A RECONSIDERATION OF THE FUNCTION OF AKÓ, SECOND BURIAL EFFIGY IN ÒWÒ¹

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So far only two scholars have done significant work on the institution of akó², a burial ceremony in Òwò. Akó, particularly the effigy used in it, is of unquestionable importance in the stylistic interpretation of some bronze and terracotta sculptures from Ile-Ife. In fact, it is essentially for this reason that Justine Cordwell³ and Frank Willett⁴ have studied the akó ceremony and effigy in Òwò.

Before proceeding to describe the akó ceremony, I shall briefly highlight some of the important views that Willett has expressed on akó in Òwò. Of the studies available on it, Willett’s appears the most comprehensive and the most frequently quoted by scholars, especially in connection with the interpretation of the life-size Ifé bronze heads. Willett contends that the concept of akó derives from Benin whence it spread to Òwò, Onitsha, and other places. Consequently, he interprets Òwò akó in terms of the Benin one. Using Bradbury’s suggestion he states that the significance of the Benin akó is ‘to symbolize the continuing nature of the chiefly office despite the death of the temporary holder’.⁵ To reinforce his argument, Willett cites conclusions reached by St. John Hope⁶ and Kantorowicz⁷ on the social function of ‘similar’ effigies used in Medieval Europe. Willett believes that the naturalism of the Òwò effigy is a recent trait even though the use of the effigies was ancient. He mentions one Ogunmola Olujare who died in the mid-thirties as the first person to carve akó effigies and that previously they had been made of straw. In his view, akó in Òwò has lost much of its original meaning. The use of an effigy in the akó ceremony, Willett attributes to the immediate putrefaction rate of corpses in the tropics and the need to have ‘a vehicle for carrying the insignia’ of office. Hence, as in Benin akó, the effigy ‘may be stylized without loss of meaning’.⁸

For the moment, however, I shall not extend my concern with the akó funeral effigy to its relevance in the study of the Ifé naturalistic heads, but rather I shall confine myself to a re-examination of the meaning and function of the akó effigy. Relying mainly on fieldwork and some knowledge of the institution as a member of the Òwò community, I shall attempt to interpret the akó effigy in the context of the functions it performs and within the total picture of the akó institution in Òwò. Where necessary, I shall use songs, oríkì and Ifá poems which bear relevance to akó for purpose of illustration. And, since the akó effigy can also be viewed purely as an object of art, I shall try to treat it aesthetically as the expression of the concepts on which the institution is based.

Most of my information has been supplied by Chiefs Eléègbá, Eléèréwè, Ojómo and Arúwáji all of whom have had akó performed at least once in their families. On the effigy itself, Chief Justus Akeredolu (himself an akó carver), Chief Òdógún (a retired forester), Mr. Mamah (another akó carver), and Yeye Oko (who was very familiar with Chief Ogunleye Ológán’s work), were most helpful.

There are many ways of burying the dead in Òwò. All are very close to the general
system of burial among the Yoruba. The determining factors in the selection of the appropriate burial include the circumstances and/or cause of death, age and social status of the deceased. The last factor is measured in terms of surviving children, wives, chieftaincy titles, property (human and material) and, not infrequently, good neighbourliness. If a person dies a good death, that is if the death is peaceful and timely, and he is considered successful in terms of the factors already mentioned, then his burial is not likely to end with the disposal of the corpse. In most cases, a ‘second burial’ follows. In the distant past, the interment of the corpse never took place before the eighth day when ópósí is celebrated. During this period, various kinds of aromatic herbs are burnt to preserve the corpse and prevent it from decomposing. With the introduction of modern health laws the corpse is no longer preserved for this length of time before burial, and ópósí has come to be seen as a ‘separate’ stage of burial. Traditionally, therefore, ópósí is recognized as a part of the first burial while the ìkò, which comes much later, is considered the second burial. Where the children of a deceased person intend to carry out an ópósí burial for their parent, there will be a formal announcement three days after his death to the whole community through the bèmbé music to beat out this message:

Àgbà òghò
Ya bá mi beere
Bába rẹ̀ lọ̀

Ọwèrè,
Alábèbè ọjọ
Èghèn mà şere ọ
B’úkú ‘bà mì yó s’ọjú mì

‘Ṣájọ . . .
È má yá sájọ ‘bà mì o o
Ṣájọ . . .’

Elders of Òwò
Please help inquire
My father has departed home.

Ọwèrè (òrika, of family name)
Alábèbè ọjọ (who is the possessor of a fan which controls rain)
I am very grateful to you
That my father’s death has occurred in my life time.

Your sympathy . . .
People please come, express your sympathy,
Your sympathy . . .

Meanwhile, the corpse is kept in the house and preserved by burning various kinds of herbs to prevent decomposition until the ópósí which comes, five days after bèmbé. This permits the children and close relatives from distant places to arrive in time for the ópósí which in some cases is the last honour the survivors can afford the deceased.

Ebi Òtán (relatives on the father’s side) and Ebi Òsin (relatives on the mother’s side) of the deceased meet, discuss the details of the Òpósí and communicate their decisions to Chief Óṣowé (the traditional ‘registrar’ of deaths and burials in Òwò) for approval. They also request him to make available an ópósí, a traditional bier, somewhat resembling a coffin made from raffia palm. The Òlàwò is then appropriately informed of the ópósí plans by slaughtering two cows for all his chiefs. These two cows are known as èrènlà-ùgbọ. Also to announce this ceremony, the children of the deceased slaughter one cow (èrènlà-òtán) for ebi-òtán, and another (èrènlà-òsin) for ebi-òsin. Four goats are slaughtered to ‘support’ each cow or more precisely to ‘wash’ their feet.

On the day of the ópósí ceremony, the traditional bier is brought from Chief Óṣowé’s
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to the house of the deceased where it is dressed with the most expensive cloths known
in Òwò. The asigbó12 and segbósen cloths, however, are used only by those traditionally
permitted to do so. The ṭòòsí which never contains the actual corpse, is then carried in a
procession made up of survivors, relatives, and sympathisers who dance around the
town to the music of Òlámàiše singing:

Yá ghou nólóma ìṣe Ọ All and sundry, see how honourable it is for one who
is blessed with children.
Yá ghou nólóma ìṣe o Ọ All and sundry, be a living witness to the honour
done to one who is blessed with children.
Yá ghó, yá ghó Ọ All and sundry, be a living testimony to this honour
done to one who is blessed with children.
Ya ghou nólóma ìṣe o Ọ All and sundry, be a living witness to the honour
done to one who is blessed with children.

Having been carried round the major streets in the town, the empty coffin (ọpọṣí)
passes through the market place called qjààta, before it is finally taken home where the
actual corpse lies. Very cleverly, the ṭòòsí is withdrawn from the scene, and the corpse
is displayed for the first time. The preparations for its actual interment follow: egbó
unwânlé, special fees for clearing the grave site, and egbó obúkogbén, fees for grave-
digging are the first to be settled. Adìye ìmùnàlì (a fowl) is slaughtered to ensure a clear
and easy passage for the deceased on his ‘journey’ to ìràn (heaven). Then, egbó ipakusi,
‘pocket money’ for the deceased, is thrown into the grave. While the grave-digging is
in progress, a special music called ìgogo is played, and the following is sung:

Nàábo nàábó Ọ Don good always
Wè mà nàábò ò Ọ It is desirable to be good
Ènène nàábo ara rẹ Ọ For your own sake, do good
Onù kàn àn gbúlì o Ọ It is necessary since you are not a hermit.

Meanwhile the children of the deceased distribute several bowlfuls of pounded yam
and meat to close relatives in appreciation of their help during the ṭòòsí ceremony.

If the children of the deceased are sufficiently wealthy to bear the expenses, they can
proceed to perform the Åkó burial nine days later. But nothing prevents them from
postponing the Åkó until such time as it is financially convenient. It is the highest and
the most honourable burial that can be performed for any individual, other than the
special case of Òlówò.

In Willett’s study of Åkó in Òwò, he makes the following points:

a) that ‘it seems that the first naturalistic Åkó figures were introduced only at the end of the
nineteenth century or even at the very beginning of the present century’14
b) that the purpose of the Benin figure ‘has remained that of emphasizing the continuity of
authority through successive office bearers’ while ‘in Òwò we have clearly a further
development into a much looser concept’.13

c) that ‘these figures in Europe [see above] and in Africa appear to have performed a similar
social function on both continents’.14
In the light of my own study, it would be pertinent to make a few remarks on Frank Willett’s findings on the same subject. Willett succeeds in presenting much useful data on ìkó in Òwò, but it is doubtful if they have been used with full understanding.

Perhaps because Willett was in so great a hurry to solve the problem of naturalism in the life-size bronze heads of Òwò, he overlooked the most salient points about the ìkó institution in Òwò. His reliance on Benin ìkó may have been necessary or even crucial to the understanding of Òwò ìkó, but we cannot easily say the same for the Medieval European parallels which form the basis of his interpretation. Willett’s approach, in effect, may have severely limited his reaction to both the ìkó ceremony and the effigy. His formal analysis of the ìkó effigy is inadequate and his attempt to find the meaning and function of the effigy fails to go beyond the stage of associative reaction.

Willett ‘discovered that ìkó naturalism was a recent trait, though the use of effigies was ancient’. He suggests ‘European influence’ for the ‘naturalism’ which he neither defined nor discussed at any length in his essay. One suspects that Willett had the influence of photography in mind for he mentions how Kenneth Murray and William Fagg tried to establish the degree of resemblance of an ìkó effigy by comparing it with a photograph of the deceased. Examining the effigy in this manner and not going further to search for possible meanings of its style in the context of ìkó, lays Willett open to accusations of superficiality in his study of naturalism in ìkó effigies. While Willett notes the difference between the work of Lamunren and Ogunleye, he accounts for it neither ethnologically nor aesthetically. The influence of photography could not have caused the ìkó-type naturalism, even though it may have affected the style in recent years. Later in this paper, I shall try to show that the naturalism of these figures is firmly rooted in the very concept of ìkó. They are the focal points of the ìkó ceremony, and must be as ancient as the institution itself, which could be well over 500 years old.

In suggesting the role of ìkó effigies in Òwò, Willett uses Bradbury’s conclusion on the role of ‘similar’ effigies also called ìkó in Benin. This means that the effigy is to ‘symbolize the continuing nature of the chiefly office despite the death of the temporary holder’. Assuming that this is true of Benin ìkó, Willett did not offer us sufficiently strong reasons for thinking the same must be true of Òwò ìkó, either in the past or at present, apart from the fact that both effigies are known by the same name. Furthermore, Willett’s unifunctional assumptions in the ìkó study have prevented him from recognizing other possibilities. In any case, the Benin ìkó effigy from which Willett suggests the Òwò form might have been derived is ‘a figure of red cloth sewn over a piece of wood for a nose and clothed in chiefly beads’.

Willett explains the difference between the Òwò and Benin ìkó effigies by choosing to believe that the present day practice at Òwò has lost much of its original meaning. Again in Willett’s essay, we have no clue of the criteria used to determine which meaning is ‘original’. This notwithstanding, it is strange that Willett insists on the purpose of the ìkó effigy as ‘only a vehicle carrying the insignia’ even though the evidence in Òwò contradicts this view:

The mother of the King has no office in Òwò, still less have the mothers of chiefs. That seven of the eleven ìkó listed above are for women is a remarkable testimony to the filial affection felt by
the Olowo and the various chiefs for their mothers, but at the same time, it clearly indicates a
loss of the original significance of the ceremony compared with Benin from which it seems
likely to be derived.  

While one would not quarrel with Kantorowicz’s findings on European funeral
effigies per se, one needs to be cautious before using her concept that ‘the effigy dressed
in regalia symbolized the undying dignitas of the king’ to the Olowo akó effigy. If indeed
the effigy was meant as a vehicle for the dignitas, there would be little need for it to be
‘naturalistic’. But akó-style naturalism is meant to play an important part in the proper
reconstruction of the image of the deceased, which is the main goal of akó. For the
same reason, Willett cannot be right in suggesting that ‘the use of an effigy in these
ceremonies, which take place after death can be easily attributed to the putrifaction
of the corpse (which is especially rapid in the tropics)’. The deceased person may have
lost an eye, ear or even a few fingers during his life, but the effigy allows for a re-
construction of these parts.

Without any supporting evidence except the medieval European parallel, Willett
states that akó is performed for those of the kingly rank of ọba. In Olowo, neither the
concepts of installation nor that of the ‘continuing nature of the chiefly office despite
the death of the temporary holder’ are as relevant to the akó burial ceremony as
Willett would have us believe. In fact, the child of the deceased person need not take or
inherit any chiefly title before, during or after the akó burial ceremony. As for the death
and burial of an Olówó, the rites and ceremonies involved are very different from
those of akó. The only time one can speak of an installation during the akó ceremony is
when the deceased is installed posthumously (i.e. iyán oyé) to enable him to qualify for
akó burial.

In preparation for ẹbin-ìwá (after life), the akó is of great importance. After all, those
who pass from this world to the next look forward to Ẹbin-ìwá ti i ìgbón ọmì, ‘After-life
which is the superior of Today the present’. The akó institution ‘creates a situation
whereby a symbolic elevation of the social and material status is possible. A total
reconstruction of the physical, social and psychological identity of the deceased takes
place through the akó effigy which employs a controlled akó-type naturalism
sanctioned by tradition which already provides a ‘vocabulary’ for this style. The akó
device makes it possible for the distinguished dead to enter into ọrun and start the
‘after-life’ with assured success.

The effigy with its akó-type naturalism should not be judged in terms of
photographic realism but of its efficacy within the context of the akó ceremony which
is intended to make the end of this present life, and the beginning of the next one;
honourable and dignifying for one’s parents, whose goodwill is needed by those still
on earth.

The ceremony of an akó burial is normally reserved for men with chieftaincy titles,
but a woman may be eligible by virtue of being the mother, daughter, or wife of a chief.
If a man is successful by traditional standards but is not a chief, the children may, at his
death, decide to ask the Olówó to confer a chiefly title posthumously on the parent to
enable him to qualify for the akó burial. When this request is granted, a short but
expensive ceremony known as iyán oyé, incorporating all the important parts of an
actual installation, takes place. However, iyán oyé is possible only before the burial of
the real corpse. The usual fees are paid and elaborate feasting and drumming accompany the ceremony. Hereafter, the deceased is referred to and treated as a chief with all the rights and privileges attached to the title.

As already indicated, the performance of akó burial is the responsibility of his children, and like the ópósi, they take the decision in consultation with close relations. The details of the ceremony are also worked out and communicated to Chief Oṣowé who assigns a date for the celebration. The dates are kept strictly in order to avoid any possible clashes with other burials or important traditional ceremonies taking place at the same time.

The preparations for akó are like those for ópósi but much more elaborate and expensive. As many as ten cows together with the appropriate number of goats to 'wash the cows' feet' are slaughtered just to announce the ceremony. If the deceased is permitted by tradition to use the asigbó cloth, the children go to Chief Uwángwé's (now Sáséré's) compound to commission the asigbó for the occasion. When the weaving of the asigbó is in progress, the weaver, usually a female, observes certain taboos. She is forbidden to eat any meal prepared the previous day; she must not have sexual intercourse; if she is menstruating, the work has to be suspended; and she must bath herself every morning before starting the day's work. For making this special cloth, 200 of each of the following items are presented to the weaver: yam tubers, plantain, sugarcane, bean cake (ikára) kolanut and ewúra.²⁴ Added to this list of items are seven antelopes, one goat and seven mats. An informant told me that an akó ceremony is incomplete without the asigbó cloth.

Next, an akó effigy is commissioned and not just any artist can execute it as it calls for specialised skills and experience. I am told that in the past a special kind of plastic clayey solid called amajé was used to model the head, arms, and legs while the rest of the body was of firmly built straw-work. An organic colouring matter from a plant called afi²⁵ was applied to the face to achieve the effect of a fair complexion, while a dye from another plant called ọrafùa²⁶ was used for dark skin complexion. Later amajé was abandoned in favour of wood in making akó figures, while the torso remained straw. Exactly when this change of medium took place is still uncertain, but it was used for the akó of Olú-úlù, Sáséré I, during the reign of Olówó Eléwókuón in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

Chiefs Akeredolu and Òdògun have suggested that straw was used because of the need to eliminate any unnecessary weight in the effigy since about six men had to carry it around the town during the ceremony. This parade could last a whole day without a break. The change from the use of straw to that of wood for the torso was coincidental (between 1901 and 1924) with the introduction of the use of Okúrúkuru²⁷ (a Victorian rickshaw) into the akó ceremony. This rickshaw greatly facilitated the transportation of the effigy. By making the effigy's torso out of solid wood instead of straw, it became the heaviest part of the figure giving it the stability that it needed to remain seated in the rickshaw while it was pulled along the streets. The resultant increase in weight was compensated for by the new ease in transporting the effigy.

Ogunmola (Chief Olúújáre) the famous akó carver mentioned by Willett, worked at about this period (that is in the first quarter of the century). I suspect that Ogunmola was the first to deal with the technical problems arising from the use of a wooden torso, particularly those relating to the articulation of the limbs and heads. Apart from
being a good carver, which Ogunmöla probably was, the introduction of an effigy with movable parts must have been impressive and made him appear to be the greatest akó carver of all time. It became the practice that whenever an akó figure was made, a gift of a goat was sent to Odófohó’s compound in Ogunmöla’s memory. In an attempt to emphasize Ogunmöla’s greatness, Willett’s informant may have exaggerated when he said that Odófohó’s compound ‘was the first one to introduce carving of any kind into Owo’ (italics mine).

Agbón is preferred to other woods for akó effigies, and before it is felled for this purpose, a goat is slaughtered at the foot of the tree to appease hostile spirits residing in and around it, and to ensure a successful carving. The head of the goat is left in the forest while the rest of the carcass is roasted on an open fire and eaten.

While the effigy is being sculpted, the carver claims the following items each day: two big bowls full of pounded yam, one goat, one large gourd of palmwine, and several bowls full of kolanuts. The taboos to be observed are very similar to those of the asigbó cloth weaver. In order for the carver to arrive at a reasonably recognizable likeness of the deceased, the practice before photography was to have one of the children who closely resembled the deceased as a model, while striking features were ‘filled in’. Such a process would probably account for the youthful look on akó faces. In recent years, a photograph has become the model, and the tendency among akó carvers has been to rival photographic realism.

When the effigy is completed, it may be dressed in the deceased’s best clothes but usually an entirely new and very expensive set is made for the occasion. It would appear that this aspect of the ceremony is, in reality, aimed more at exhibiting the wealth and success of the children rather than that of the deceased. This does not in any way mean that the deceased’s wardrobe is not adequate, rather he is flattered by his children’s ability to ‘clothe him’, both literally and metaphorically.

The fully dressed effigy is placed in a seated position in an open room and it remains there nine days for viewing and admiration until the grand akó outing. This period is called akó gwiguwé. Women, who sometimes number over a hundred and are drawn from important families, and especially those who have performed akó before, sit on a slightly elevated mud platform in a semi-circle with the effigy in the centre and sing akó songs and chant praises of the deceased. They are accompanied only by the òdídù, a kind of music produced by beating a folded cloth with the palm of the hand. For the occasion, the women are called Ìkọjú.

In the same room but at a slightly further distance from the Ìkọjú another group called Ìmájú made up of young girls, mostly teenagers drawn from the same families, sit together and sing akó songs. They make their music by clapping hands and playing the ìkòrògbò, a kind of musical instrument. The following are typical of the songs rendered by the Ìkọjú:

Ma ráyè sin bà à mi
Ma ráyè sin yè é mi
Éshù bàla kà
Éshù boloko

I will carry my father through the path of honour

May I be privileged to bury my father
May I be privileged to bury my mother
Despite all evil machinations
Despite all evil forces.
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During the period of akó gwígwé, there is extensive feasting and drinking. It is very hard to say how many cows, goats and sheep are slaughtered, and the number of yams pounded for the occasion is virtually countless. One informant describes an akó celebrant as one who feeds the whole community for as long as the ceremony lasts! This is probably the reason akó has not been performed in modern times. It needs to be emphasised that in addition to being wealthy in order to finance akó, the celebrant has to have innumerable slaves and servants not only to cope with the enormous work entailed, but also a few ‘good’ ones to be buried alive with the effigy. An average of about 200 slaves are said to have disappeared with every akó celebration before the coming of the white man. Since an estimation of wealth traditionally included the slaves and servants one possessed, their sacrifice during an akó ceremony was intended not so much as a matter of cruelty as of display.

On the last and final day of the akó ceremony, the effigy is carried by some young men of the Ugbama35 age group, but known in this ceremony as Segbé. They are
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accompanied by several musical groups each with its own set of dancers and admirers. The most prominent bands include the olùsoròp ét, ajàbúr è, ọsìnjîn, màrè and ugbèdù. The following are two of the songs frequently rendered during the akó procession:

Èrí i mà dòma 'lùwà mi rèn
Oma roba sèkun rèn o
È e e oma roba sèkun rèn
Mà a bà légìn, mà a ba lòpè

Oma roba sèkun rèn o
È e e, oma roba sèkun rèn
Èdo ogwa Olùwayé wè ka rè e
Oma roba sèkun rèn
È e e, oma roba sèkun rèn

Sè è núbà?
Uròghò enúbà
Sè è núbà?
Uròghò enúbà

The akó procession passes through certain important streets and lanes in the town, which are restricted to only high grade burials like the ìpòsí and akó. Among others, these include Úsòkìn, Òmitàko, Ọ̀nà-Ọ̀nà (pronounced Ọ̀nà) and Ójàlá. During this outing, the procession stops at the entrance of the house of anyone who has performed akó before, slaughters a goat there, and the effigy is lowered just enough to allow the feet to touch the goat's blood. I am told that over 200 goats were slaughtered in this manner at Madam Osemí's akó ceremony in 1920(?). At the end of the celebrations the effigy is buried with some cows instead of slaves in a grave situated in an open space far from the actual grave of the deceased.

The last akó burial ceremony in Òwò district was performed for Ameri Òlasubude, mother of the ex-Ọlòwò Olàfèrè Òlagbegí II in 1944/45 (see chart of akó performances). However, there have been at least half a dozen others performed in villages around Òwò, since 1945. The writer has seen several akó figures but never as fully-dressed as they would appear in the actual burial ceremony.

It is uncertain when akó, as we know it, was first performed, but it must have started well before the present century. The present chief Èléèrèwè, Abraham Ojo, in whose lineage at least three akó have been performed told me that according to his father, the oldest one was that of Èléèrèwè Akéntún which he thought took place at least 300 years ago. This date is quite plausible if we use Willert's average of one akó in three years. According to most informants whose families had performed akó, the practice during the ceremony is to slaughter one goat at the entrance of each house whose family had performed akó before. The number of goats slaughtered on any one occasion has been well over 200. If one goat was slaughtered for each family which had performed akó in the past, then 600 years would be a modest estimate of the age of akó. This figure will not, of course, include the number of akó celebrants whose names have passed out of memory and therefore would not have any goats slaughtered at the
entrance of the family house. The next datable ăkô are those of Ojomo Agunloye, and Madam Aládéébóyè (Adáfún Adéébégáhá’s mother) in 1880 and 188(?) respectively. This would be approximately twenty years before the first European visited Òwò. During the first half of this century, about a dozen ăkô were performed although there have been none in Òwò district for the past thirty years.

My informants said that they would have performed ăkô for their deceased parents but for the great expense it involves. Others have been content with the straightforward ‘40th day funeral outing’ which consumes less time and, in most cases, less money as well. Even though ăkô is known in Benin and also in Onitsha to which the practice was extended, Òwò would appear to be the most active ăkô centre at least for this century, judging by the amount of information and material still extant on the subject. Justine Cordwell’s study points to the possible existence of other centres of ăkô among the Yoruba-Ijebu, Òyo and Northern Yoruba areas, but its disappearance has been attributed to the advent of the Islamic faith which forbids the practice of naturalistic sculpture which is so important in the ăkô effigy. In addition, the lack of permanent settlement especially among the Òyo and the Northern Yoruba owing to civil wars in Yorubaland might not have been conducive to the continuation of ăkô. However, it would appear that the Islamic faith which was introduced into Òwò as late as 1910/1234 has had little or no detrimental effect on the continuation of the ăkô ceremony.

It appeared that the Òwò ‘were able to maintain virtual independence for their capital and surrounding district’, even though ‘from time to time tribute had to be paid to Benin’. Other than the legendary migration of the Òwò from Ile-Ife under Òlówò Ojugbelu to their present site, we know of no other major movement or change of site in oral or written history. It can be inferred, therefore, that Òwò has enjoyed a notable measure of cultural stability which most Yoruba settlements cannot boast of. This fact is reflected in the size of the àáfin (palace) at Òwò which is considered the largest one extant in Yorubaland. Moreover, at no time did any stranger reign on the Òwò throne. This historical continuity made possible the cultural stability which has preserved important cultural institutions like the ăkô ceremony.

As stated above, the medium for the ăkô effigy changed from clay to wood for reasons which still remain obscure. I would, however, suggest that the following may have contributed to the change:

a) the development and/or abundance of wood-working iron materials which may have made carving relatively easier and more precise.
b) the need to work in a medium which is more manageable than, and not as delicate as clay, which can easily crack or break either during manufacture or during the ăkô procession.
c) the desire to eliminate the weight problem since the ăkô effigy used to be carried by men.

Whatever the case may be, it would appear that even if the material used in the effigy was important, the artist did not display it since paint usually covered the final product. It would also imply that the change of medium would not have been of great consequence in the determination of the style of the ăkô effigy. The effigy is seen from close quarters, as it is actually placed among the people, and the celebrants feel the deceased person to be actually there with them. The reality of this presence is
enhanced by theatrical means; the ‘audience’ truly interacts with the life-size effigy by moving to, from and around it unrestrictedly. The application of paint heightens the naturalistic effect of the effigy. The akó-type naturalism is not just a resemblance of the deceased; its goal seems different from that of photography. It shares the aims of akó itself, which is reconstructing the image of the deceased physically and socially.

The figure which Lamunren (a relatively modern carver taught by Chief Akeredolu) executed for Ameri Olaṣubude’s akó in 1944, was rejected by the Olówò because it did not conform to the ideal of akó-type naturalism. Even though Willett reports that ‘according to the Olówò it was not considered sufficiently like the deceased’, it would be unwise to take the statement too literally. The Olówò may have meant that the carved figure had failed to meet the requirements of the traditionally acceptable akó effigy. A glance at the effigy by Lamunren reveals how impressionistically the work has been carried out. This fact is particularly noticeable in the carving of the toes and fingers on which Willett himself has remarked.

On the other hand, Ogunleye Ologan was a more traditional carver, and a second figure was commissioned from him for Ameri Olaṣubude’s akó. Apart from being much older than Lamunren, Ogunleye had undoubtedly seen more akó effigies carved and understood better the criteria of acceptability. Moreover, we are almost certain that Ogunleye’s experience of akó carving predates the advent and/or active use of photography in Òwò; that is, assuming that Ogunleye was in his late teens when ‘his father Ologan carved the akó for the mother of Chief Sàṣèrè of Ìjúlẹ some time before 1909’. Since Ogunleye’s version of Ameri Olaṣubude’s akó figure was accepted and has been buried, we have no means of knowing what it looked like. The existing akó figure of the mother of Chief Sàṣèrè of Oke-Oja, however, carved by him does provide some idea about his style. Unfortunately, the single surviving akó figure by Ogunleye is no longer accessible but a photograph is reproduced in Willett’s article, and he describes the figure thus:

It represents her as a young woman, and is painted white, except for the hair which is represented as braided up to a topknot, and edged with black cloth, presumably for greater realism when it protruded from beneath the head-tie which would be worn during the ceremony. The head of this figure is a more stylised than the former one (i.e. Lamunren’s), but the hands and feet are strikingly naturalistic, with long slender fingers and toes, carved separate from each other whereas Lamunren carved his toes and fingers touching.

Ogunleye Ologan’s style of carving akó figure seems to agree with the impression that most informants gave me on what they thought a good akó carving should be. The nature of the material used (at least in the case of wood), is usually concealed under paint (which used to be either aji or orópá while factory-made paints have been used in recent times). But before the application of paint, the wood is smoothed and finished to such a degree that the procedural aspect of the carving can no longer be perceived. Tool marks are hardly visible on the surface, particularly on the head, hand and feet, and the artist’s hand is therefore often hard to recognize. The akó sculptural technique seems to be geared to conveying qualities of completeness and perfection while it also eliminates unnecessary details and marks which may distract from the main subject.

The youthful face of the akó figure by Ogunleye is stylistically linked to the earlier practice of using one of the deceased’s children as a model for the effigy. In Òwò, it is
regarded as a compliment to be told that one resembles either of one’s parents. So too is the parent flattered if told that his child or children resemble him. In both cases, there is a confirmation of the legitimate birth of the child. In addition, of course, is the fact that the deceased’s age, preceding his death, is eliminated after death, being replaced by the creation of timeless and everlasting qualities which the deceased needs in the next world. Psychologically, such continuity represents the conquest of death, the concept being made clear in an informant’s belief that: *Iba mi ku, ifọye re o gbe w’ale* meaning ‘My father has not died, it is the effigy that has been buried’.

The expression on the youthful face of the àkó effigy by Ogunleyé is not one of frivolity that might characterise the age group. Rather, it is dignified, but alert, severe, but assuring. The look is that of one who has been ‘released from all restraints imposed by this earth’ and thus is a possessor of ‘limitless potentialities which they can exploit for the benefit of those who still live on earth’. The open eyes are a response to the plea by the survivors asking him ‘not to sleep in *qrn*, but to open his eyes wide and always look after his children, taking good care of them and providing for their needs and aiding them in difficulties’.

After the head, which is the outward physical symbol of the inner head or personal divinity, the hands and feet are the next most important parts of the body. They must be carved accurately, with the correct number of digits. An impressionistic rendering of these parts is not traditionally acceptable. Indeed, it might imply a physical, mental or moral deformity. The following reference in *Owónrin meji* from *Ifá* points this out:

- Òkúta là pàá mọ sèjè;
- A diá fòwò
- Òmọ abárunünjárún
- Nwón ni ó ríbó fún ómọọ rè
- Nitorí ikú
- Gbogbo ómọ màráàrún
- Tí ówò bí náà
- Ló ríbó fún
- Gbogbo ómọ màráàrún náà á sí yè
- Ó ní ómọ ówò
- Kii tojú ówòó kú;
- Òmọ ẹsè kii tojú ẹsè rórùn
- Kèè pé o
- Kèè jinà,
- Ò tètè wáá bá ní láíkú kàngiri.

The verse can also be read as a prayer for the surviving children of the deceased who are here symbolized by the fingers and toes.

As part of the aim of àkó to reconstruct the social image of the deceased, his chiefly status is demonstrated in the choice of attire, and the music that accompanies the effigy. The use of very expensive cloth such as *asígbó* and *segbóṣẹn* are all indicative of
wealth and position in society while music such as ayibúre and osinjíi are played for only the most important chiefs. The slaughter of cows, or slaves as in the past, is evidence of power and prosperity, while the procession about town, which passes through important areas such as Ömíè-Ọlá, Úsókú and Omitake, also confirms high status and success in this world. The akó song ‘greetings, Child of Olúwayé’, etc. makes this point clearly.

The akó effigy, in a most carefully calculated manner during the ceremony, manages to ‘fill in’ the space vacated by the deceased, and perhaps does more. In his lifetime the deceased may not have been a chief, but the akó ceremony not only takes care of this deficiency, it goes a step further to create the best image of him by traditional standards. If, however, the deceased is childless in the first place he cannot have an akó burial no matter how wealthy he may have been. All through the akó celebration three points are clearly made:

a) that the deceased has got children.
b) that the children are successful materially and socially.
c) that the children are now performing their filial duty to the parent through the akó burial ceremony.

From the moment that either of the parents dies to the last day of the akó ceremony, there is constant reference to the strong physical and emotional ties between parent and child. The bîmbè, a rather moving kind of music announces the death while the children join in the song: ‘Elders of Owó, please help inquire, my father has departed home’. By so doing, the children are not only eliciting sympathy from the people, they are also honouring the parent by announcing his death, for it is only ‘bad deaths’ that are not announced. In the opósi ceremony which is just a step below the akó, the only music played, Ölómaiṣe, fully rendered is yà gbòrun Ölómi isè o, ‘all and sundry see how honourable it is for one who is blessed with children’. This is complemented by the Yoruba saying ‘children are not a cause for rejoicing themselves, it is the man who is buried by his children that has had children’. The desire to give one’s parents a fitting burial stated unequivocally is in the song rendered by the Òkọjú: Mа ràyè sin ‘bà mì, mа ràyè sin ‘jè mì, etc., ‘May I be privileged to bury my father’.

Physically, a connexion of resemblance is forged through the akó effigy, whose appearance is midway between the deceased parent and the offspring. The effect of this art is most striking in the akó procession where the child and the akó effigy are seen together and people remark that ‘the parent is not dead’. What is actually meant is that the life-likeness of the effigy, especially when compared with the child as its model, makes it appear like a living person. We must remember that since the akó ceremony may come as late as 20 years after the death of the parent, the actual likeness of the deceased may have almost faded from memory, and the only link is the child. The child ‘carries his parent through the path of honour’ as the Òkọjú say in their song Òna olà mà gbè’bàmi gù o, etc. The child realizes and believes that, in doing this, he is conforming to the injunction in Ogbe-Irosùn that ‘a person should render his filial duties to a deceased parent in order that he may have children to look after him’. Also the child’s status is raised from that of an ordinary child, omọ lásán, to that of a ‘proper’ child, omọ gidi, as can be observed in another akó song: Òma láj’oma, etc., ‘Children are born different’. All this is besides the belief among the Yoruba that ‘the deceased stand apart and watch all performances of the burial and funeral rites’. 
In Òwónrin méjì of Òṣíí poems we get a glimpse of the pleasure that the departed one takes in the celebration of the àkò ceremony:

Kó o, ng ò kó o;
A diá fun Àkò Aláwòróònpápà
Ekún òmọ níi sun
Nwọn ní ó káakí Molè
Ó jàre
Ebo ní ó ọ̀c
Igbà tó rúbọ tún
Ló bá bérẹ́ sì òmọ o bí
Ijó ní njó
Áyò ní nyó
Ó nyín àwọn awoorè
Awọn awoo rẹ̀ nyin 'fá
O ya énu kóto
Orin awo ní ńko

Kó o, ng ò kó o (Take charge, I refuse to take charge)
They all divined for Àkò Aláwòróònpápà
(Àkò the Restless)
Who mourned his lack of children
Was advised to appease the god’s anger
And be blessed
Ritual sacrifice was the remedy
After the offering of the ritual sacrifice
He started to bear children
He danced in appreciation
He rejoiced and made merry
He gave honour to his priests
Who in turn glorify Òṣíí

Kó o; ng ò kó o (Take charge, I refuse to take charge)
They all divined for Àkò Aláwòróònpápà
(Àkò the Restless)
Who mourned his lack of children
(Àkò aja) The bitch does not remain for long outdoor
Without delay
I shall go home to have children quickly.

Ese tí ó nà
Ijó fá a
Oní bẹ̀ẹ̀ gége
Ní àwọn awo óun ńṣenu, rereé pa 'fá
Kó o, ng ò kó o;
A diá fun Àkò Aláwòróònpápà
Ekún òmọ níi sun
Ákò aja kì pé lóde.
Wàràjá
Ng ó relé lọ́gò gbonọ
Wàràjá

This Òṣíí poem lays great stress on the importance of having children. There is reference to the childless àkò who is ‘restless’ and nervous. Such Àkò cannot join the departed ancestors but lurks in dark corners, wandering about neither here nor there in dissatisfaction. One of the àkò songs by the Ìkhójú warns the deceased against just such conduct: màà bá lègí nìì màà bá lọpè, meaning literally ‘Do not perch on tree top; Do not perch on palm-tree tops’.

Àkò represents the last and final appearance of the deceased in a physical and recognizably naturalistic form. Hereafter, he is neither seen with the ‘ordinary eyes’ ojú lásàn, nor under normal circumstances. He may, however, be seen in dreams and in the next world. If the deceased’s children need his help, they may go to the grave site where the actual corpse is buried and making their request. Equally effective as media of contact are those objects, places or things associated with the deceased during his life on earth.
### Names of Person whose ńkó was Performed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of Person whose ńkó was Performed</th>
<th>P.C.N.’s Date</th>
<th>Eleereewe’s Date</th>
<th>Willett’s Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eléérèwè Akéntún</td>
<td></td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adařɛn Adéégbégbá’s mother</td>
<td></td>
<td>188(?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ojómo Agunloye</td>
<td>1880</td>
<td>1880</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Eléégbá</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>190(?)</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madam Baba Okunrinwaide</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madam Òsemí</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Aruwade</td>
<td></td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eléérèwè Adekanye</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ojómo Ajimarare (also called Oyigún)</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>192(?)</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ojómo Oyigun’s mother</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>1910/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ojómo Amaka’s mother</td>
<td></td>
<td>1933</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ameri Fabółakun</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ameri Òlasubude</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>1944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Sášére Adeula’s mother</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Aruwaiji</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
<td>n.d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeye Aríbólári*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Acedara*</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Notes

1. The fieldwork for this research was funded by the University of Ife. I wish to express my gratitude to Mr. Lalu Agbe who has been most helpful in locating and contacting families of those who have performed ńkó in the past, and to Mr. Benjamin Òlagbemi for translating the texts into English. I am also grateful to Dr. Sope Oyelaran for his assistance with the orthography and phonology of Yoruba words in the text, to Dr. Richard Taylor for textual advice, and to Dr. Wande Abimbola with whom I discussed the subject on several occasions.

2. **Phonological Notes:**

   We adopt the current practice in Yoruba orthography for purposes of transcription. For rendering the dialectal materials, however, the following conventions have been adopted (SY = Standard Yoruba):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orthographic Symbol</th>
<th>Phonetic Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gh: Òghó</td>
<td>Ñ: Ò (SY: Òwó)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ẹghẹn</td>
<td>Ë: Ë (SY: Ëi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ẹsù</td>
<td>Ë: Ë (SY: Ëi)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With reference to the second symbol, common Yoruba [J] corresponds everywhere to Òwó Yoruba [ts]. For the rest, we have largely ignored the vowel harmony requirement for lax [u] and [i] in places, since we do not pretend to make a strictly phonetic transcription.

5. See Willett (1966:34).
7. See Kantorowicz (1957).
10. Òpóis as used in Òwó can refer to either the
ceremony itself or the mock coffin which is borrowed from Chief Osowé for use in the ceremony.

According to Bobade Yusuf (n.d.), Oluulu Sàsàrè I had a daughter named Awojekun to whom he gave a maid to take with her when she was leaving for matrimonial home. The maid, whose name was not given had a head tie which Awojekun discovered to be of a rare quality and type. The head tie cloth known as asigbo would be reproduced only for very wealthy persons who could afford the very high cost. Òmu, Awojekun's husband wanted the 'copy-right' of the asigbo but Awojekun would not allow it as she feared that this might eventually make the maid more important than her. She sent the maid back to her father, Oluulu. When the maid had taught the Sàsàrè family the technique of weaving the asigbo, she returned to Òmu to continue her work as a maid. From then on, the asigbo was made in Chief Sàsàrè's compound exclusively. Today, however, the Ògwàba (that is, Òmu's family), and the families of Lâjâhô and Arijî, who are direct descendants of Oluulu also make the asigbo.

Sàsàrè Oluulu served in the time of Òlòwò Eléwúkùn, and therefore within the last quarter of eighteenth century when asigbo was most likely introduced to Òwò. Since we have no indication of the original hometown of Awojekun's maid, it is not easy to guess where asigbo came from originally.

REFERENCES


RÉÉVALUATION DE LA FONCTION DE L'EFFIGIE AKÓ UTILISÉE POUR LA SECONDE INHUMATION À OWÓ

La cérémonie d'inhumation Akó à Owó a été décrite pour la première fois par Justine Cordwell et Frank Willett. Willett entrevit la possibilité d'un lien entre l'effigie akó et les têtes en bronze et en terre cuite d'Ife. Le rôle de l'effigie étant pour Willett de fournir 'un moyen de représentation des insignes d'une fonction sociale', il ne voit aucune nécessité fonctionnelle justifiant le style naturaliste de ces effigies et estime qu'il s'agit là d'un développement récent.

La réévaluation de l'effigie akó et de sa fonction au sein de l'institution akó est la tâche entreprise par l'auteur qui a interrogé des sculpteurs et d'anciens officiants de la cérémonie: cette réévaluation comprend l'étude du contexte social dans lequel se déroule la cérémonie et l'interprétation des références à cette institution qui sont faites dans des sources littéraires orales. L'observation directe de l'akó a été impossible, cette institution vieille de 300 ans n'ayant pas été célébrée à Owó depuis 1944-5 en raison de son coût extrêmement élevé.

Traditionnellement, l'akó était une seconde cérémonie d'inhumation pour les individus d'un rang social élevé ainsi que leurs proches parents du sexe féminin. Son but est de recréer l'image du défunt, physiquement et socialement, et de l'aider à entrer dans l'ìrun (le ciel) où il jouira d'une seconde vie (èhin ìwà) supérieure à sa vie passée sur terre. Cette institution crée une situation qui permet une élévation symbolique du statut social et matériel. Le Yi'jàn ìjè par exemple, investit le défunt du rang de chef après sa mort, rehaussant sa position lorsqu'il entrera dans l'ìrun.

Les préparations que nécessitent l'akó comprennent la fabrication de l'effigie par un sculpteur et le tissage d'un tissu spécial par un spécialiste. Les artisans observent certains tabous et pendant l'exécution de leur travail, la famille du défunt effectue des paiements importants. À l'origine, le visage et les mains de l'effigie étaient en argile colorée par des teintures organiques et le corps était en paille. Le changement qui entraîna l'usage du bois pour l'effigie complète qui était ensuite recouverte de peinture importée, eut lieu vers la période qui suivit les 25 dernières années du 18ème siècle et coïncida peut-être avec l'introduction de l'okè ríde ìṣù (pousse-pousse) qui en facilitait le transport.

Pour assurer la ressemblance avec le défunt, on fait appel à un des descendants qui sert de modèle ou, plus récemment, on utilise une photographie. L'impressionnisme n'est pas admis.

La sculpture une fois terminée (akó gwró) est richement parée et placée sur un siège dans une pièce pendant 9 jours au cours desquels des officiantes et des jeunes filles chantent pour elle. Le dernier jour de la célébration, des hommes de la catégorie d'âge Ògbà portent l'akó à travers des quartiers importants de la ville et égorgent une chèvre devant la maison de chaque ancien officiant. On égorge au moins 10 vaches et 200 chèvres qui servent de sacrifice et de nourriture. Autrefois, on enterrait 200 esclaves avec l'effigie; de nos jours ceux-ci sont remplacés par des vaches.