

# The Nigerian Field

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A design on Hausa hat

**THE NIGERIAN FIELD SOCIETY**  
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## **THE LAST OF THE TROUBADORS: ADIEU, LAMIDI FAKEYE**

Ohioma Ifouny Pogonon

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Post colonial discussions of African art initially centred on capturing the essence of traditional African arts alongside a new contemporary art that was practically a product of colonial circumstances. Growing side by side these were to all intents and purposes, other artistic initiatives fashioned after western cultural parameters. Some of the new initiatives included attempts to study, understand and as much as possible retain traditional elements that had more or less been deliberately relegated as a result of missionary colonial contact. And therefore here lies the huge historical contradiction, for it is the same missionary force that later sought to encourage, foster and allow the use of traditional images in the churches. As a result, local and outside initiatives around that time paid some attention to investigating the traditional arts. In doing this and against the background that African wood sculptures were incontrovertibly the best and most widespread of traditional arts to reach the west, the efforts of the Catholic mission to encourage and propagate African images in its churches led to the inadvertent discovery of one of Africa's greatest and most prolific woodcarvers, in Nigeria, Lamidi Fakeye.



Works in OYASAF garden



Detail of a work

Art circles in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, especially around Paris, benefitted tremendously from experiencing African art when it instigated and catalysed a new art there. *Avant-garde* artists of the time had tacitly given credence and recognition to African art by adopting the freedom of expression they learned from the authors of the African wood sculptures, then referred to as curiosities, that they had purchased to decorate their studios. Having played such an overwhelming catalytic role, it left little doubt that African arts had to be investigated further. A number of anthropologists/ethnographers and others in the discipline of understanding man in his totality then began to actively investigate the objects and their makers. This again gave impetus to the study of African art as an academic discipline which today has earned worldwide recognition having since evolved its own *modus operandi* and specific methodology.

Wood sculptures are two or three dimensional images, usually representative, that were produced for particular purposes in traditional Africa. Broadly speaking traditional artists produced both secular and utilitarian objects, the most popular of which include masks and figures for rituals and festivals and household/sundry objects. In both cases, the objects were highly decorative and peculiar in the sense that they were more user specific than not. Within the society members therefore, it was easy to identify objects meant for specific cultural and sundry purposes in the producer community. Carving was more or less tied to lineages and was learnt by the apprenticeship method whereby a master-carver had learner carvers under his tutelage and they in turn mastered the art by watching, and imitating their master over a relatively long period. In this process the learner-carver matured to freedom from the master and moved on to start his own workshop. Such tutelage is still being done, but quite minimally today.



Detail of another work

On the other hand, contemporary initiatives to teach and learn art have been through formal and classroom teaching oriented in the pure Western sense. What started during the colonial period was the establishment of schools that had teachers who taught pupils using the western curriculum. Their products were not permitted to benefit from the same local colour and cultural establishment that had earlier on provided the impetus for the creation of what we today refer to as traditional arts. Therefore the arts that were produced by this new group were basically western inclined. Of course, the mediums of artistic expression were a drastic departure from those of the olden days. While the academically trained artists worked in mediums common to western artists, some few others however were to be encouraged by the missionaries to work in wood and metals using their traditional idioms. One of such artists is Lamidi Olonade Fakeye, an outstanding artist who hailed from Ila Orangun in Osun State of Nigeria and enjoyed the benefit of early training and direction from

some of the best carvers in the South-western part of Nigeria under the tutelage of Europeans, whose major aim was to revive, revitalise and rejuvenate traditional African sculpture in order to cross integrate. Today Lamidi Fakeye has served creditably, to all intents and purposes, as the bridge between the old and the new.



Addressing one of his creations?

A popular but simple way of classifying Nigerian artists and their arts is into two broad groups, namely the academically trained artists and the locally trained artists. Lately, a new stream paying its own attention to artists who are working purely in the traditional style using traditional forms, even with some western elements, is emerging and is referred to as the neo traditionalists. It is to this group that Lamidi Fakeye falls plumb into. Lamidi Fakeye's works are reminiscent of and exemplify traditional forms of carving just as his tools and his exposure to the west and western methods of work stand him out as the product of the evolving new 'global' world. Lamidi Fakeye is prolific and has benefitted from many huge commissions. He is the author of the famous Oduduwa statue in the assembly hall of the Obafemi Awolowo University, the statues that adorn the entrance to the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan and many others in the Catholic collection in major churches in Nigeria.



**Annunciation: U.I. Lady Seat of Wisdom (photo: Peju Layiwola)**

Unfortunately Lamidi Fakeye passed away on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2009 at the age of about 82. Shortly before his death, in January 2009, the Omooba Yemisi Adedoyin Shyllon Art Foundation (OYASAF) in an extra-ordinary board meeting had decided that since it held the single largest collection of Lamidi Fakeye's sculptures in the world, over thirty of them and Pa Fakeye was then over 80 years old, it should commence the writing of a book on this classic traditional sculptor. OYASAF, also reputedly holder of the largest private collection of Nigerian art, therefore invited Lamidi Fakeye and his wife to be interviewed for the book. A number of scholars were invited alongside to join in over 40 hours of interviews and interaction with Lamidi Fakeye and his wife in the newly built and cosy OYASAF International Centre. Chairman of OYASAF, Omooba Yemisi Shyllon and his wife were

also present. There in this serene and conducive environment the interviews of Pa Fakeye took place over a three day period. The schedule was strict. Interview sessions started at 9.00am daily with an hour's break-up for lunch between 2.00 and 3.00pm and then back to work from 4.00pm to 7.00pm. After 7.00pm we were dinner guests of our host till we were ferried back to the hotel.

The soon to be published book was conceived to be a dialogue with Lamidi Fakeye on his life and his works. Therefore, the entire process was recorded in audio and video. An audio version of the book is planned. Apart from his mother tongue, Yoruba, Pa Lamidi speaks English easily but he was permitted to communicate his responses and answers in either of the two languages he spoke. We thought also that to retain some of the local colour, it was desirable to record mainly in Yoruba to save error of translation and transliteration. The interviews were also directed at allowing Lamidi Fakeye to speak on the works in the OYASAF collection individually. To do this, each of the thirty works in the OYASAF collection was brought out into the place of the interviews, placed before Pa Fakeye and he was interrogated about the works. By so doing we ensured that he spoke reminiscently, sometimes recalling the details of the works and detailed, local and international personal experiences that gave impetus to the making of the arts. On the whole, the methodology adopted was satisfactory, adequate and quite rewarding.



Jesus before Pilate: U.I. Seat of Wisdom (photo Peju Layiwola)

Lamidi Fakeye has enjoyed a lot of attention from scholars and the art world. In fact, quite early in life, he became the toast of traditional carvers and earned several commissions from individuals and public institutions, especially the Catholic Mission through his contacts with



Fathers Carol and Mahoney. For this reason a good number of publications have come out on and about him, both locally and internationally. Although his outside experiences have yielded a number of publications, there is a lacuna on works about him at the local level. This is what the present OYASAF effort aims to fill in the forthcoming book. A number of scholars/students have also studied his biography and some of his works in the context of local colour and experience, but they remain in the libraries where they have limited readership. This is why an audio version of the forthcoming publication is also considered. It is the firm belief of OYASAF that an audio version will allow for everyone to have easy access to the man and his works for a long time to come.



Holy water font: U.I. Seat of Wisdom  
(photo: Peju Layiwola)

The book is set in about six chapters dealing with Lamidi Fakeye's childhood as an artist, becoming an artist, his works and his travels, his art, artists and outside influences, the carving tradition and the OYASAF collection. The book will be generously illustrated in black and white pictures of his works in the OYASAF collection. This will however be interspaced with about 10-15 other pictures in colour.

Unfortunately, Pa Fakeye died peacefully on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2009. His death leaves a wide gap to fill in the scheme of contemporary art studies. Easily the most active in his class, Lamidi Fakeye has left a legacy both locally and internationally. Little wonder therefore that since his passage, numerous tributes have been published in his honour. He is indeed the last of the troubadour.

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Metal panels: U.I. Seat of Wisdom (photo: Peju Layiwola)



Metal panel detail: U.I. Seat of Wisdom (photo: Peju Layiwola)



Cleansing the Temple: U.I. Seat of Wisdom (photo Peju Layiwola)



Granting an interview



Lamidi Fakeye reviews his work.

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