

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF WOODEN OBJECTS CONSERVATION: FOCUS ON NATIONAL MUSEUMS IN LAGOS AND ORON, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Conservation of cultural wooden objects in the national museum in basically to preserve the social, cultural and religious attributes embedded in the collection. The traditional wood-carvers produced various objects for utilitarian purposes in the community. These objects have in the past played one functional role or the other to the society that produced them before they got into the museum for preservation. Collection of wooden objects in the national museums started with a view to protect cultural objects from theft, vandals and weathering agents as well as present them as testimony of ancient civilisation. This study, examined indigenous types of wood commonly used by wood-carvers or sculptor, and methods of preserving them for a long period of time. Data were collected from wood-carvers, sculptors, museum workers, and relevant literature was consulted. Result shows that Nigerian wood carvers understand strong and durable wood types that are good enough to carve different objects. The wood types, strength, and indigenous methods of preservation of wooden objects have contributed greatly to their survival under scientific methods of conservation in the national museums in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: Conservation of wooden objects, Lagos and Oron national museums, Cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage in the National Museums speak volumes about the sociocultural, political, economic and technological attainments of the past society. Cultural objects and materials kept in the museums are records of activity that provides the good grasp of historical past. These cultural materials are produced in different art media to express the thought of their makers. It is with the intent of information, education and enjoyment that these objects and materials are kept in the museums nationwide to care for them in order to prolong their lifespan. Though the traditional wood carvers made good choice of wood for their works, yet when there is no proper and adequate care for wooden objects, it will deteriorate with ease.

The museum is responsible for the care of tangible and intangible natural or cultural heritage. It also regulates the governing bodies and those saddled with the responsibilities of making museums functioning by following strategic directions. It has a primary responsibility to protect and promote heritage as well as the human, physical and financial resources made available for that purpose (ICOM, 2006). The 21st century context of museum is “an institution developed by modern society to stop as much as possible the deterioration and loss of objects treasured for their cultural values” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1986; UNESCO, 1987). The duty and activity of a museum on cultural objects can be compared to the duty of library in keeping books. The museum does not store idle and condemned cultural objects but functional and historical ones for the purposes of information, knowledge, and wisdom on human, artistic and scientific practices. It does not also store idols or gods to be worshipped. Whenever the authority of a museum acquires an object or material, the primary function of such object ceases

to go on in the museum. The primary function of the museum institution on any object it acquires is to conserve, maintain, and guarantee the safety of such object (UNESCO 1982; 1987). Thus this study, therefore, examined the types of wood used by the traditional wood carvers in Nigeria and scientific methods of preserving the objects in the museums.

Method of conducting the study

The study carefully observed and visually appreciates the ethnographic as well as the antiquity materials displayed in the museums' stores and galleries. Literature review was used to appreciate what earlier researchers had done in the area of study. Oral interview was also conducted with traditional wood carvers, contemporary sculptors, museum workers, saw millers on quality wood types and their uses. The results presented some of the varied data available in this study.

a. Archaeological Studies

- i. Effort was made efforts to find out whether any of the wooden objects were recovered from an archaeological context, either from surface collection or from within excavation context.
- ii. Materials from archaeological sites were referred to as antiquities in the museum.

b. Ethnographic Studies

- i. Ethnographic wooden objects in Lagos and Oron museums were the major subject of our study.
- ii. We observed the records that accompanied each of the objects, which included names of objects, where they were made or collected and when.

- c. To obtain the information, we visited both museums as part of the study. Adequate ethnographic information helped to appreciate the significance of each of the ethnographic objects. There are indications that some of the objects in the store might have lost such ethnographic information.

Usefulness wood to the society

Wood has always played an important part in the life of man, and trees, from where wooden objects come, serve a lot of purposes for humanity. Some wooden logs are useful for fuel, bridges and tools for many occupations from the earliest time to the present. Wood has been exploited by man since the Upper Palaeolithic period for fashioning tools, shelter, artistic and religious objects (Feilden 1979; Plenderleith and Werner 1971). Because of the usefulness of wood in fashioning various forms that served as utilitarian objects, such as musical instruments and household utensils in ancient times, and subsequently in the contemporary times as paper and even clothing. It is obvious that museums are making wooden objects conservation very important so that we can appreciate of wonderful works that came from wood. Evidences of the great number of wooden objects collection in Lagos and Oron museums testified to this school of thought. According to Taylor (1981), there are evidences in archaeological context of wooden carpentry tools and cultural objects that may suggest how sophisticated the woodworkers were in the time past. Wood has been of immense use throughout human history owing to its combination of valuable properties: it can be worked with tools as simple as stone axes, yet has great tensile strength and durability in relation to its relative light weight (Feilden

1979). It is impossible to conceive of human cultural history without wood, as it has served as the basis for the fabrication of structures, boats, furniture, utensils, mundane items, bridges, musical instruments, scaffolding and bracing for masonry construction, and all manner of sculpture and works of art. It is also the primary component for modern paper (Taylor 1981).

To further strengthen our knowledge of wood, Cronyn (1990) discusses two groups of trees, each with its own cell types: hardwoods, generally comprising deciduous trees; and softwoods, comprising the conifers. The density, porosity, hardness, strength, and flexibility of wood differ from species to species and to a lesser degree within species from the age and part of the tree and where it has grown. Deterioration in wood manifests as shrinkage, warping and cracking, which result from the loss of bound water within the cell walls. Cronyn (1990) observes that the loss of water will cause the cellulose fibrils to move together, resulting in a greater degree of shrinkage occurring at the right angles to the length of the fibrils that is across the grain. Because of the characteristics of trees earlier mentioned, it is not good to clean wooden objects with water. To clean or remove surface dirt from wooden objects, it is advisable to lightly brush or gently swab with dilute alcohol. Cronyn (1990) also assert that conservators must avoid the use of dampened clothing or duster to clean surface of the wooden objects. Such may cause deleterious expansion or loss of paint or lacquer coating on the surface. It is advisable to use soft brush for cleaning with great care in order not to introduce a misleading "tool marks" on the object. That is, unintentional mark that is not created by the maker of the object. This can result into confusion and unwarranted information.

Damp environment or moisture-filled room may also have negative impact on wooden objects preserved in the museum. According to Cronyn (1990), it is in the cause of moisture that wood becomes grey as the solubilised lignin washes out. It is possible for certain fungi to grow on damp wood, living on nutritious cell sap rather than cellulose. This action can cause weakening; it can also stain the outer layers of wood because they require oxygen to live. Under these conditions, bacteria begin to penetrate the wood and perforate the cell walls. This, in turn, allows oxygen to enter and opens up the core of timber to more deleterious fungal decay. Discolouration in wood may also be caused by exposing wooden objects to excessive light, which makes lignin to become oxidized and darkened.

Ethnographic study of indigenous wood types in the museum

The wooden objects are important cultural materials preserved in the national museums of Lagos and Oron, Nigeria. About 60% - 65% of the collections in the galleries and store rooms of these two museums are wooden cultural objects (Adebayo 2003; Adeoye 2010: pers. comm.). The significance of preventive conservation of wooden objects in both museums lies not only in the aesthetic appeals, but also in the inestimable values that are preserved when they are destroyed. Many wooden objects in Lagos National museum were not carved in Lagos; they are products of different ethnic groups in Nigeria who understands different types of wood by their strength. In the case of Oron National Museum, wooden objects are basically products of Ibibio, Efik and Igbo cultures. Many objects in the museum were carved by Oron community and some from other eastern parts of Nigeria (Federal Department of Antiquities Services, 1977). According to Murray (1946), "skill in carving wood and ivory must have been common in Oron clan, but disappeared by the first decades of the nineteenth century." Analysis of the *Ekpu* ancestral figures suggested that carving was an accomplishment of a great many people and not just of a few professionals. Murray notes that, by the late 1930s, a few names of carvers could be obtained and there were much woodwork done in the neighbourhood of Oyubia community (Uya, 1979; Jones, 1983; Nicklin 1999).

According to Edunam (1984) and Uya (1984), “the art of wood carving in Oron clan seemed to have been localised in Mbokpu Uko” during the pre-colonial era. This was a well forested area where the raw material for carving would have been abundant. Uya (1984) and Nicklin (1999) reports that the sculptural medium was wood of sacred *Oko* tree *Coula edulis* and *Pterocarpus soyauxii*, a type not used for firewood because; it can resist termite attack, and other weathering agents. Nicklin and Salmons (1984); Nicklin (1999) adds that “the work was usually done in secret by an accomplished carver who would charge appropriate fees.”

Traditional carvers, especially in Nigeria, used hardwood, such as ‘Iroko-African teak’ (*meliscia excelsa*), ‘ole’, ‘omon’ (Mahogany based) and *Mba* (*Funtumia eiastica*) for artwork or carving so that they can last for a very long time. As hinted by Olukotun (2010 pers. comm.), the carver removed the bark in order to carve a very good shape or form on the log. Unique historical antecedent (Keay, 1990) shows that Nigerian carvers know certain types of wood that are durable and good enough for various forms of objects for example (*Oko* wood, for *Ekpu* figure; Iroko wood, for *Ikenga* statue) through their experiences and knowledge in wood carving. They use different types of wood commonly found in their environment to express their social and cultural attainments. This shows why some *Ekpu* figures that are carved over 300 years ago are still in good shape under preventive conservation in Lagos and Oron National Museums.

The table under this paragraph shows the local names of wood types in Igbo and Yoruba tribes in Nigeria and the objects usually carved from such wood. The traditional Igbo and Yoruba are vast in the knowledge of identifying strong wood for carving. The craft of wooden object is as old as the beginning of human society right from when man lived in the cave. He learnt to make use of natural resources found in his environment to meet his needs and comfort. Wood carving is a popular trade among the traditional Igbo, Ibibio and Yoruba because of their location in the rain forest zone Nigeria where there are different species of trees. The wood carvers or traditional artists are usually patronised by the noble people in the society.

Wood Types and their Local Names

	Igbo/Scientific Names	Objects in which the wood is used
1.	Iroko-African Teak <i>Meliscia excels</i>	<i>Ikenga</i> statue, drums, mortar and pestle.
2.	<i>Ngu- Albazia ferruginea</i>	Talking drums.
3.	<i>Mba-Funtumia eiastica</i>	Figures, masks, small objects.
4.	<i>Okwe-Ricinodendron heudelotii</i>	Figures.
5.	<i>Ofo-Tallow Tree Detarium microcarpum</i>	<i>Ofo</i> staff (walking stick)
	Yoruba/Scientific Names	Objects in which the wood is used
6.	Iroko-African Teak, <i>Meliscia excels</i>	Doors, trays, bowls, etc.
7.	<i>Ole-Nessogordonia papaverifera</i> , <i>Apa-Afzelia Africana</i>	<i>Gangan</i> (Talking Drum), <i>Gangan</i> (Bata Drum, Mortar and Pestle)
8.	<i>Ahun-Alstonia boonei</i> -(cannot be easily attacked by insects; it also has quality of being washed when dirty)	Tray, bowls, spoons, dolls, etc.
9.	<i>Erinmado - Ricinodendron heudelotii</i> -(soft, light in weight, also insect proof)	<i>Epa mask</i> - (big mask, wooden tray), <i>Opon</i> -(used in Osun shrine)
10.	<i>Omon - Mansonia altissima</i> (has quality to withstand vibration)	<i>Agba-Ogboni and Gbedu drum</i> (Single membrane drum)

11.	<i>Ire</i> (Rubber tree) - <i>Funtumia Elastical</i>	Used to carve small wooden objects
12.	<i>Irena</i> - <i>Holarrhena floribunda</i> (very durable)	Used for twin figure, fly-whisk handle
13.	<i>Eriri</i> - <i>Veronia colrata</i>	Can be used to carve <i>Ogboni</i> drum
14.	<i>Oriri</i> - <i>Vitex doniana</i>	Can be used in place of <i>Omon</i>

Sources: Keay (1990); Gbile (2008)

Usually in the past civilization, it is the king or high chief that would commission wooden stool for personal use (Akpan 2014: pers. comm.). The design or motive depicted on the object tells the storyline peculiar to the community where it originated. Abassi (2014: pers. comm.) maintained that wood carving in Cross-Rivers before independence was popular among certain lineages. The trade was thought and handed over to the younger generations. Wood carving thrived in this area because it is a forest zone where different types of trees grow. Akpan (2014: pers. comm.) mentioned that *Ekpu* ancestral figure, *Ekpo* and *Ekpe* wooden mask carvings were popular among the Ibibio people of Cross River State. However, he lamented that most carvings of the people in the past have been stolen to foreign lands in the pretence of religious bigotry.

Akpan (2014: pers. comm.) identified some wood types as mansonina, which he said has the ability to withstand vibrations. The Efik people used them for mask and drum frames. This type of wood appears in brownish and yellow ochre colours. They perform religious and ceremonial functions of entertainment to the people. After being carved, they are sometimes dipped in black indigo dye that is prepared from native plants and leaves that make them resistant to termites' invasion (Akpan 2014: pers. comm.). In the contemporary times, woods of such nature are conserved against deterioration by initial application of insecticides, such as primer. The wooden object is further sprayed with wood finish or wax. According to Olukotun (2014: pers. comm.), the wax is in different colours; they could be red, colourless or transparent that can later be mixed with the intended colour.

Some wood types that are known and patronised by the Yoruba wood carvers are ebony, which belongs to the class of hardwood. It appears sometimes in black, wine, cream or brown. According to Olukotun (2014: pers. comm.) it is used for the carving of functional items, such as bow and arrow, twin figure, mask, king's staff of office and police baton (*kondo olopa*). African teak-Iroko is another class of hardwood which comes in orange colour and yellow ochre. The functional objects to be carved from it are figures of traditional rulers. It can also be used for furniture.

Olukotun (2014: pers. comm.) mentioned mahogany as another hardwood base which looks like crimson (blood) colour. It is used for furniture. It becomes more durable when coated with wax. Mahogany is favoured and preferred by white men when used for traditional African carving (Olukotun 2014: pers. comm.).

Cedar is another hardwood base. It commonly comes in white and yellow ochre colour. It is primarily used for the carving of ceremonial mask in Yoruba land, such as *Epa* or *Gelede* masks. The carved wooden masks are later painted with ethnographic content that protects them from being attacked by termites and other pests (Olukotun 2014: pers. comm.).

Wax (candle) and wood burning are to give effect of coating or texture after sand-papering of carved forms and shapes on the log. Coating an object with wax or finish will help protect it from deterioration (Olukotun 2014: pers. comm.). Traditional wood-carvers of Yoruba tribe

prefer application of wax on carved wooden objects. Sometimes, they also apply *aro* (indigo dye) in order to give effect of painted colour on the object.

The study of wooden objects conservation also took a step further, to find out historical antecedent of indigenous wood types from a saw-miller who knew the type, origin and concentrated areas of different types of wood in Nigeria. Our informant was Mr. James Opeoluwa, a saw-miller at Iyaniwura Saw-mill Market, Pakoto, via Ifo, Ogun State.

According to Opeoluwa (2014: pers. comm.), *orin-dudu* or *ayin* (black *pako*-chewing stick) is of two colour combination (black and brown). It belongs to the category of hardwood. It is mainly found in Saki, Iseyin, Igbo-Ora, Kaimo (Oyo State) and Omu-Aran (Kwara State).

Itara is another hard wood base. It comes in white colour. It is found mainly in Oyo State. *Apa* is also another hardwood family. It is brownish in colour. It is used for the carving of most contemporary sculptural pieces, such as figural and still-life objects.

Black *Ayunre*, according to him, is black in colour. It is used mostly for carving of figural objects in the contemporary times.

Apa is brownish in colour. It is in the class of hardwood. It is used for carving sculptural pieces in the contemporary art. It may have also been used for the carving of *Agere-Ifa* (oracle's bowl) used by *Ifa* Priest in Yoruba land.

Omon wood is also called cedar; it belongs to the category of hardwood. It appears in light brown colour. It is commonly used by contemporary sculptors for the carving of everyday objects. It can be found in Ijebu land (Ogun State) and some part of Ondo state. A popular adage in Yoruba that favours *Omon* goes thus '*Omon loma sinku Iroko.*' This can simply be translated to mean *Omon* has longer lifespan than *Iroko*. This does not mean *Omon* is stronger than *Iroko* but it is beautiful and aesthetically appealing to the eyes when used for carved objects. *Omon* is mostly used for the carving of *Iya-ilu* (lead drum) among the Yoruba.

Egi appears in orange colour and it is used for carving of objects in the traditional Yoruba land. *Egi* is found in Ijebu land of Ogun State. *Egi* is referred to as stubborn wood because of its nature as a tough wood to carve or work upon.

Ire (*Funtumia*), rubber tree, is elastic and appears light-brown in colour. It is common in Ijebu land (Ogun State). *Ire* is sometimes used for the carving of twin figure among the Yoruba.

Idigbo (Black *Afara*) dries easily and quickly. To prevent the fast-drying nature, it is soaked inside water or suspended in the stream that does not flow until it is ready for use. It is not good for the carving of artwork. It is used mainly for local canoes. It can survive 100 years and above on the water surface.

Methods of conserving wooden objects in Lagos and Oron Museums

Wooden object naturally decays under combined biological and chemical attacks, wood are durable in moderately sheltered environments. Most biological damage to wooden objects are as a result of poor environmental conditions of storage and display (Oyinloye 2015). The frequent changing in relative humidity may cause wood crack or distortion. According to Oko (2012: pers. comm.) the most reasonable way of preserving wooden objects is to avoid exposing them to wide variations in the atmospheric humidity. The museum regulates the

condition of the museum stores and gallery in a steady relative humidity to avoid dampness that could supplies necessary nutrients for the growth of fungi.

According to Oko (2012: pers. comm.) insects or pests constitute a greater menace to wooden objects in the museum, therefore, museum takes preventive measure of fumigating the stores and environment on a periodic basis to forestall attacks. He maintains that the team of conservators and technical officers also go on routine checking of the stores. They look out for sign of insects or pests attack noticeable through the worm holes discharging powder and frass on the shelves in the store.

The following steps are being carried out by conservators in Lagos and Oron museums as part of their daily routine inspection prescribed by Plenderleith and Werner (1971).

- i. They inspect wooden objects regularly to ensure they are free from “worm” termites and other insects.
- ii. During routine checking of the stores, they lift suspected wooden objects carefully into the air, clean with soft brushes to be sure they are not infected.
- iii. They carry out treatment on infected wooden objects in order to prevent the spread of disease.
- iv. They eradicate insect pest invasion in the museum by fumigation or poisoning the air

In the course of our question and answer with the museum workers, it was discovered that workers at the conservation unit of the National Museum Lagos receive training continually on the preventive methods of conservation of museum objects. They adhere strictly to these scientific methods of preventive conservation. The role of conservators in any museum is to observe carefully, take care and conserve the collections that are kept in the museum store and gallery.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Wood carving is an accomplishment of many people in the western and eastern Nigeria before independence. Most people that practised wood working have turned it to a family trade which is being passed down to the younger generation in the lineage especially among Yoruba, Igbo, Benin, and Efik people. The traditional craft of wood carving thrives in most parts of western and eastern Nigeria because it is a forest zone where the raw materials are readily available. Nigerian wood carvers know and understand wood types as well as their strength that can survive different weathers. They chose the wood according to their hardness in relation to the types and sizes of objects intended to carve.

Wood carvers in different communities in Nigeria have played prominent roles as social commentators and are in the fore-front of documenting values in culture through art. Most wooden objects serve functional roles to the people; they are basically utilitarian objects which were used for one purpose or the other. For instance, Yoruba twin figure; *Mumuye* figure of Wamba town in Adamawa State; *Gelede* and *Epa* masks among Yoruba; *Ekpu* ancestral figure and *Ekpo* mask in Cross River State; and several other cultural objects were to protect people from outbreak of diseases, forestall calamity and death. They were also carved as symbols of

fertility and to increase food harvest among people in various communities. However, relocating them in Lagos and Oron National Museums are share the basic information from their makers about the socio-cultural and religious events surrounding them to next generation.

Therefore, the study suggests additional anthropological studies for most wooden objects in these two museums. This is borne out of the fact that record in the documentation unit did not ascertain information on the various techniques and tools used in carving most wooden objects. Nevertheless, information on individual makers of the crafts was sparsely supplied by the unit, especially of the antiquity objects in the National Museum Lagos. Therefore, further research would be expected in order to find answers to such necessary information.

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APPENDIX I: INFORMANTS

List of Informants

S/N	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Place of interview	Date
1.	Mr. Kasim O. Olukotun	46	M	Sculptor	Surulere, Lagos	2010/2014
2.	Mr. Christopher N. Akpan	55	M	Traditional Woodcarver	Oron	2014
3.	Mr. Bissong Abassi	60	M	Traditional Woodcarver	Oron	2014
4.	Mr. James Opeoluwa	44	M	Sawmiller	Pakoto, Ifo	2010/2014
5.	Mr. Oko Gabriel	45	M	Documentation	Lagos Museum	2010-2011
6.	Mr. Olusola Adeoye	50	M	Ethnographer	Oron Museum	15-02-2010