the forest for several years without any harm or damage because it is hard and insect-proof. This is the artist's favourite wood. The *Iroko* tree is the largest of all the other woods he uses and so a lot of his big works have been carved from it. Just as wood is important to the artist, so are the different types of tools he uses. "It is important that he uses his tools exactly the way they should be used to produce not just sculpture but aesthetic qualities because it is the expertise or skill with which he uses these tools that makes the difference between his works and those of other artists" (Oligbinde, 2013).

Tools

There are special tools the artist uses for carving. These tools are both local and foreign-made and he combines them to give him the result he expects in a carving. The tools are as follows: chisels of different types, ranging from flat, v-gouge, u-gouge., adze, knives, axe, sharpening stone, iron file, mallet,

A Critique of his works and discourse on his achievement after the Oye Ekiti Workshop

Lamidi executed a great many important commissions, of which the most numerous are his carved doors. He made them for churches in Ondo in 1961. Among Lamidi's most memorable relief carvings are the panels on the three sets of double doors for the church in *Oke-Padi*. The Centre and most elaborate set, containing six panels separated by traditional Yoruba interlace designs, represents scenes from the life of Christ, from the presentation in the temple to the entombment.

The panel- "Christ among the elders" illustrates the combination of Yoruba and Christian concepts. The basic forms employed are Yoruba, but the proportion shows a tendency to become more naturalistic and in a general sense, lacks the boldness of a traditional carving. In assessing this work, Adepegba (1995), thinks that "what is important is not the absolute merit of the door, but that the process of adaptation and integration is actually taking place; and that from this new process there may eventually come a style of carving that will express the mind of the new African".

Onifade (2009) also recalls that "The posts represent traditional Yoruba figure types of the local Ekiti style that Lamidi Fakeye learned from Bamidele. They have a vigour and expressive as well as monumentality lacking in the figures represented on the doors". (Y. Shllyon, personal communication, July 8, 2022) noted that, "Lamidi's career demonstrates the success of catholic mission workshops in Nigeria. They provided instruction and practice for him as a young and inexperienced carver and second many important commissions for him over a period of fifteen years. Lamidi, therefore, has had the opportunity to carve full-time and to train young assistants".

Lamidi Fakeye in his mid-thirties had become an independent artist, recognized for retaining and perfecting the essence of what was strong, vital and universally worthy of respect in Yoruba culture. By his forties, he had travelled, exhibited lectured and given demonstrations in France, England and the United States. Lamidi didn't lose his way as he encountered new religions, nor did he lose his way in the period of transition between colonial rule and the resumption of African independence. Rather, he transformed Yoruba woodcarving without abandoning tradition and helped to make it known in Africa, Europe, and North and South America.

Filani (2001) submitted that "it takes a hardworking and imaginative person to be important in arts, especially when he is not academically trained; more so in the Nigerian situation. It is a fact that Lamidi distinguishes himself in wood carving worldwide, and the core of his craftsmanship lies in the neo-traditionalisation of forms". However, all human beings are dynamic, and by nature, we must adapt to certain situations which are contemporaneous. Fakeye having experienced university life by interacting with academic artists also experimented with their approach that shows the dynamism in his creative being. Onifade (2009:82) opines that "Fakeye's sojourn to the United Kingdom in 1979 as a guest of the British Council and an expert on African art opened doors to other international engagements for which he became the envy of his colleagues". So to say that he has become a force to reckon with and this has added to his fame and popularity that makes this project relevant.

Kojo (2005), remarks that "he was an enigma, an inspirational and a symbol of hard work, honesty, determination and consistency of purpose". Okediji (2011) also asserted that "Lamidi works a defiant of classification that silently grows on viewers, blending with their moods simultaneously, taking their minds to strange and familiar forms and places full of false nostalgia". With all these beautiful appraisals of Fakeye by these scholars, one cannot but consider it appropriate to appreciate him further by having a statue of him for posterity.

Formal Analysis of his works



Plate 1: Lamidi Fakeye, Asan Eje (a woman honouring her covenant to the god who blessed her with a child), Wood (Iroko), 43cm, 1995.

Photographed by: Esan Azeez, 2005

According to Lamidi (2008), “a close study of a woman's sacred part will reveal that it is a pure artistic beauty”. Traditional carvings show nude women with breasts jutting out or the phalluses of the males hanging out, this can be found in (plates 2, 3, 5, and 6). However, unlike modern art, the traditional art forms do not seem to make attempts at sensuality or draw attention to sexuality (Burne, 1970). Okediji (2002), remarks that "there is more concentration of the female nudity in Yoruba traditional carving. He agrees that the woman's body is the most prized work of art and putting it on artistic display is no pornography". It is also to establish the fact that the stylizations of human figures with distorted proportions in traditional forms are deliberately done to create directional emphasis as noticeable in the treatment of the breast in his female figures. “The figures of the women are treated in manners which reflect the female physical qualities” (Abimbola, 2011).

These are some distinctive features of contemporary Yoruba works as can be found in the works of Lamidi Fakeye. His figures are usually symmetrical and though decorated in the round and meant to be enjoyed from any angle, they are however frontally positioned. “Most of the works, particularly those that are of two or three figural (human and or with animals) compositions are usually of hierarchical representation with the main subject being depicted larger than the others” (Akeem, 2007). "Fakeye forms are derived from the usual canon of traditional imagery though reflecting his adopted semi-abstract style which he has been identified with over time" (Filani, 2001). His figures are generally very robust, peaceful and characterized by clarity of details. They are generally depicted in bold forms, particularly the heads with the almond-shaped bulbous eyes, fenced with thick upper and thin lower lids which form borders around them. The broad nose and full chubby lips as well as the rotund cheeks, all summed together to depict the images of their youthful age, as seen in (the mask, plates 10 and 11).



Plate 2: Lamidi Fakeye, *Ose Sango*, Wood (Iroko), 45cm, 1996. **Photograph:** Taiwo Dele, 2004

"To capture the quality of a subject, you must have a feeling about it beyond literal qualities" (Oligbinde, 2013). To get it right, you have to have an empathetic understanding of what you are depicting. Getting a likeness, for instance, requires much more than an accurate description of all features. The intensity of a wood carving is an echo of which it was carved. Most of the goals most carvers have in common are to make their carvings readable from across the room. It is a good idea to think of your wood carving, as a space, an environment, rather than a collection of things. A wood carving must have a subject matter, which is also called the theme base.

Some very popular forms of traditional carvings include worship drums, *Ifa* divination board and tapper, *ibeji* and other free-standing figures, *Sango* staff of authority, *Gelede* mask, and shrine furniture. A few exceptions are the uses of traditional wood carvings as architectural fittings like door panels, veranda posts and stools, which serve as decoration, house furniture and status symbols respectively. *Ose Sango* depicts a woman kneeling on her both legs, with the representation of *ose Sango* which is the staff of *Sango* (the god of thunder) on her head. The *ose* has the image of a face on it. But the wings of the *ose* are carved asymmetrically with the same style and pattern. The woman is half-dressed with her breasts not covered. She is also depicted as having a tribal mark on her face and with an adorned traditional hairdo known as *all back* in the traditional Yoruba culture. She is well-beaded on her neck and both arms. The work is carved on a base with a negative space which includes a big ball that is carved inside which cannot be removed. The cloth of the lady is well adorned with traditional patterns like the base on which she is kneeling.



Plate 3: Gunyanguyan, wood (Iroko), 71cm (1999)
Photograph: Alao Babalola, 2006



Plate 4: Ilari Sango, wood (Iroko), 59cm (1998)
Photograph: Alao Babalola, 2006

Highly noticeable in all his works is his lavish use of decorative patterns called *Ona* (Okediji, 2011). This, more than the uniqueness in his manner of rendering figures, actually distinguishes him from any other known Yoruba carver dead or alive. His numerous works which often come in series are easily differentiated by the distinctiveness of motifs and patterns on them. Ekpo (1990:10) argues that "the main motives for making sculpture in African society until very recently, and indeed in Europe until the late century, were religion, prestige, and festivities. However, it appears that it was religion more than anything else that provided the primary stimulus for the making of the sculpture. Religion has its prevailing influence on human life probably since man began to grapple with the problems posed by his environment and to confront the awesome issues of life and death".

In *Gunyangunyan* (plate 3), Lamidi depicts a traditional woman figure, half-dressed with her breasts showing and pointing out, standing and pounding a yam. She is beaded both on her neck and one arm. Her hairdo is traditional plaited all back and the mortar is finished with different motifs. *Ilari Sango* (plate 4), shows a man, putting on a traditional cap, walking looking sideways, holding *ose Sango*, with a long chain on his right raised hand. There seems to be a presence of a traditional Yoruba drummer kneeling and drumming the bata drum. The walking male figure is seen barefooted meaning whenever the bata drum is been played whoever is going to dance to it must not wear his or her shoes, that is why it is said that "*a n fi bata jo bata*" meaning "we don't wear shoe to dance to bata drum". The walking figure is no longer any other than *Sango* himself. It is said that whenever *Sango* want to go to war, the bata drum is always played to charge his spirit. *Sango* can be seen putting on his battle regalia because that is what he is always used to wearing likewise his descendants. The regalia is often worn during occasions or battle periods. Both *Gunyangunyan* (plate 3) and *Ilari Sango* (plate 4) bases are well-finished and designed in traditional motifs.

Gunyangunyan, (plate 3), and *Ilari Sango*, (plate 4), shift towards proportionate representation of human figures. Even in his attempt at proportionate representation of human figures, Lamidi still retains features that are considered 'traditional', especially in the treatment of the eyes, nose, mouth and ears. Fakeye is a traditionalist who strongly believes in the preservation of traditional art forms as an important part of Yoruba culture. His venture into partial proportionate representation of figures in some of his works is perhaps to prove his potency in that aspect. *Gunyangunyan* is a work that depicts the socio-cultural lifestyle of the Yoruba. It depicts a common day-to-day activity. The beads on her neck, around her waist and wrist are suggestive of a maiden of royal blood. It is a work that reflects womanhood with great attention given to 'mother and child'.



Plate 5: Olumeye I, wood(Iroko), 61cm 1997
Photographed by: Bidemi Morenike, 2004



Plate 6: Olumeye II, wood(Iroko), 47cm 1996.
Photographed by: Bidemi Morenike, 2004

Olumeye means giver and humility. *Olumeye I* (plate 5) and *Olumeye II* (plate 6) depict female figures kneeling half naked in front of them as standing hens. It depicts the two female figures making a sacrifice to the gods. Their hairdo is both plaited, having a pointed breast with a neck bead on both of their hands. The two hens are both covered in motifs and patterns. They are both looking forward in a frontal position. There is a presence of a tribal mark on each of their faces as well. The bases on which both of them are kneeling are covered with traditional motifs and patterns.

After a close study of Lamidi Fakeye's works, one notices that, none of the elaborate bases of his works share the same pattern. A closer look at *Olumeye I* (plate 5) and *Olumeye II* (plate 6) would reveal, in both, apart from individuality of structural design, differences in the depiction of the cock being carried and their embellishment. The kneeling female figure in *Olumeye I* (plate 5) with its oval head shape has facial marks and its hairstyle and posture are not the same as the *Olumeye II* (plate 6) which has no facial marks but a round head shape with a *suku* hairstyle and a child fastened to its back. This confirms Fakeye's assertion that never two pieces are exactly alike.

It is sufficed to note that Fakeye hardly depicts the deities; he instead reveals the attributes and paraphernalia peculiar to the deities in their personal guards, priests and devotees. Fakeye addresses the issue of religion and identity reflecting the traditional significance of certain heroes in Yoruba culture. He however does this without expressing worship or giving undue emphasis to ritual sacrifices. The images to him are mere representations of symbols of power and religion. The Europeans emerged in Africa with different cultures and traditions that stood as their *modus operandi* and were used in their formal day-to-day activity among which were the works of Lamidi Fakeye. The Africans also had their form of identifying their people. Unlike those of the Western world that could be forged, manipulated or manoeuvred, the African Identity card stood indelible and the marks were irrevocable.



Plate 7 and Plate 8: Figures with tribal marks, Lamidi Fakeye. **Photograph:** Oligbinde Rotimi, 2009

Kwame (2009) noted that "his work displays several tribal marks as well as motifs which are symbols that associate a person with a particular place, language and tradition". For example, the *Abaja* mark is to the Owu people and any individual who bears the mark is assumed to carry the physical identity card of the Owu people and is automatically assumed to understand the culture, customs, principles and norms that guide the society because a person cannot bear the mark without been a native of that community. His wood carving contains motifs that give prayers of success to the viewer. Examples of tribal marks are *Abaja merin*, *Pele*, *Ture*, *Pele Ife*, *Ila*, and *Ondo*. They are mostly used for identification and beautification. He imitates neither traditional Nigerian forms nor any particular school of European carving.

Other works of Lamidi Fakeye



Plate 9: Lamidi Fakeye, The entry into Jerusalem and Jesus carrying the cross to be crucified, 1952. Photograph: Oligbinde Rotimi, 2013



Plate 10 and Plate 11: Lamidi Fakeye, Masks, 1950 Photograph: Oligbinde Rotimi, 2012



Plate 12: Lamidi Fakeye, Door at the catholic university chapel, Ibadan, 1954. Photograph: Oligbinde Rotimi, 2012

Lamidi has been engaged in serious Art practice, which made him highly prolific in nature and has engaged him in several notable exhibitions both home and abroad. His prolific nature and style of work have also brought him to execute various high commissions both at home and abroad. “Some of his commission works are door panels, commissioned by the catholic churches to serve as illustration” (plate 12) (Bruce, 1996). He has also received various distinguished awards from competitions, individuals and organizations. He has had various life demonstrations of wood carving but home and abroad and has always organized workshops.

"Lamidi is also a good storyteller; by this, each of his works is a complete storyline" (Kelvin, 1966). He uses his wood carvings to tell stories of Yoruba legends in history to a generation who may never be privileged to hear them narrated. In his depicted figures, like in the status of the saints, are encoded stories of good virtues meant to stimulate thoughts on religion, culture and personality. On one of his usual visits to Western Michigan University, he met with a friend Prof Albert Lavergne, who he encouraged to come to Obafemi Awolowo University, as a bright scholar, to demonstrate one of his works in the university environment. He accepted his offer, and he arrived in Nigeria, on the 2nd of January, 2011. On his arrival, he was told that Lamidi Fakeye had died in 2009.

Findings and Conclusion

"The Greek philosopher, Plato, summed up the art of composition most succinctly he describes it as creating diversity within unity" (Akeem, 2010). By this, he meant that a wood carving should have a satisfying wholeness and completeness, yet within it there should be a restrained and organized diversity of shapes and masses, rhythms, tones, colours, and textures, to give life and interest to the picture. The artist must perform a kind of juggling act with all these elements and unite them so that they fit effectively within the picture space and create a pleasing sensation when gazed upon.

In his chosen field of sculpture, Lamidi Fakeye has carved a niche for himself as a wood carver, he is a renowned Artist known for his great wood carvings of note. Most Nigerian artworks have a religious background and this is true of Fakeye's early works. "Carving has always been part of the Yoruba occupation and apart from household objects like mortar and pestle, the others have to do with one religion or the other and this is why I think people did not patronize it since it was not just for aesthetic purpose, especially since the introduction of Christianity and Islam, both of which are against pagan or idol images" (Adepegba, 1995). When the artist is patronized according to Fakeye, it is by the high-class people of the society, kings and the rich.

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