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CONTENTS

ARCHAEOLOGY

- Usman, A.A. Northern Yoruba Villages During the Old Oyo Period: Recent Archaeological Research in Kwara State, Nigeria

CULTURAL PRACTICES

- Folorunso, C.A. The History and Anthropology of Labour Mobilization for Agricultural Production Among the Yoruba
- Okpoko, A.I. & Ezeadichie, E.U. The Igbo Traditional Titles: An Overview

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CONTENTS

Editorial

ARCHAEOLOGY

Usman, A.A.	Northern Yoruba Villages During the Old Oyo Period: Recent Archaeological Research in Kwara State, Nigeria	1
Aleru, J.O..	A Preliminary Report of Excavations at Oba-Isin in Isin Local Government Area of Kwara State, Nigeria	47

CULTURAL PRACTICES

Folorunso, C.A.	The History and Anthropology of Labour Mobilization for Agricultural Production Among the Yoruba	65
Okpoko, A.I. & Ezeadichie, E.U.	The Igbo Traditional Titles: An Overview	81

NOTES

Pogoson, O.I.	Another Reconsideration of the Origin of the Tsoede Bronzes	97
Ekechukwu, L.C.	The Use of Inert Atmospheres for Insect Control in Museum Objects: A Good Option for Our Museums	113
Tanto, T.R.	The Effects of Local Hunting Practices On Biodiversity Among The Wimbum of Southern Cameroons	123

Another Reconsideration of the Origin of the Tsoede Bronzes

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The provenance of the Tsoede bronzes and the stone images of Esie town are incontrovertibly the most thorny and problematic of all the Nigerian ancient arts. The reason for this may not be farfetched. One major commonality between them is that they were both not originally discovered in important extant towns. In addition, they were not initially closely associated with any of the known major artistic traditions within the immediate vicinity of their discovery. Generally, this situation is not true for the other art traditions of south-western Nigeria. But at least a cultural connection was quickly established between the Tsoede bronzes and the other arts of the region, if not a stylistic or historical relationship (Adepegba, 1983).

The cast metal objects now referred to as the Tsoede bronzes were discovered in at least three different towns along the bank of the River Niger. Interestingly, it is the difficulty that arose from questions of their true origin that prompted art historians to package them together. It was only convenient to do it this way, especially for easy reference. But truly, the works, numbering about ten, do not conform to a single style (Fagg, 1963: 39 - 40). Later on, the bronzes became closely associated with the Nupe culture hero called Tsoede and hence the name (Obayemi, 1980: 155). It would appear that it is quite important to associate the works with a nearby kingship in order to legitimise them. Many of Nigeria's ancient arts have been so associated. However, the factor of the proximity of the works to the Nupe appears to have conditioned this association. There is limited manifestation of other artistic productions of the Nupe people and evidences are still lacking to substantiate association claims. The result is that the origin of these bronzes has become a subject for wide and wild, and at times, farfetched speculations and conjectures.

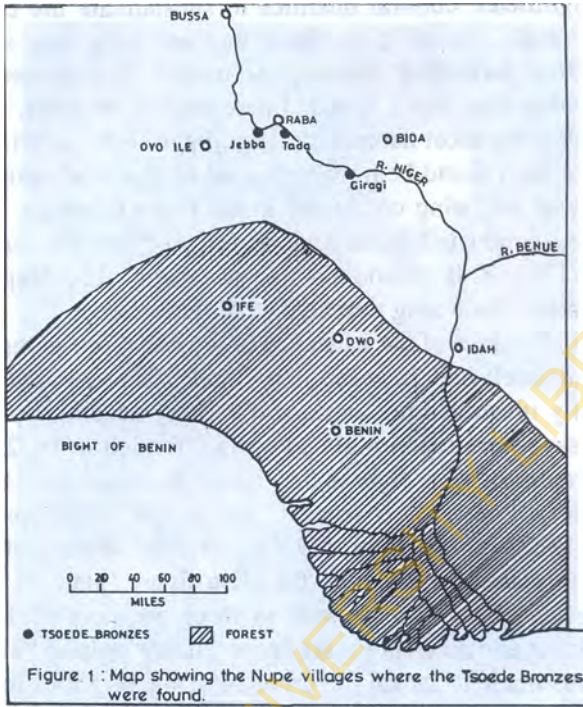
This paper therefore sets out to examine the plausibility of some of the more popular of these conjectures regarding the origin of the Tsoede bronzes.

It will also attempt to discuss the relationship of the bronzes with one or two other art traditions in the region. Finally, it will suggest other possible places of origin of the cast metal arts. This effort it is hoped, will shed more light upon the arts themselves as well as expand the debate on the origin of these undoubtedly spectacular and significant Nigerian bronze art works.

Some ten bronze sculptures, both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic in their themes, were found in the towns of Jebba, Tada and Giragi (See Map). All three towns are situated on the right bank of the River Niger, around the confluence area (Eccles: 1962, 17). The high naturalism of one of them, the seated Tada figure (plate 1) and the fact that two of them represent Africa's largest traditional bronze sculptures have attracted much attention to the works (Eccles, 1962: 17). The works are indeed unique, striking and worthy of note. These bronze sculptures as well as a few others, including some wood sculptures that were found within the region but have doubtful provenance, were initially packaged together by Fagg. He called them the Lower Niger bronzes. Their manufacture according to Fagg could only be ascribed or credited to an industry situated within that region (Fagg, 1963: 39 - 40). Although Fagg's position was largely advised by the stylistic non-conformity of the works, either to themselves or to the more popular neighbouring artistic traditions in bronze, he failed to investigate for the site of such an industry in the vicinity of the discovery of the works.

Recent efforts to seek the true origin of the bronzes associate them with the Nupe culture hero, Tsoede. He is said to have been born by an Igala king and a Nupe woman. Some other sources according to Obayemi (1980: 155) portray Tsoede as a warrior king who waged big and victorious wars against neighbouring peoples among whom are the Yagba, the Bunu and the Kukuruku. It is, however, instructive to note that the Nupe towns from where these metal arts were first brought to light are not as popular today as Bida or Pategi, which are bigger and even perhaps older Nupe towns.

The oral traditions of origin gathered from the inhabitants of the Nupe towns where the bronzes were found associate them with Tsoede. There it is reported that while fleeing Idah in about the 16th century: Tsoede headed up-stream taking the sculptures and some other materials of high cultural value with him (Obayemi, 1980; 155). This oral tradition may well have been a *fait accompli*, but evidences of other cultural materials are scanty. The story even sounds mythological. The only other notable cast metal object is the one found in Idah, which is part of the royal regalia of the Ata of Idah (see map). It is called *ejube jailo* (see Nyet and Desirant, 1985: 44). The *ejube jailo* is incontrovertibly of Benin style and manufacture. Then, the Tsoede bronzes



do not possess significant cultural qualities to substantiate the claims of a traditional Nupe origin. In addition, there has not been any satisfactory explanation for their form and meaning or indeed their presence in the obscure towns where they were found. Interestingly, however, the seated Tada figure, which is the most naturalistic of perhaps all Nigerian metal arts, is reported to have been found being worshipped by the inhabitants of Tada. But the worship was not being conducted in the Nupe language. Rather, its worship was being conducted in an archaic form of the Yoruba language (Williams 1974: 133). This should not be surprising. The Nupe and the Yoruba have interacted for a long time in the confluence area.

The earliest indications of the existence of the metal arts along the River Niger banks were published between 1912 and 1933. At that time, the publications merely illustrated the works with scanty accompanying essays. Even then, the essays were repertorial and basic. Tremlett in 1912, came out with the photographs of two figures—the Jebba Bowman and his female counterpart (plates 2 & 3). Then in 1922 and 1931 respectively, Heman-Hodge, (1922) and Palmer (1931: 261-282) came out with the photographs of the seated Tada figure, the Gara figure (plate 4), two small standing figures (plates 5 & 6) as well as three zoomorphic figures—two representing ostriches and an elephant. However, it was only in Palmer's case that an attempt was made to tackle the problem of the origin of the bronzes. In it he suggested that the works could be ascribed to the Kanberin Beriberi, a people situated north of the Nupe. This position is based on the face-marking similarities shared by the Jebba Bowman and those to be found on the faces of the Kanberin Beriberi people. But Palmer's inability to describe these face mark patterns makes his suggestion difficult to ascertain. Moreover the Kanberin Beriberi are today an Islamic people, and they do not engage or condone figural sculptures.

Anthropological activities of the 1930's also rubbed off on these metal arts. Walker (1943: 169-172) relying heavily on the contextual anthropological approach upheld the traditional origin of the metal arts. Meyerowitz (1941) on the other hand in a highly speculative paper, which Fraser (1975: 31) has described as ill thought-out, ventures far afield to suggest a Nile valley origin for the bronzes. But earlier on in a descriptive paper, Daniel (1940: 284) gave an important hint about the curious resemblance between the two copper figures at Tada and certain terracotta figures found at Esie (plate 7). It is now obvious that he was erroneously referring to an Esie stone head as terracotta. But this error notwithstanding, he inadvertently laid down the grounds for this paper. It is noteworthy to



Plate 1: The seated Tada Figure.



Plate 2: The Jebba Bowman.



Plate 3: Female Counterpart of Jebba Bowman.



Plate 4: Gara Figure.



Plate 5: Little man with stick.



Plate 6: Little man whose hand positioning suggests Ogboni connection.

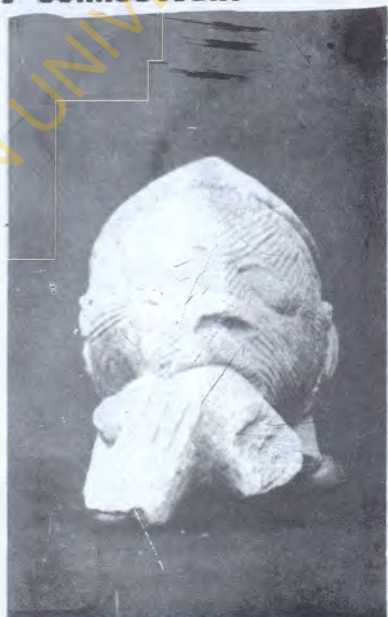


Plate 7: Esie stone figure displaying facemarkings similar to those on Jebba bowman.

mention that the initial reaction among scholars was to ignore this cultural resemblance. And up till now, little attention has been paid to this curious resemblance. Could it be because the Esie stone images themselves have inherent problems of what their true origin also is?

Informed interest and speculations about the origin of these metal arts began to take a new turn in the 1950's. By this time scholars and specialists in African and particularly Nigerian arts had started to carry out comparative, analytical and well synthesised field work. In their works therefore, the bronzes were thought of, not in isolation or only with respect to the problem of their true origin, but more importantly alongside other Nigerian arts. Fagg, as I have indicated earlier on, packaged all these bronzes together with the other metal arts of doubtful provenance but, which were found in the whole area from the west to the east of the Lower Niger.

This package which Fagg refers to as belonging to the Lower Niger bronze industry includes some objects similar to the Benin metal arts but are not in standard or regular Benin style. Others show vague similarities with the Igbo-Ukwu works. But Fagg considers the Tsoede ones closer to Benin metal arts than to any other metal art tradition of the region. This is because of some specific iconographic details that are not now of much relevance, having been properly elucidated.

Even though largely adhering to Fagg's position, Willett (1967: 175-176) in what Fraser has described as a novel twist, separates the Tsoede bronzes from other obviously unimportant metal arts of the Lower Niger bronze industry. He then suggests that the seated Tada figure is of Ife manufacture while all the others are attributed to Idah. The other bronzes are according to him fashioned using the seated Tada figure as model.

More recently, further studies, which have been based on, the study of the art objects themselves, have been carried out. One of such studies by Thompson has noted the similarities between the gathering-of birds motif on the Gara image and the forms that according to him embellish modern Yoruba beaded crowns (Thompson, 1970: 8-17/74-80). His view is that the occurrence of a similar motif on the Gara image is the earliest manifestation of the icon in that region. Then he concludes that the bronzes may have been brought from. Old Oyo, ancient capital of the Yoruba, which indeed was situated in that region. He cites the Islamic holy wars of the 19th century as being responsible for this.

But the possibility that the sculptures were taken from. Old Oyo in the 19th century is in my view very unlikely. Old Oyo was subjugated by Muslim Jihadists whose religion abhors the use of images or idols. Had the

images been found by the Jihadists, they are more likely to have been destroyed and we would not have been so lucky to see these beautiful works of art. In addition, they should not have been moved northwards where Islam has a stronghold till now. Then had the Fulani taken the images at that time, the chances are that they would not have been found being worshipped by the Nupe, especially in an archaic Yoruba dialect.

Shaw in his case has not suggested any specific origin for the Tsoede bronzes. What he did was to look at the whole area where the metal arts were found and then he came up with the idea that the region must have had great commercial potential in the past (Shaw, 1973: 233-238). Therefore their discovery in that region in his opinion should not surprise us. They could have been trade goods. But the question now is who would trade the largest and perhaps the best and certainly including the most naturalistic African bronzes in an obscure Islamic territory?

Lawal, like Thompson, thought that the Nupe might have removed the images from Old Oyo (Lawal, 1977: 206-213) when they were conquered. Thompson's position is slightly different from Lawal's in that he believes that they were removed in the 16th century. But Adepegba has argued against this position, pointing out that the Nupe capture of Old Oyo is unknown in the history of the Yoruba (Adepegba, 1976: 126-127).

Gillon has also attempted to tackle the problem of the origin of the Tsoede bronzes. He sets out by revisiting perhaps all the speculations that have been so far put forward (Gillon, 1984: 207-222). Unfortunately, however, he does not suggest any specific place of origin for the bronzes. Rather it appears that he joins Ryder (1969) who suggested that since bronze figures played an important role in the ritual of kingship among the Nupe and Igala, their place of origin could not be far. But he admits that the bronzes are mysterious even though Owo is rated high in solving the problem of the origin of the Tsoede bronzes.

In a stylistic classification of the Tsoede bronzes, Williams packaged nine out of the ten bronzes into three groups and assigns them different provenance (Williams, 1974: 221-224). This attempt although worthwhile, has not put an end to the search for the true origin of the Tsoede bronzes. The seated Tada figure, the standing male Tada figure whose hand positioning prompts an Ogboni connection and the little man with a staff are according to Williams from Ife (Williams, 1974: 221-224). Then, the Jebba Bowman, his female counterpart and the Gara image as well as the remaining three zoomorphic figures belong according to him to Benin and Jukun provenance.

Reacting to them Fraser (1975) ascribes the manufacture of the seated Tada figure to Ife. Then using some specific iconographic details, he argues that the arch shaped pectoral which depicts the fish legged figure, the act of self dompting, nostril snakes and snakes issuing from the nostrils, the representation of the snake winged bird as well as the Benin type forehead marks found on the Jebba bowman though essentially Benin elements, could not make the works definitely of Benin manufacture. He in fact disqualifies Benin as a possible place of origin on the grounds that there is a stylistic heterogeneity. Old Oyo and Idah are also disqualified on the bases of the fact that they can lay no claim to the technology that has cast Africa's largest bronze sculptures. He then ascribes the origin of the works to Owo, a Yoruba town situated between Ife and Benin and whose arts also share close stylistic affinity. His choice of Owo is premised on the rationalisation that it is only in Owo (Fraser, 1975: 31) that Ife and Benin elements, that are so obviously shared by the Tsoede bronzes, could have met.

The view that Old Oyo could not lay any claim to the technology to cast Africa's largest bronze is in my view unfounded. This is because sufficient and indeed large-scale archaeological work is yet to be carried out there. Also in the case of Owo, there is as yet no indication that the idealistic naturalism of Ife art was transformed into metals in Owo. The larger numbers of the Owo arts are in terracotta, in wood and in ivory. Metal arts are indeed so scarce in Owo that existing ones are more easily and conveniently ascribed to Benin manufacture on stylistic grounds. Fraser's suggestion that Old Oyo could not have cast these spectacular bronze sculptures appears farfetched. Besides the iconographic similarities which he pinpoints in Owo are to be found on the costumes and ornaments worn by the Tsoede personages whose stature is unknown. Therefore they may not denote artistic links.

The presence of brass casting in Obo Ayegunle, a nearby town, and indeed the strong Nupe/Yoruba connections that Adepegba has gleaned from the history and culture of interaction in that region prompts him to suggest a localised origin. Then the antiquity of the bronze arts of Obo Ayegunle also conditions his reason for ascribing the origin of the Tsoede bronzes to somewhere in that vicinity. However, he shares the view that the seated Tada figure is without doubt, an Ife piece (Adepegba, 1984). And interestingly, the history of the region is full of stories of previous Nupe occupation of many parts of Northern Yorubaland. Could the bronzes have been taken as war booties from any of the Yoruba towns with latent creative-abilities?

It is interesting and indeed instructive to note that none of these attempts to find the true origin of the Tsoede bronzes pay much attention to the towns

where the sculptures were found. Rather it is the proximity of these towns to major art producing centres that seems paramount to many of them. Also, little attempt appears to have been paid to the curious resemblance between the face markings on one or indeed two of the stone images from Esie and the Jebba Bowman.

Esie like Obo Ayegunle is a northern Yoruba town. Both towns are scarcely 40 kilometres apart. In Esie, have been found the largest number of stone carving belonging to a single tradition. Well over 800 carved soapstone images of very high artistic quality were found in the town as early as 1933. But for unknown reasons, little attention was paid to them. They were relegated and downplayed in the Nigerian art discourse. Beyond noting them, it appears at best that the stone images received little research interest. Stevens (1978) book is undoubtedly very worthy. But its cost and its scarcity make it unavailable to the scholar and enthusiast. I did a dissertation (Pogoson, 1990) on Esie, which in the main centred on relating them to the other art traditions in the region. Andah (1982: 111-117) and Hambolu (1989) have also made their contributions to the study of Esie. The consensus is that the origin of the soapstone carvings creates problems, but it is also noted that sufficient archaeological investigation is yet to be carried out in and around the sites of the finds. But a localised origin is heavily favoured (See Usman, 1997: 50-68 and Folorunso, 1997: 63-67).

Adepegba has pointed out that considering the numbers of the stone sculptures found in Esie, the art tradition is more likely to be communal rather than elitist (Adepegba, 1984). Perhaps the images were made to propitiate or avert a potentially dangerous situation that the inhabitants of the region were faced with. They may have even been personal gods once kept in the homes of their owners but no longer required for their original purposes. Considering this, the possibility that Esie or a nearby town may have been a fairly large town becomes attractive. The presence of ostriches and elephant - animals of power and position also reinforces the possibility of not only a large settlement, but also an organised one. The artistic, cultural and administrative potential of that vicinity is thus established.

The nine bronzes that were found in the Nupe country are undoubtedly in more than one style. But whichever style is discernible among them, their similarities or counterparts can be easily located in Esie. Apart from the issue of proximity, and the potential that Oba Ayegunle has for metalworking and in addition, confirmation of the antiquity of brass casting there, Esie may pass for the place of origin of the Tsoede bronzes, but there is need for more concerted research efforts in the area. After all, Stevens' reconnaissance

survey of the neighbouring environment reveals "clear evidence of smiting activity." (Stevens, Jr., 1978: 35) Interesting also is the fact that there are manifestations of terracotta works, which are in the same styles as the stone carvings, not to add the woodcarvings of the region which represent excellent examples of Yoruba artistry. Stevens did some work in relating the Esie stone carvings to artistic traditions in the immediate vicinity (Stevens, Jr., 1978: 53-73), which ought of necessity, to have conditioned all or at least most thinking towards the possibility of a few of the bronzes coming from the immediate vicinity of their discovery.

Finally, although evidence are still scant to prove an Esie origin for the Tsoede bronzes, the aim of this paper has been to draw the desired attention to the possibility of not only Esie, but also of towns with known artistic traditions in Northern Yorubaland being possible places of origin of the Tsoede bronzes. This is not to lose sight of the great potential of the region that Shaw points out. Rather it reinforces the thinking that given such potential, any of the towns in that region is a potential place of origin of these intriguing bronzes.

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