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Portraits of Heroes: Fela and Awolowo at Ikeja, Lagos State, Nigeria

Abstract
This essay explores figural representations of two iconic figures, Fela Anikulapo Kuti and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, as heroic historical characters. The tenet of Yoruba figural expressions in wood, metal, and mixed media is loaded with philosophical and symbolic insights, informed with coded and comprehensible information that manifests in distortions, exaggerations, and fragmentations of figures, as idiomatic images such as *Jagunjagun* (Equestrian figures), Babalawo (diviners), and Sango (Divinity of lightning and thunder). To what extent does the contemporary Yoruba artist benefit from the indigenous philosophic visual language of Yoruba ancestry, and to what extent do the artists depart into more Western visual concepts, in the representation of Fela's and Awolowo's portraits? Readings here will draw on the impact of Yoruba traditional objects and coded forms, and on their continuity in the works of contemporary Yoruba

artists, while exploring modern materials as a means of reflecting on the artistic representations of Fela by Sobayo Abolore and Awolowo by Bale Olawale.

Key-Words: Heroes. Portait. Immortalization. Lagos State government. Visual arts. Yorouba art philosophy. Interpratation.

Résumé

Cet essai examine les représentations figuratives de deux figures emblématiques, Fela Anikulapo Kuti et Chief Obafemi Awolowo, en tant que personnages historiques héroïques. La tradition des expressions figuratives yoruba, réalisées en bois, en métal et en techniques mixtes, est riche d'enseignements philosophiques et symboliques. Elle véhicule des informations codées mais intelligibles qui se manifestent à travers des déformations, des exagérations et des fragmentations des figures, donnant naissance à des images idiomatiques telles que les Jagunjagun (figures équestres), les Babalawo (devins) et Sango (divinité du tonnerre et de la foudre). Dans quelle mesure l'artiste yoruba contemporain tire-t-il profit du langage visuel philosophique hérité de l'ancestralité yoruba, et dans quelle mesure s'en éloigne-t-il au profit de conceptions visuelles plus occidentales dans la représentation des portraits de Fela et d'Awolowo ? L'analyse s'appuie sur l'influence des objets traditionnels yoruba et de leurs formes codifiées, ainsi que sur leur continuité dans les œuvres des artistes yoruba contemporains. Elle explore également l'usage des matériaux modernes comme moyen de réflexion sur les représentations artistiques de Fela, réalisées par Sobayo Abolore, et d'Awolowo, réalisées par Bale Olawale.

Mots clés : Héros. Portrait. Immortalisation. Gouvernement de l'Etat de Lagos. Arts visuels. Philosophoie de l'art Yorouba. Interprétation.

Introduction

Among the Yoruba people, two- or three-dimensional representation in naturalistic, (abstract), or stylized form is known as *àwòrón* (Lawal, 2001). Hence, *àwòrón* refers to figural representation known as sculpture. The Yoruba people of South-western Nigeria are known for consistently producing sternly sculptural pieces, which have made them known beyond the shores of their territory. The finesse of the images is more than meets the eye, as the forms carried in the overall physical shape are tailored to conform to their socio-cultural, political, and religious beliefs, needs, and understanding. On this note, the consistent, obvious peculiarity in the figural representation that characterized ancient African/Yoruba works in form speaks volumes. The physical form of the images has raised issues among outsiders and, in particular, among early Western scholars, who

lack explanations for why the images were depicted as they were. Hence, having no comprehension of the essence and expressive content that informed the artists to produce such strange forms, compared to what is obtained in Europe and America, resulted in their wrongful labeling of African artists who executed the images with many negative words, such as naïve, unlettered, unskilled, and primitive, among others.

The discovery of Leo Frobinous in 1910, when he excavated some life-like portraits at Ile-Ife, at a period not far from when some notable European artists (Pablo Picasso, George Braque, and Henry Matisse) were arrested by the good qualities in an African image (a mask acclaimed to be from Gabon in Fig. 1). The relief mask is characterized by angularity, exaggerations, and willful distortion, as well as symmetrical balance synonymous with African sculptures. The arrest of the mask by these notable European artists, therefore, led them to reason otherwise, and they were of the opinion that African artists' perspective on the forms in their images was not the right perspective. The striking form of the mask eventually influenced Picasso, Braque, and Matisse to achieve the long-awaited freedom in their visual forms and contents they had been yearning for around 1904 to 1907. From this time onward, European artists began to pursue new approaches and forms in their artistic expression, modeled on the African visual approach of geometric abstraction, which requires philosophical insight to understand, in contrast to their then-copy-of-nature artworks. This new approach eventually gave birth to the Euro-American modern art style and movement known as Cubism, which later yielded several other art movements in the Euro-American art scene.

The naturalistic portrait discovered by Leo Frobenius (29 June 1873 – 9 August 1938), a renowned German ethnologist and archaeologist, at Ile-Ife in present-day Osun State, around 1910 and 1912, introduced Ile-Ife art to the Western world. Among Frobenius's awesome discoveries was the mind-blowing "Ori Olokun" portrait bronze cast using lost-wax techniques synonymous with a sophisticated race (Hirst, 2019). The outstanding quality of the bronze portrait induced Frobenius to an exclamation state of mind that made him jump to the conclusion that the work was not executed by Africans on the grounds that the qualities exhibited in the works were equal to those found in Greece. Hence, he claimed that Ile-Ife was an extension of the lost city of (Athens) Atlantis (Adebowale, 2022).

From this period onward, the Western approach to judging and appreciating artworks from the African continent took a new direction. It is worth noting that images by Yoruba artists are among the forefront of idiomatic, philosophical, and symbolic expressions in African art. Little wonder, Willett (1971) asserted that the greatest contribution of the African race to the world is its richly artistic images executed in various media. This assertion points out that artworks from African soil have generated considerable appreciation and academic writing to the benefit of mankind, and this continues.

The presence of Christian missionaries and their Islamic counterparts in Yoruba land brought a major setback to the people's flourishing art, particularly sculpture. This set of people succeeded in making their Yoruba disciples see figural art as the devil's incarnation and a fetish. The belief against images, therefore, is so hard on the artists (carvers) as many of their clients are now followers of the alien newfound religions (Christianity and Islam) and have jettisoned the age-long traditional worship. This, therefore, pushes carvers out of demand and discourages upcoming artists from relying on art (carving images) as a reliable source of income. Hence, artists (sculptors) and their products (sculptures) were drastically affected.

To date, the ruins left by the foreign religion on African/Yoruba creative image are still germinating at the expense of the people. To avoid belittling, modern Artists, due to their educational backgrounds and exposure to modern materials and techniques, are mostly found expressing themselves visually within the Western canon. This, however, makes their product look westernized in form at the expense of their indigenous identity of figural representations. The Western realistic approach to art has therefore taken over in Nigeria, particularly in the rendition of human portraiture, pioneered by Aina Onabolu (1882–1963), the acclaimed father of modern art in Nigeria and a self-taught Yoruba artist. Onabolu later succeeded in pressurizing the government to make the teaching of fine arts part of the curriculum in Nigerian schools. Onabolu's conscious effort and ability to cope with nature, however, helped demystify the notion that African artists lack creative competence within the Western canon. Notwithstanding Onabolu's style, the art students from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, saw the death of their cultural identity in their works, which led them to discard the Western approach imposed on them by their lecturers, who were predominantly foreigners. With this idea, the students were labeled rebels; their act led to the emergence of the Zaria art movement in the modern Nigerian art scene (Oloidi, 1986). The reflection of the Zaria student socio-cultural background in the visual was referred to as "natural synthesis," and this later spread to other art institutions in Nigeria.

Since the emergence of Nigerian artists exploring forms relating to their socio-cultural background, the pace is still being kept alive by a handful of artists, among which are the two Yoruba artists (Abolore Sobayo and Bale Ola-Olu Olawale) who reflected the cultural and symbolic insight in the portraits of Fela Anikulapo and Obafemi Awolowo erected at Ikeja, the capital city of Lagos State, respectively. The two iconic images, since they have been placed for public view, have generated many reactions because the two portraits are being judged by Western aesthetic standards at the expense of the producers' socio-cultural and idiomatic insights and beliefs. Therefore, to make clear the dark places in the mind of the viewers/critics on these two iconic images as regard Yoruba aesthetic, philosophic and symbolic means of communication through the visual is the trust of this study which seek to examine the heroic portraits:

Fela and Awolowo at Ikeja with a view to providing information about the embedded canon of Yoruba philosophy and symbolic insight in the two iconic figures as well as the artists background to help clear the aspect of misconception (regarding quack) and anonymity of the two artists.

The Artists

Having the knowledge of the artist's cursory background is of importance to help clear the aspect of anonymity, as well as bringing more light on the artists behind the two heroic iconic portraits. Sobayo Abolore, the creative head at Ore Apparel, an outfit known for fashion design, is the artist who executed the sternly erected figure of Fela Anikulapo Kuti that enhanced the aesthetic landscape of the Allen round at its initial erection before its relocation to the Opebi-Toyin street junction in Ikeja. He completed his secondary education at Ikeja Grammar School in 1998, and to achieve his creative quest, he enrolled at the Yaba College of Technology, where he studied Fine Arts. After graduating, he delved into politics and, from 2011 to 2014, served as the leader of the Oshodi-Isolo Local Government Council. Abolore is the founder of *Jeleosinmi*, a place meant to keep younger age busy creatively, thereby keeping them busy off the streets. Bale Ola-Olu Olawale (born in 1978), a graduate of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where he earned his B.A. Fine Arts and M.F.A. (Sculpture) in 2007 and 2014, respectively, and currently (as at the time of this study) pursuing his PhD (Sculpture) at the same University.

Interaction with the management of Terra kulture (the consulting organization for the Lagos State Government on the beautification of the state through the visual) during the course of my field work and findings gave a contrary information on the actual artist that executed the Awolowo statue as against the view observed by Kehinde (2017), that the portrait was done by Hamzat Attah rather than he was the middle man whose company won the bidding of the image and then sublet it execution to a sculptor (Bale Ola-Olu Olawale). The information above on Sobayo Abolore and Bale Ola-Olu Olawale has no doubt shed light on the handling of portraits by roadside (quack) artists, as they are products of the foremost formal art institutions, the Yaba and Zaria Art Schools, respectively. These artists have been able to reflect their Yoruba aesthetic idioms in their execution of the iconic portraits, notwithstanding the medium and approach used, as well as in their efforts to borrow from their Yoruba aesthetic philosophy background in the portraits of Awo and Fela erected at Ikeja.

The study Area

Since the creation of Lagos State in 1967, Ikeja has served as the state's capital and the seat of power. From this time till date, the state Government has continued to invest in and improve Ikeja and its environs by ensuring a good road network, a sound urban environment with good

landscaping, and beautifying the area by erecting sculptural pieces of iconic figures at notable landmarks.

Outdoor Portrait Sculpture in Yoruba Land

Outdoor art in Nigeria, according to Nwanna (2022), began as a result of colonization and Christian missionaries, with the aim of using it as memorials and as an extension of their mission-inspired teaching. He further notes that things changed after Nigeria's independence, when images became a means of honoring notable Nigerian statesmen and of projecting the country's cultural richness and identity. Lagos, being the seat of power from the Colonial era till Nigeria gained independence in 1960, and thereafter, afforded the state the opportunity to be at the forefront of modernization. These include the execution of notable people in sculptural form and the erection of their image (s) at strategic locations. These ideas, therefore, added to urban beautification with a view to immortalizing the people whose images were erected. Owoade and Adesanyo (2022) posit that sculpture's significance in the public domain extends beyond the aesthetic, offering psychological and mental relief, among other benefits, to viewers.

The first modern human sculpture representation in urban Lagos was the popular cenotaph erected in memory of the fallen soldiers (probably of Nigerian Origin) in the Second World War, with its two standing figures erected in the *Ìdúmòtà* area of Ìsàlè-Èkó (Lagos Island). Due to the location of this cenotaph, the images are therefore called *sójà Ìdúmòtà* (see Fig. 2). However, since these two standing figures were not linked to any known person, they were also referred to as the Unknown Soldier (Sobowale et al., 2022). It is very unfortunate that these two standing images have been replaced by a few figural works, with no knowledge of their new location. Notwithstanding this, the iconic cenotaph led to its replicas across Nigeria's states after independence.

Akintonde (2009) and Akintonde and Kalilu (2013) observed some outdoor images in Yoruba land earlier than the Soja Idumota. Among these is the female figure executed in 1905 and erected in front of a private home in the Idi-Agbata area of Alagbaka, Akure (see Fig. 3), while the earliest public image is the obelisk erected in honor of the Ijesha war lord Ogedengbe in 1934 (see Fig. 4). Pedro and Idowu (2022) observed sculptures in public spaces in Nigeria with a view to looking into their essence, execution, installation, maintenance, forms, and content in relation to the socio-cultural context of the sculpture's location. The study concluded with a recommendation that people be educated on how to relate effectively to the images to prevent further abuse of the works. Also, the government should embrace the idea of engaging professional artists and organizations to ensure well-executed, high-quality sculptures in Nigerian cities.

Other relevant scholarly works on the outdoor portrait genre include those of Afolayan et al. (2022), Tirimisiyu (2022), Ademuleya, Adeyanju,

and Ijisakin (2015), Adekoya (2015), Kalilu and Oladugbagbe (2013), Akintonde (2009 and 2004), and Kalilu and Akintonde (2013). These studies generally focused on the use of sculpture as an outdoor genre, its importance, and its abuse due to poor maintenance and attitudes towards sculptures. Also, these studies captured how images erected across the South-Western region reflected the socio-cultural significance of the sculptures for the people. In resolving issues of anonymity among public sculpture artists in southwestern Nigeria, Kalilu and Akintonde (2013) focused their search on the biographies of artists whose work is found across Yoruba land, with a view to tracking their identities and assessing the inherent art-historical information in their art. This study is highly relevant, as it provides a platform for tracking the artists behind the two iconic portraits, especially the person who executed the seated Awolowo portrait.

Slightly different from the above but relevant to the current study is Afolayan et al. (2022), which examined people's perceptions of the Eyo statue erected in front of Lagos House, Abuja. In the study, the authors identified two perspectives among their respondents: most people loved and accepted the image because it enhances tourist attractions and adds to the aesthetics of the built environment. While some viewed the eyo masquerade as lacking significant essence, this latter opinion might be due to the sculptures' location in the Northern region, dominated by people whose religious beliefs oppose images.

Of specific reference to outdoor images in Lagos are the works of Odiboh (1987), Adenle and Ayodele (2022), and Nwanna (2022). Odiboh's work is a master's thesis, and the first of its kind on public sculpture in Lagos (Nigeria). The study dwells on the occurrence, styles, and significance of urban images in Lagos State. The recent study is that of Adenle and Ayodele (2022), which examined selected outdoor sculptures erected across Lagos State in 2017 to commemorate the state's 50th anniversary. The study notes in the identified sculptures elements of poor counseling by the State Government to the agent through which the works were given to those who executed them. The paper concluded by suggesting that, in the future, the Government should take cognizance of the need to involve professional artists and administrators to avert the continued feeding of the public with sub-standard images.

Public art in Nigeria and issues relating to urban space recognition cum roles of art in urban cities in the country, of which Lagos State is a part, were examined by Nwanna (2022). The study observed that urban art became the center of attraction within its respective location. In direct relation to this current work is the mention of sculptures erected in some strategic locations in Lagos, among which is Awolowo's portrait. However, it is worth noting that the reviewed literature's fertile areas are unable to encompass the age-old socio-cultural and philosophical insights associated with the expressive content of Yoruba images, as this current study intends to do.

Yoruba Aesthetic Appeal in Fela's and Awolowo's Portraits

The Christian mission and their successful introduction of their foreign religion to the country in the middle of the 19th century brought a lot of setback to Yoruba traditional worship and belief which invariably hit hard and brushed the people's traditional art (most especially sculpture) and custom to the background due to the people engrossed in the foreign religion that almost resulted in its total collapse (Fowowe, 1984). According to Beier (1968), Western religion and ideas rubbed off on people's age-old beliefs and customs, forcing traditional art (and artists) to struggle under this yoke for a long time. However, in contemporary times, some artists of Yoruba exact like Baale Olaolu and Sobayo Abolore, did not give way completely to the assault of the Western visual canon, as they were still able to reflect and sustain forms in relation to Yoruba beauty and expression loaded with coded meanings, as shown in the portrait of Awolowo and Fela executed in 2017 by the two artists respectively.

From ages, beauty in Yoruba art does not rest on the physical appearance, as the artist never had it in mind to copy nature but to interpret it in connection to their socio-cultural and religious beliefs. Corroborating this, Ademuleya (2012) asserts that the artist's mindset is to interpret nature rather than copy it. In this attitude, beauty in Yoruba art lies in expressive content pregnant with philosophical and symbolic insights, offering comprehensible messages within the environment that produces it. Yoruba artists used form in their visual imagery to convey idioms used to communicate virtues among themselves. This act, though, is fading away; however, a handful of Yoruba artists are still borrowing (making use of) this wonderful act of expression used by their forerunners (traditional Yoruba artists) to the present day.

Form in African/Yoruba creative works has, however, generated substantial subject matter in scholarly discourse around the globe, further adding to the value of these works. Despite the exposition of people to the understanding of the Yoruba aesthetic philosophy and insights, the current generations of Yoruba artists still surfer set back from public criticism due to the viewer's lack of reasoning along with the artistic idioms (of Yoruba) embedded in a work. This attitude is a reflection that the people's contact with the West has not only robbed them of their traditional beliefs and values but has also eaten deeply into their visual aesthetic appeal (taste), which needed to be addressed in order to help tailor their thoughts in appreciating works of art from Yoruba (African) soil in the present era. On the two iconic heroic Portraits, Abolore Sobayo and Bale Ola-Olu Olawale were able to reflect their revolutionary mind visually by borrowing from their ancestral Yoruba figural philosophy and idioms in depicting the forms exhibited in the two works (Fela's and Awolowo's portraits erected at

Ikeja), notwithstanding the materials and techniques involved in the execution of the two iconic portraits.

Since the two iconic portraits were unveiled to public view and appreciation, the images have been met with negative comments, reflecting people's poor understanding of the Yoruba philosophical and symbolic insights encoded in and comprehensible through them. Prominent among such comments is that of Jegede (2017) below, calling the Lagos State Government for the replacement of the Awolowo portrait:

> "There is a disconnect between your laudable idea and its execution. And in the public domain, where this statue has taken up residence, the Awolowo image I have seen in pictures falls far short of the colossal idea that inspired its commission. My concern here is purely on the merit of the statue as a public work of art. It is, to put it directly, a poor representation of Chief Awolowo. The proportions are way off the mark, and, indeed, reveal an image that is completely antipodal to all the attributes that one has come to associate with the sage. The physicality of the sculpture considerably diminishes the eminence of the subject matter; in its shrunken and undignified sitting posture, this statue significantly whittles the vitality—the aura, the élan vital that this cerebral Nigerian hero embodies. This image is of such horribly juvenile quality, such laughable artistry, that all I can do is invoke the spirit of Ronald Reagan's 1987 call and ask, "Mr. Ambode, tear down this monstrosity!" (Jegede:2017).

Jegede's view above on Awolowo's portrait aligns with that of early scholars of African art, who had little or no insight into the socio-cultural and religious essence of appreciating the beauty of the physical form in non-Western art. Steven (1935:14), noting the decline in the form of art from Africa philosophically asserts that "Once the self-contained beliefs and values which are peculiar to ancient works are upset, so the forms which they clad themselves collapse. The more complete the civilizing process has been, the more completely the older (idiomatic insights) are destroyed. He further affirmed that a work of art has value only as evidence of a spiritual state. Corroborating this, Abiodun (1994) opined that "Such attention to form and emptiness to content has characterized many collectors of twentieth-century art who collect African art as well. For them, 'form' is the defining aesthetic factor: they have no real interest in understanding African art or the culture from which it came. Hence, to guard against misconceptions about the beauty of African artworks, Underwood (1951) and Trowell (1953) both called on interested minds studying African art to first understand the cultural philosophy from which the artworks emanated, thereby increasing their aesthetic enjoyment.

On Fela's and Awolowo's heroic portraits, the artist's power of rendition rested on the Yoruba philosophy of beauty (ewa), which processes two sides like a coin. According to Lawal (1974 and 2008), beauty among the Yoruba has two parts: physical beauty (ewà òde),

referring to visual appeal, and inner beauty (ewà inú), character or moral worthiness (ìwà), which also stands to be the essence on which they place a premium, as shown in the Yoruba popular saying: *ìwà l'ewà* (character determines beauty). Hence, in Yoruba visual art, artists place importance on form as a means of expressing their thoughts through the selected forms used in their artworks, communicating their ideas to viewers visually. Once this is achieved in a work, the image will therefore be judged as good and beautiful (*dára* and *léwà*). On this note, it is pertinent to bring to the fore the hidden Yoruba aesthetic and philosophical idioms embedded in Fela's and Awolowo's portraits for a better understanding and appreciation of the artist's view and courage in tapping from their ancient canon of figural representations symbolically.

Forms and Expressive Context in Fela's and Awolowo's Portraits at Ikeja

Form is the overall physical shape of an object. In visuals, it is a design element. According to Marder (2020), form in art may stand independently to evoke meaning in the viewer's eyes. Interacting with Sobayo and Bale (the two artists) revealed that the choice of forms in the two images as they were is purposeful. Fela Anikulapo Kuti is known for the posture and appearance depicted in the 30-foot-tall image in Fig. 5. It was revealed (by Sobayo) that the work was done to capture the essence of what the late music maestro and legend is synonymous with, such as his struggle for the masses' freedom, human dignity, social justice, consciousness, values, courage, and Pan-Africanism, among others. He further revealed that Fela's portrait is depicted headless and amputated to address questions arising from heedlessness. No doubt, the head is very important in the human body; hence, emphasis is placed on it during figural execution, particularly among Yoruba artists. During Fela's time, he did all he could to speak out against oppressive leaders in Nigeria, particularly through his popular Afrobeat music. Hence, the artist (Abolore) chose to represent Fela's portrait headless to depict what the oppressed leaders would have done to him while he was alive, had they not feared that such an act might erupt into chaos beyond their control.

Today, Fela has joined his ancestors, but his music and sayings keep on coming as a prophecy hunting down the evil-minded people. On this note, the absence of a head (orí) in the image stands as a reminder before the faces of the politically oppressed leaders who were never akin to seeing Fela's face and their intention (though they were unable to behead him) to silence him. The heedlessness, therefore, depicts that, notwithstanding his physical death (and departure to the ancestors' status), his good works are still projecting him as alive and vibrant for the loved ones to emulate.

The hand (owó) is one of the crucial parts of the human body, without which it would be difficult to hold and do things with ease. For a

musician and activist like Fela, a hand means a lot in holding and playing musical instruments. Many times, Fela has been handcuffed for no just reason and imprisoned. Hence, the phrase representing his wrist less (láì lọ́'rùn owó) is used to suggest how the then-tyrannical government in Nigeria has dealt with him through arrest, handcuffs, and imprisonment that hindered him, particularly from playing his musical instruments to express his mind while in detention. Without the wrist (*orùn owó*), it is difficult to hold or clamp someone's hands without losing the grip. Hence, depicting the portrait without the palm (*àtélé'wó*) and phalanges (*ìka*) is a way of saying that Fela, having joined his ancestors, is free of torment (handcuff). While the color patina and relief ornamentation speak volumes about the Yoruba idea of artistic ornamentation (òsó/onà), which adds to the value of artworks.

According to Adejumo (1995), in his study "Osogbo Festival of Images: An Insight into Some Aspects of Yoruba Art and History," he revealed that color application on the images during the festival is a recent phenomenon due to the fact Osogbo people have abandoned the festival of images for their new fond foreign religions (Christianity and Islam). Hence, when the city was plagued by disease, and after consulting an IFA oracle about their problem, the people were counseled to perform the festival of images and to apply various warm colors to the figures to make them clearer and more visible to people at a distance. This is because, without the various color patinas in the images, it will easily fade out of sight at a long distance during the procession. The color patina, therefore, serves as an easy link between the viewer and the view. Considering the color finishing of Fela's portrait at Ikeja without philosophical insight, one may feel otherwise, at the expense of the artist's justification and knowledge of borrowing from his traditional Yoruba visual ancestry.

The seated portrait of Awolowo, like Fela's, is also loaded with Yoruba traditional philosophical insights. When considering the size of the chair the figure is sitting on, it appears smaller than the body it carries. The small size of the chair is used to represent the wrong dimension of the seat that current politicians claim to emulate and occupy in Awolowo's political life. The fists were used to suggest the greedy nature of many current Yoruba politicians, who deceive people with their greed despite proclaiming the generosity of Awolowo's political ideas to the masses. A generous and plain-minded Awo was never found or accused of greed by his followers and the general populace, as he had a distaste for keeping secrets that could hinder the success and achievement of people in governance. Hence, the folded hands suggest the greedy manner in which current politicians are displaying by withholding from themselves, family members, and close associates the country's resources meant for the benefit of the general populace. The frontal and angularity of forms displayed in the position of the head, as shown in the figure, are synonymous with traditional Yoruba images used to depict attention and focus. Hence, without attending to and focusing on meeting the needs of

the masses, Awolowo would not have attained all his laudable achievements during his lifetime.

The size and type of shoe worn by the figure are symbolically represented to pass messages. Considering the overall size of the figure, the foot is represented as larger to symbolically communicate that Awolowo's shoe (bàtà) is big, and hence it is not easy to find a replacement for it. Hence, in this portrait, Baale Olaolu consciously depicts how the vacuum left by the legendary Yoruba political sage is too large for current politicians to fill. The latchet shoe (*bàtà olókùn*) symbolically connotes the wrong idea and philosophy that the current leaders are using in operating their government policies. This upside-down approach has not been making things fit and work progressively, as a Yoruba man is not expected to wear such a laced shoe with native attire, and his dressing is expected to be appreciated.

On this note, it is germane to bear in mind that both the "texts" of the art objects and the "contexts" of the culture of the producers, as Drewal (1988) opines, have a say in a fuller understanding of art (particularly in the case of Fela's and Awolowo's portraits at Ikeja). Meaning in African art (in particular) is not static but rather continually emergent. In a nutshell, only when one has reached some comprehension of the deeper significance of a form can one truly begin to describe or analyze (criticize) it. Otherwise, one will fall into misconceptions like the Yoruba proverb "*ohun tó wà léyìn éfà, óju òje lo"* (what comes after six is more than seven), according to Lawal (1994), the proverb suggests that one needs to gaze beyond what is physically ordinary to comprehend something relating to African artwork in its cultural depth to guide against misconceptions.

Conclusion

The paper has established that the heroic portraits of Fela Anikulapo Kuti and Chief Obafemi Awolowo at Ikeja not only serve as public monuments but are also seen as visual texts through which contemporary Yoruba sculptors interpret history, identity, morality, and collective memory. Viewed through indigenous Yoruba aesthetic philosophy, rather than the conventional Western ideals of anatomical realism, the sculptures reveal that expressive distortion, symbolic imagery, and unconventional proportions are not artistic shortcomings but deliberate means of communicating philosophical thought, cultural values, and socio-political commentary. Using Babatunde Lawal's conception of Yoruba aesthetics, this paper argues that beauty (*ewà*) in Yoruba art lies not only in outward appearance (*ewà òde*) but also in inner character (*ewà inú*) and expressive significance.

The two depicted icons are not Lagos indigenes but are from Ogun State; Awolowo is from Ikene in the Remo area, while Fela is an Egba by origin. This notwithstanding, their life and contributions to the growth of Yoruba land and Lagos State, especially facilitated the idea of their being

(honored) immortalized by the then-led Akinwumi Ambode administration as Lagos State Governor.

There is no doubt that this paper has shed light on the dark areas in the portraits, revealing the coded forms and philosophical insights represented in the two iconic portraits (Fela and Awolowo). This age-old practice, as exhibited in the two portraits, also brought to the fore the efforts of Sobayo Abolore and Bale Ola-Olu Olawale as contemporary Yoruba artists who are doing their best to keep viewers of their work in mind, an important aspect of Yoruba visual aesthetics. It also restates that using Western approaches and materials is not a barrier to representing works of art in the Yoruba canon, and that using images of the two iconic Yoruba men encourages the need to contribute their quota to ensuring a positive impact on people. Hence, achieving this through the artists helps preserve their legacy visually for generations yet unborn, as the Lagos State Government has preserved the outstanding memories of Fela and Awolowo.

The paper concludes that the heroic portraits at Ikeja reveal the enduring influence of Yoruba aesthetic philosophy on contemporary sculpture. Beyond commemorating notable historical figures, the monuments preserve collective memory, express cultural standards, and encourage reflection on leadership, identity, and social values. They also show that indigenous artistic traditions continue to provide meaningful ways of interpreting the past while remaining relevant in contemporary Nigerian society.

List of Figures



Figure 1: *Ngil Mask* - Gabon Mask, Central Africa Wood. Photo: Wikipedia, 2026.



Figure 2: *Cenotaph of Unknown Soldier* (1948) Bronze; dimensions unavailable, Idumota, Lagos, Nigeria. Photo: Moses Akintonde, 2013



Figure 3: A female figure, 1905, Alagbaka, Akure. Photo: Moses AZkitonde, 2013.



Figure 4: Obelisk in honor of Ogedengbe (1934), Cement and ceramic tiles; H: 4.8 m, Ilésà, Nigeria. Photo: Moses Akintonde, 2013



Fig. 5a: Fela (front view), (2017), Fiber Glass. Photo: Sobowale Tolulope, 2022.



Fig. 5b: Fela (Back View), (2017). Photo: Sobowale Tolulope, 2022.

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Fig. 6a: Awolowo (Front View), (2017), Fiber Glass. Photo: Sobowale Tolulope, 2022.



Fig. 6a: Awolowo (Side View), (2017), Fiber Glass. Photo: Sobowale Tolulope, 2022.



Figure 7: Awolowo's Shoes (Side View), (2017), Fiber Glass. Photo: Sobowale Tolulope, 2022.

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