



Kéhinlé Adépégba, PhD *is an artist, art historian, creative writer, and bilingual author. His career has taken him to The Polytechnic Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, University of Lagos, Akoka and back to Ile-Ife where he is currently a Ph.D. student in African Art Studies. Kehinde has participated in various joint exhibitions and a solo exhibition on 28 August -11 September 2007 at the National Gallery of Art, Iganmu Lagos. As an art scholar, he has attended many conferences, where he presented papers some of which have been published locally and internationally. He has authored a number of books in Yoruba and English. Some of them include Ogbon Ologbon, Eku Eda (Yoruba plays), Okele Akobu (Yoruba prose), Journey to the city, Under the Orange Tree (children proses) and Contemporary Yoruba Wood Carving (art historical research book), among others. He has written over 50 reviews in exhibition catalogues of Nigerian artists. Kéhinlé Adépégba who lectures at the Department of Art and Industrial Design, Lagos State Polytechnic, Ikorodu, is the current head of the Department. He specializes in Graphics Design and art historical studies on Yoruba art and*

architecture, Yoruba artists, and communal art. He is a member of the Lagos Chapter of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA).



Abati Oluwaseun Isaac *is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Fine Art and Design, Kenyatta University. He earned a Master of Art in African Art Studies from Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife after completing his undergraduate studies at the University of Nigeria Nsukka. He has nine years of teaching experience at the University of Jos in Jos, Nigeria. He is an active lecturer with a gift for simplifying complicated themes in art history. By advancing his academic career as an art historian, he wishes to get exposed to more cultures and forms of art that may impact African artists who feel that art is a catalyst for environmental sustainability.*

**FORM AND MEANING IN YORÙBÁ WOODCARVINGS:
A REVIEW OF SELECTED WORKS BY BÍSÍ ỌLÓNÀDÉ
FÁKÈYÈ AND DÈJỌ ÒNÀBỌLÁ FÁKÈYÈ**

Kéhìndé Adépegba, PhD,

Lagos State University of Science and Technology, Ikorodu, Lagos,

adepegba.k@lasustech.edu.ng, adepe200us@gmail.com

and

Abati Oluwaseun Isaac,

University of Jos, Nigeria,

isaacabati@gmail.com

Abstract

Yorùbá traditional woodcarving has existed for immemorial generations, though the perishable nature of woodcarving makes it impossible to ascertain when it started, it is one of the most prominent and profuse art practices of the Yorùbá. They are used majorly to service the pantheon of the Yorùbá gods like ẚàngó, Ògún, Ifá, et cetera, cults like Orò and Ògbóni, and other religion-inclined worships and acts of veneration. It is also used as an architectural support in the palace and the houses of Yorùbá titleholders. This paper examines the form and meaning of selected relief

panels of Bísí Ọlónàdé Fákéyẹ and Dẹjọ Ònàbólá Fákéyẹ of the popular Fákéyẹ family of carvers, with the view of understanding some of the socio-cultural beliefs of the people. Formal and contextual analyses were employed to achieve this objective.

Keywords: *Yorùbá, woodcarving, form and meaning, Bísí Ọlónàdé Fákéyẹ and Dẹjọ Ònàbólá Fákéyẹ*

Introduction

The Yorùbá occupies the Southwestern parts of present-day Nigeria in West Africa. This ethnic group occupies south-western parts of Nigerian and spreads into the eastern parts of the People’s Republic of Benin and Togo and also found in Diasporas beyond the African continent. They are subdivided into distinct groups such as Ẹgbá, Ìjẹbú, Èkìtì, Ìjẹ̀sà, Ìbàràpá, Ọyó and Àwòrì to mention a few as can be seen in Figure 1.

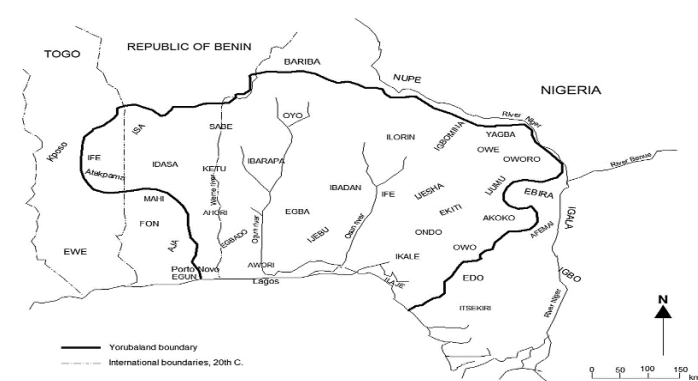


Figure 1: Yorubaland showing major towns and Yorùba sub-groups in Nigeria, Republic of Benin and Togo.

Source: *cambridge.org (July 18, 2020)*

The Yoruba rich and composite culture is not in doubt and ranks as one of the best in Africa. As put by Adepegba and Abati (2017), the people's distinct political structure, social structures and

organizations, ways of life in the workplace, religious convictions, artistic expressions, and worldview have all been made clear by their culture. Their religious and temporal contexts are fundamental to this worldview. These two settings have frequently combined to become one, influencing the people's diverse sociocultural customs and creative expression.

The Yorùbá have been recognized in literature as the best and most prolific art-producing people in the south of the-Saharan Africa. Not only in terms of quantity but also in the quality of their creations (Bascom, 1969; Fagg and Pemberton III, 1982; Willett 1993; Lawal 1996, etc.). Regarding Nigeria, Pogoson (1991) asserts that the Yorùbá have a more abundant and diverse creative heritage than any other ethnic group in the country. Pottery, metalworking, woodcarving, beading, and textile design (tie and dye) are among the Yorùbá art forms for which they are well recognized worldwide. Their most widely renowned art practice is woodcarving. Corroborating the above, Adepegba (2007) notes that the art of woodcarving is the most phenomenal of all the Yorùbá art forms going by its impressive scale of production and diversity of expression.

The Yorùbá people inhabit the rainforest regions of Nigeria, where wood is a plentiful supply, and this has a significant impact on their prolific output of woodcarvings. The people's woodcarvings were influenced by their sociocultural and religious beliefs, particularly as expressed in the symbolic depictions of spiritual beings used in acts of reverence and worship. The likeness of a deity or spirit is expressed through Yorùbá woodwork, or woodcarving, as Underwood (1964) highlights. As such, most of the Yorùbá carvers' creations were utilized to serve the densely populated pantheon of the Yorùbá gods (Plate 1). The portrayal of social activities such as palm-wine tappers,

traders, equestrian figures, family life, etc., is another characteristic of Yorùbá woodcarvings. A portion of these representations mirrors the activities and occasions in the society.



Plate 1: A Gèlèdè dancer adorned with a carved and painted wooden headdress in OAU, Ile-Ife in 2005.

Source: Pelu Awofeso

Over time, the Yorùbá artistic tradition has shown dynamism in the face of influential external factors. Okediji (2008) states that the Yorùbá perceive themselves as perpetual pilgrims on a journey and this is reflected in the constant change and transformation of their art forms. Therefore, as affirmed by Adepegba and Abati (2017), due to contact of the Yorùbá nation with agents of Westernisation like education, Christianity, travelling, colonisation, new technology, etc. their woodcarving art has changed and is now referred to as neo-traditional woodcarving.

Though the contemporary Yorùbá woodcarving did not start where traditional Yorùbá woodcarving ends a transformation (and continuity) of the former has taken place. This change began in the early 19th century. Adepegba (1995) informs that the 19th and 20th Centuries have brought immense changes to the African life. Before

interaction with the compulsive agents of westernization, the shapes inherent in traditional African art transformed; as a result, new styles that followed European proportions and norms became the norm. New standards and criteria for creating artworks, new boundaries for assessing them, and new venues for artwork sales are offered since art was taught in walled schools instead of the old apprenticeship system. Formats of executing artworks also changed and this also affects the visual language of our art (Adepegba and Abati, 2017).

One of the events that reshaped Yorùbá woodcarving was the Oye-Èkìtì workshop, conducted by Father Kelvin Carroll and O'Mahoney and organized by the Catholic mission in 1947. Some Yorùbá carvers at the workshop created Christian themes using customary styles. Lamidi Fakeye was among the artists created by the workshop (Carroll, 1969). Adepegba (2005) states that the workshop's carvers created a number of door panels, house posts, and independent figures for use in religious organizations, private collections, and institutes of higher learning (Plate 2).



Plate 2: Baptismal font showing the Rising Christ by George Bamidele in 1985, a product of Oye-Ekiti experiment.

Source: Frank Willet (1971).

Although there are differences in the sub-regional Yorùbá woodcarving styles— Èkìtì, Ọyó, Abẹ̀òkúta, Lagos, and Kétu, to name a few—there is a common canon that sets Yorùbá carvings apart from other types of carvings from other places. This covers the unusual interpretation of hairstyles, costumes – *bàntẹ́ẹ́* (waist pant), *bùbá* (top) and *sòkòtò* (trousers), etc, line textures and patterns, and other details.

In addition, the representation of pieced eye pupils, nasal and aural channels, facial features, and the figure's 1:4 head-to-body ratio are all shared denominators. It is noteworthy that each artist's work may be identified, without signature, based on his or her unique style of carving.

The Yorùbá neo-traditional carvers: Bísí Ọlónàdé Fákéyẹ and Dẹ̀jọ Ònàbọ́lá Fákéyẹ¹, who were artists from Ìlá-òràngún town of the Ìgbómìnà sub-region produced works for religious, architectural, and other contemporary purposes. Some of their works are rich visual documentation of socio-cultural and political events and narratives of their times. This paper examines the form and meaning of selected relief panels by Bísí Fákéyẹ and Dẹ̀jọ Fákéyẹ with the view of understanding the socio-cultural beliefs of the Yorùbá.

Literature Review

The Literature review for this paper involved biographies and works by Bísí Ọlónàdé Fákéyẹ and Dẹ̀jọ Ònàbọ́lá Fákéyẹ. These are presented in the following sections.

¹ *Bísí Ọlónàdé Fákéyẹ and Dẹ̀jọ Ònàbọ́lá Fákéyẹ will also be referred to (for short) respectively as Bísí Fákéyẹ and Dẹ̀jọ Fákéyẹ sometimes in the paper.*

i. Bísí Ọlónàdé Fákéyẹ

Neo-traditionalist Bísí Ọlónàdé Fákéyẹ was born in 1942 into the well-known Ìlá-òràngún, Osun State, woodcarver family. At the young age of seven, he began a lengthy woodcarving apprenticeship with his father, then with his uncle Lámídì Fákéyẹ. He completed his teacher training in 1962 after attending Ife Divisional Teacher Training School following his contemporary school. Soon afterward, he decided to take up woodcarving for evidently private reasons. Later, in 1968, he relocated to Lagos.



Plate 3: Bísí Fákéyẹ at work in the late 1970s.

Source: Bísí Fákéyẹ (2005).

Following his contacts with academically trained painters in Lagos, he started incorporating modernist inclinations into his artwork². In order to appease his patrons, some of whom are elites and

² *Personal communication with Bísí Fákéyẹ in his Studio, June 2006.*

expatriates, he purposefully adopted the new mindset that followed Nigerian independence and FESTAC 1977.

This had an impact on his works (Adepegba, 2007; Adepegba and Abati, 2017). He was a member of the Universal Studios of Art where he worked for many years until his death. He exhibited widely, and his works grace the walls of many public and private spaces, including churches and government buildings. On October 8, 2017, he passed away to join his ancestors.

ii. Dẹ̀jọ̀ Ònàbọ́lá Fákéyẹ̀

Dẹ̀jọ̀ Ònàbọ́lá Fákéyẹ̀ was a member of the same Fákéyẹ̀ family and was born in Ìlá-òràngún, Osun state, Nigeria. His birthday is April 24, 1941³. From a young age, he demonstrated his artistic penchant. Like other young boys, Dẹ̀jọ̀ Fákéyẹ̀ started carving under his father's tutelage as early as age 8. Dẹ̀jọ̀ Fákéyẹ̀ completed his elementary education in 1959 and his modern education in 1960–1961, both with success. His exposure to Western schooling expanded his perceptions.

However, he turned his attention to carving full-time in 1962. Since then, there has been a constant demand for his carvings in Nigeria and beyond. Dẹ̀jọ̀ Fákéyẹ̀ decided to work with his uncle Làmídì Fákéyẹ̀ when he returned from his educational travels to France, America, and Japan. He rapidly assimilated the novel methods and concepts that his uncle had learned while studying overseas (Fakeye Dejo Onabolu's Facebook, 2024). His artwork is displayed in

³ Though some references states 1945 as his date of birth, but the date above was credited to the Facebook account of carver: Fakeye Dejo Onabolu.

numerous public and private spaces domestically and outside Nigeria. He has participated in multiple exhibitions.



Plate 4: Dèjọ Fákéyẹ posing with his work probably in the early years of his career.

Source: Dejo Fakeye Facebook (2024).

There are several connections between the two artists. Their father and their uncle Lámídì Fákéyẹ trained them both, and they are both the sons of David Adéòşun, who was also a skilled carver (Plate 5).

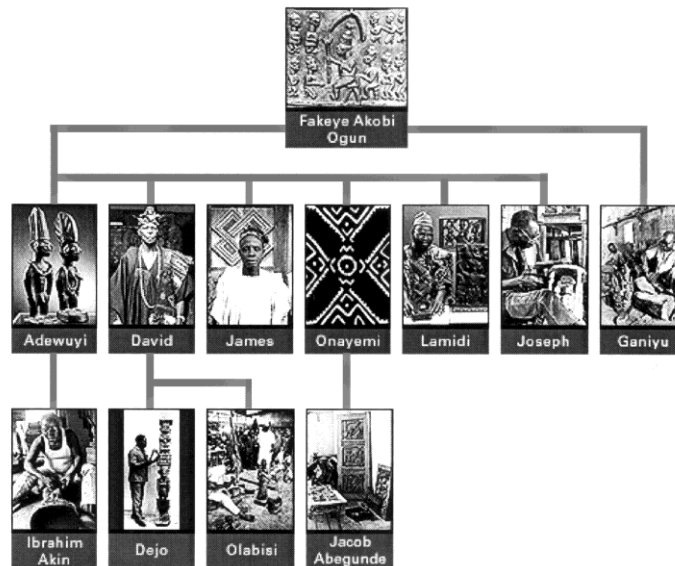


Plate 5: The 4th and 6th generations of the Fákéyẹ family of carvers.

Source: www.mnh.si.edu (2005).

Làmídì Fákéyẹ, who was impacted by the Èkìtì sub-style, contributed to the two musicians' success. As indicated in the plate, in Yorùbá woodcarving, Bísí Fákéyẹ and Dẹ̀jọ Fákéyẹ belonged to the sixth generation, which balanced traditional and modern periods. The analysis will demonstrate how similar the chosen works are to one another.

Analysis of the selected works of Bísí Ọlónàdé Fákéyẹ and Dẹ̀jọ Ọ̀nàbọ́lá Fákéyẹ

i. Bísí Ọlónàdé Fákéyẹ's works

Plate 6 (below) titled *Triumphant Warrior*, is one of the carvings by Bísí Fákéyẹ. It is a depiction of a Yorùbá warrior on a horse in a journey back home after a war. The year of execution of the work is not known but it is considered to be in the early 1970s giving the forms inherent on the works, which are equivalent to those produced in the early stages of his career.



Plate 6: *Triumphant Warrior* by Bísí Fákéyẹ. Wood. Size: 12 x 24 x 1 in. (30.48 x 60.96 x 2.54 cm).

Courtesy of David Owsley Museum of Art at Ball State University, USA (2022).

The work (above) reveals the warrior's triumphant entry after victory at war. The victorious war lord is dressed in the paraphernalia of power, which includes, a war tunic, usually attached with charms); an *idà* (sword) hanging around his neck, a *şakabùlà* (short native gun) in the left hand, and a staff of office in the right hand.

The warrior's horse is decorated with a garland of victory led by a servant guide. At the extreme left, the trumpeter-blower who apparently was part of the war, sings praise of the victorious warrior while carrying the booty of war on his head. The heroic song usually sang by musical attendants may include this common song:

Káàbò o, káàbò / Welcome, welcome

Ọmọ abíle sòrò, / The son of the one who speaks to the earth

Ọmọ abíle sòrò / The son of the one who speaks to the earth

Kílẹ lanu, káàbò / And the earth opens up, welcome.⁴

The figure on the right is a prisoner of war tied to the horse with a chain, with another booty on his head. The form as described shows a social perspective whereby the horse-rider warrior is rendered to be bigger than other figures, especially the head proportion, aside from being exalted on a horse. The emblem of power, control, and influence is his staff of office, sword and the short gun.

The figure that is smaller than this by size is the trumpet-blower depicted as decently dressed with a cap on his head, unlike other

⁴ *It is believed that great warriors are capable of doing great things including commanding the earth to open up.*

smaller figures, which are prisoners of war and horse guide with scanty dresses. This emphasizes the importance of dress as a symbol of honour, class and status among the people. Thus they say: *iríni sí ni ìṣọni lójò* (your appearance determines how you are honoured).

The act of war and the glamour associated with victory after war are also here depicted. Apart from glamour, which is visual, the work shows the physical booties of war on the head of the trumpet-blower in the picture. The picture of chains depicts captivity over enemies and the postures of the slaves are signs of their helplessness and capitulation in the presence of a victorious warrior. The stretched hands of the gallant warrior reveal his imposing reins of supremacy. For victors who are eulogies for success as *ó kẹru, ó kẹrù* (the one who captures the slaves as well as the spoils) are equally appraised with songs such as:

Jagun jagun ló ñ bọ/ Behold the arrival of the warrior

Jagun jagun ló ñ bọ/ Behold the warrior

Olórí ogun kò gbọdọ kẹyìn ogun /The warrior must not be found wanting

Jagun jagun ló ñ bọ. / Behold the arrival of the warrior.

The second artwork to by Bísí Fákéyẹ to be discussed is *Offerings to Priest* (Plate 7 (below).) It shows a priest attending to two kneeling women who come with thanksgiving offerings inside calabashes or bowls in appreciation of the gift of children from the gods.



Plate 7: *Offerings to Priest* by Bísí Fákéyẹ. Wood. Size: 12 x 18 x 1 in. (30.48 x 45.72 x 2.54 cm).

Courtesy of David Owsley Museum of Art at Ball State University, USA (2022).

The priest holds two staffs of office in both hands. The one on the left shows the image of a bird, which is the symbol of the spiritual presence of the *àjẹ* or *ẹlẹyẹ* (powerful mothers) believed to be capable of flying as birds in the night. Hence they are referred to as *olókìkì òru* (vocal birds of the night). Such typically use of birds represent the ever-present mothers as *aşe-búburú-şe rere* (ambivalent beings) to guarantee orderliness and harmony in the society (Adepegba, 2024). On a second look, the women are poised to collect medicine from the priest to be able to nurse their children to adulthood.

The work by Bísí Fákéyẹ reveals the belief of the Yorùbá in the priest as the intermediary between man and the gods and as a bringer of goodness from the spiritual realm by proffering solutions to human numerous problems. There are beautiful kneeling women on the right and left sides of the benevolent priest. The two objects held by the priest are symbols of the priest's authority. The kneeling women are showing attitudes of appreciation of his continuous interventions in making them mothers. Their new babies are strapped to their backs as evidence of the blessings. Their firm breasts, bead necklaces,

hairdos, and dresses portray the beauty and elegance of the two new mothers. All of these show they are in their prime and productive age and must not stop bringing forth children for perpetuate their family lineages.

As they bring offerings of thanksgiving, they are there to receive the blessing of the priest for protection over their children. As the people will always say: *yinni yinni, kèni lè ẹ̀ mîn* (repeated thanks to the benefactor, engender more benefits). As mentioned earlier the staff on the left hand of the priest is atop with a bird, which is an insignia of the presence of the *ẹ̀lẹ̀yẹ* who help to nurse and protect the children. The priest wears a small gourd containing powder charm round his neck, which shows his readiness to proffer medicinal care and his *bàntẹ̀ẹ̀* (short waist pant) is a sign of possession of *àṣẹ* (vital forces) to repel evils and overcome attacks.

ii. Dẹ̀jọ̀ Ònàbó alá Fákéyẹ's works

The work in Plate 8 depicts a polygamous warrior armed with a short gun and cutlass in preparation for war.



Plate 8: *Warrior with wives* by Dẹ̀jọ̀ Fákéyẹ. Wood. Size: 12 x 24 x 1 in. (30.48 x 60.96 x 2.54 cm).

Courtesy of David Owsley Museum of Art at Ball State University, USA (2022).

The women (his wives) on the right and left are paying obeisance to him while presenting calabashes of medicine for him to perform the last sets of rituals before setting out to war. The other woman is probably the last wife queuing up for her turn.

The form is a narrative of the polygamous nature of warriors among the Yorùbá. This is sometimes as a result of converting previous female prisoners of war into wives. The warrior in this case is armed with the paraphernalia of war and must receive the blessing of his wives. Women are beings whose love and blessings must be sought during this kind of situation. The dress culture of the Yorùbá is revealed in the warrior whose smart but full clothing is decorated with charms showing how poised he is for the battle ahead. Oríkì (praise chants) for such warrior is: *A tó fiṣé ogun rán, ọ wo kẹ̀mbẹ̀ rebi ijà* (the one that is worthy of being sent to war, the one who wears big casual shorts to a fighting ring).

Likewise, the women behind the warriors are supportive as they are involved with pre-war rituals. Sometimes they are continue to hold forth in performing some rituals at home until the warrior returns. This underscores the cooperation and harmony among the warrior's wives who must not let out the secrets of the husband's success. The position of the warrior as a husband is also symbolised by his ability to make his wives show obeisance and respect to him as their olúwa àtí olówó-orí-ọ̀kọ (lord and breadwinner).

The second artwork by Dejo Fakeye for discussion is *Kings offers forgiveness* (Plate 9 (below)) It is the depiction of a Yorùbá ọ̀ba (king) seated on his throne and placing his feet on a decorative stool.



**Plate 9: Kings offers forgiveness by Dejo Fakeye.
Wood. Size: 12 x 18 x 1 in. (30.48 x 45.72 x 2.54 cm).**

Courtesy of David Owsley Museum of Art at Ball State University, USA (2022).

He holds in his right hand an *irùkèrè* (horse whisk), the symbol of his authority, serving here as a gesture of greetings to the kneeling woman. His left hand is placed on the clasped hands of the kneeling woman that are stretched towards the king. The clasped hands represent a request for forgiveness, which the king obliges. The other figure is a servant who ensures that the king is comfortable as suggested by the hand-fan held in his right hand.

This work reveals the majesty of the Oba as '*aláşẹ-ìkeji-òrìşà*' (second in command to the goods). Thus they say in a popular song:

Kí lẹ̀ n fọba pẹ? /What do you take the king for?

Ọba ò / Oh king

Ọba aláşẹ ọba / the king that wields absolute authority

Ọba / the king.

He is occupying an exalted position on a decorative throne of his ancestors and gorgeously dressed in a sitting position resting his two feet on a decorated stool. The kneeling woman is probably his wife

and this relates further to the relationship between the king (though exalted) and his wife or subject. There is an eye contact between the Oba and the kneeling woman.

The above highlights the principle of *ojú lẹ̀rọ̀ wà* (effectiveness of a word is guaranteed by the gaze on the speaker). While the Oba is on his comfort pedestal, he is expected to grant peace to his wife or subject by forgiving those who ask for forgiveness, after all, *tí ẹ̀lẹ́jọ́ bá mọ ẹ́jọ́ rẹ̀ lẹ́bi, kò ní pẹ́ lórí ìkúnlẹ̀* (if the guilty knows it, he will not kneel for too long). The beauty of Yorùbá dress culture is projected by the richness of the figures' dresses as rendered by the artist.

Conclusion

The form and meaning of the selected works have been discussed and this has revealed the fact that African artists especially the Yorùbá have deep-seated visual context that reveals their belief systems, socio-cultural traditions, and lifestyles. The artists among the Yorùbá reflect the happenings and events in society and they try to narrate these to serve the purpose of visual documentation, information, and decoration. Bisi and Dejo Fakeye though contemporary artists are seen to have kept the Yorùbá culture and tradition alive with their works.

References

- Adepegba, Cornelius O., (1995), Nigerian Art. Ibadan: Jodad Publishers***
- Adepegba, Kehinde (2024), "Iba fun Obinrin: Monochromatic Mythography of Yoruba Female Power" in Methodology, Ideology and Pedagogy od African Art-Primitive to Metamodern (Ed) Okediji, M. USA: Taylor & Francis. Pp 113-130.***
- Adepegba Kehinde, (2007) Contemporary Yorùbá Woodcarving, Lagos: Aramanda Creations.***
- Adepegba, K. & Abati, O. I. "Yorùbá Wood Carving: New Characteristics New Uses" Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies, Vol 2, (2017). ISSN 254-5540.***
- Bascom, Willians R., (1969) The Yorùbá of South Western Nigeria, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.***
- Caroll Karrol, (1967) Yorùbá Religious Carvings, London: Godfrey Chapman.***
- Fagg W. (1982) Yorùbá Sculpture of West Africa, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,).***
- Lawal, B. (1996). Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender and Social Harmony in an African Culture, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.***
- Okediji, M., (2014) Yorùbá Cultural Studies, www.universityofafricanart.org an Art Press Co. retrieved 12/31/2014.***

Pogoson, O. (1991) "The Esie Stone Carving in the Art History of Southwestern Nigeria" African Notes, Vol 15. No 1&2.

Underwood, L., (1964) Figures in Wood, London: Alec Tiranti Ltd.

Willet, F. (1993) African Art, An Introduction, Longman: Thames and Hudson.

Bisi Fakeye, Personal communication, June 2006