

## Thematic Analysis of the Garden Sculptures in Ife Art School

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### Abstract

*A collection of the garden sculpture in Ife Art School stands as a veritable means of a first-hand assessment of the standard of the art school. However, the garden sculpture has been left unkempt around the African Studies complex for more than forty years and the phenomenon has largely remained isolated in scholarship; neither studied nor documented. The garden sculpture, as a matter of importance has depicted various cultural, economic historical, political and social activities which makes it a potential resource for therapeutic and tourist engagements. This paper therefore examines and documents all the identifiable sculptures in and around the African Studies complex and positions the genres in art historical and studio practice perspectives.*

**Key Words:** Thematic analysis, Garden sculpture, Ife Art School

### Introduction

University of Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University is located in the ancient city of Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. The University was founded in 1962 by the regional government of Western Nigeria and was renamed Obafemi Awolowo University on May 12, 1987 in honour of Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987), the first Nigerian Premier of the Western Region of Nigeria (Wikipedia Encyclopedia, 2009). The motto of the institution is "For Learning and Culture." An Institute of African Studies was put in place to actualize the culture aspect of the motto. The Institute was expanded in 1966 and a division, which included Art and Art History as well as Archaeology and Museum, was carved out. The Ife Art School, according to Aig-Imoukhuede (1984: 6), three unique factors that inspired the growth of the art school, which can simply be summed up into three schools of thought namely: the pre-independence or the Murray school of thought (represented by Ben Enwonwu), the Zaria School of thought (represented by Solomon Wangboje), and the Nsukka School of thought (represented by Babatunde Lawal).

The twofold earlier creative trajectory has been greatly built upon by Babatunde Lawal who later completed this creativity-impacting-knowledge. Under the headship of Lawal, the creative assembly was dominated by graduates from Zaria Art School namely: J.R.O. Ojo, Rowland Abiodun, Raphael Ibigbami, J.O. Olapade and P.S.O. Aremu. Others were Agbo Folarin, a product of Central School and Harvard University, London and Lamidi Fakeye, a neo-traditional wood carver. Other researchers who joined the department in the 1990's and in sculpture section are, a corper, Idowu Adeyanju now a senior lecturer and Yemi Ijisakin in the same department. By extension, the Ori-Olokun Workshop, organised by Irein Wangboje in the early sixties, was another contributory factor to the development of the art department in Ife. There are, however, two discernible styles that developed from the art graduates of Ife art school. The styles also have bearing on cultural philosophies of Zaria Art Society and the *Uli* traditional motif of Igbo land. The styles are *Ona* and *Ara*. It is, however, worthy to note that the *Ona* and the *Ara* styles were not taught in the art school- they evolved outside of the art school, but have now been gradually absorbed by a few students of the school. *Ona*, as a style developed in the late 1980s while *Ara* developed in the 1990s. Both styles have also been embraced by the artists from other art schools.

Apart from these two stylistic trends, there are, like other art institutions, individual style developments based on media experiments and techniques, which Akatakpo (1997: 4) classified as individual style of expression. Contextually and formally, Ife art styles are based on functionalism, and adaptation of indigenous design resources to the needs and requirements of modern times in all areas of its sections. Since the inception of the institution barely 1960, an Institute of African Studies was put in place to actualize the culture aspect of the motto. The Institute's staff conducted in-depth research into various aspects of African Culture such as Art, Music, Drama, African Languages, and Literatures (Lawal, 1984: 8). In addition, the Research Fellows in Art and Art history were by 1968/69 session, assisting the Faculty of Education to teach the students of the Faculty wishing to major in Fine Art. The first set of Bachelor of Arts (Fine Arts/ Education) students graduated in 1974, and the first set of Bachelor of Art (Fine Arts) students graduated in 1976, a year after the establishment of a full-fledged Fine Arts Department (Lawal, 1984: 8). A turning point came in 1989 when, by virtue of the National Universities Commission's standard, an approval for the minimum standards in Environmental Sciences of all Nigerian Universities occasioned the movement of the Department of Fine Arts to Faculty of Environmental Design and Management. Slight modifications were made to the degree programme brought over from the parent Faculty. A new programme structured towards the modern developments in the discipline was introduced.

### ***Ife Stylistic Tendencies***

A trend which all art departments in Nigeria are moving towards is foreshadowing in their recent outdoor and garden sculptures. A collection of the garden sculpture in Ife art school, therefore, stands as a veritable means of a first-hand assessment of the standard of the school in sculpture. The sculpture images have been neglected and left to the weedy environment of African Studies complex for more than forty years, the phenomenon has largely remained isolated, neither studied nor documented. The garden, as a matter of importance, should be held in high esteem among all stakeholders. If all the potentials of the garden sculptures are adequately harnessed, the garden would fulfill its function as a tourist centre, a recreation ground, a relaxation and meditation spot, a green conservation environment, an exploration ground, and a statement-making provider for the creative sculpture students and other art enthusiasts. Generally, literature materials abound in the plastic art. Some fall under the Western perception on traditional and modern sculpture the world over (Oladugbagbe, 2012: 23).

These publications are not specifically concerned about Ife art school garden sculpture or those of other sculptures in Nigerian art schools. They are simple syntheses of world artistic notions, influences, and histories. The publications, however, provide useful reference material for general study on sculpture. Other publications are those that focus on traditional African art and they extol the role of sculpture in traditional African culture. Williams (1974) discussed the birth and growth of the traditional sacred imagery in the iron sculpture among the Yoruba in south-west Nigeria and proposed a temporal framework for certain belief related to the genre by examining the type-motifs associated with the ritualizing of iron. Adepegba (1991) researched on the collection of Yoruba metal artifacts.

Without losing sight of the cultural significance of the metal works of art among the Yoruba of the Republic of Benin and a large portion of southwestern Nigeria, he focuses specifically on the aesthetic quality of these objects, thus providing records for broader socio-historical view of Yoruba metal art. Other unpublished dissertations (Odiboh, 1987, Ikpakoronyi, 1997, Akintonde, 2008 and Odewale, 2009) cover contemporary outdoor sculptures in public spheres, particularly in the southwest and eastern part of the country. No specific research has been carried out on the study of garden sculpture in Ife art school. Effect of weather and other environmental factors on the growing outdoor sculpture in the last four decades (1970-2000) in Ife art school have not also been discussed. This paper therefore examines and documents all the identifiable sculptures in and around the African Studies complex and the university sport arena. A chronological and thematic analysis is used to discuss the potential advancement in the exploration of materials, styles, and forms of the works. The documentation and analysis by forms, styles and materials will position the sculptures further into the stream of future artistic discourse.

### ***Thematic Analysis of Garden Sculptures in Ife Art School***

Sculpture is primarily concerned with the creation of expressive, figurative, and non-figurative forms (Hill, 1982: 2). It may be modeled, carved, or constructed with materials such as wood, concrete cement, fibre-glass, plastic or metal in relief or in-the-round. Relief sculptures are attached to a panel or matrix and designed to be viewed from only one angle.

Also, there are also sculptures that have three-dimensional depth, but do not occupy independent space as sculptures in-the-round, and as such are often times used to commemorate historical events, embellish architectural structures, or serve as functional objects themselves sculpture in-the-round, however, exists independently on its base or on the ground and viewers can walk round it to admire or rebuff its creation (Oladugbagbe, 2012: 2). The entire archetype sculpture forms practiced by the students in the Ife Art School are thematically analyzed. It is apparent that any form of art must have a topic, whether expressed or hidden. This topic may be interesting or it may not be; it may be meaningful or otherwise. It is but germane that, however vague the topic or context from which the topic may have developed, a meaning must or would be attached to a work of art. In our quest for thematic explanation, therefore, the garden sculpture from inception of the school were examined. Identifiable sculptures produced within 1970 and 2000 are about thirty-four (34) sculptures and these were grouped into thematic issues they expressed, while those which do not really treat cogent socio-political issues will be discussed based on their relevance to specific thematic applications and/or ideas.

Logically, when a work of art is titled "Untitled", a thematic connotation and denotation will or can ultimately arise from the socio-cultural and politico-artistic viewpoint of the artist, and invariably the viewer or contemplator. The work of art, thus, affords the observer to ruminate on its content, from within a context, in whichever form he or she may feel like. His judgment, whether aesthetically deduced or not, is usually based on diverse reasons, which invariably involve stylistic and or thematic understanding of the work in question. Consequently, and for clarification purpose, identifiable works from the Ife art schools have, therefore, been eventually grouped into nine different thematic categories, based on ideas and issues. Three categories are based on ideas: Architectonic, Animals, and Portraiture/ model. The six others are based on issues relating to human activities and thoughts. These issues are cultural, historical *cum* political, religious and philosophical, socio-economic, sports, and technology. They, one way or the other, present the traditional and contemporary Nigerian and African identity. Some of these are visual documents of history; others are aesthetic sources of inspiration of scholarship, individual experiences and acquaintances, important events, people and places as show. Discussions on style, form and material used by the artists and the influence of the lecturers are guided by these classifications in their broader senses. The simplification that is achieved through this methodology also gives rise to an analytical format that easily foreshadows an interwoven-into-Schools-discussion pattern from both the stylistic and thematic point of view.

Themes of identifiable garden sculpture in Ife Art School are classified based on the subject matter of the sculpture. One (1) architectonic and two (2) animal's sculptures were produced between 1980 and 1989; one (1) portrait/model was produced between 1990 and 2000. Between 1980 and 2000, eight (8) sculptures on cultural themes were produced while three (3) historic-political sculptures were produced between 1980 and 2000. Seven (7) religious/philosophy sculptures were also produced between 1980 and 2000, eight (8) sculptures were produced on socio-economic activities while four (4) were producing on sport between 1980 and 2000 (table1)

**Table 1: Showing the Thematic Classification of Ife garden Sculpture works**

Classification	1970/1979	1980/1989	1990/2000	Total No. of Works
<b>Architectonic</b>	-	01	-	01
<b>Animal</b>	-	02	-	02
<b>Portrait/Model</b>	-	-	01	01
<b>Cultural</b>	-	01	07	08
<b>Historic-political</b>	-	01	02	03
<b>Religious / Philosophy</b>	-	04	03	07
<b>Socioeconomic</b>	-	01	07	08
<b>Sport</b>	-	01	03	04
<b>Total</b>	-	<b>10</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>34</b>

Generally throughout the four decades under review, the architectonic (plate 1) and animal themes have one (1) and two (2) works respectively representing each of the ideas, while one (1) works represent portraiture (three-portrait in one body). Works in the animal category first emerged in the garden in 1990 this is *Lion fighter* (plate 2). Several other works were also produced depicting zoomorphic forms.

However, contesting the validity or appropriateness of form in an architectonic work will be largely treated from a design point of view: geometry, textural or tactile quality, spatial dynamism and a general coordination of the formal composition. Architectonic ideas have found their ways into the minds of the young sculptors since 1983 when Doyin Ogundipe created the *Drummer* in cone form (plate 3).



**Plate 1**

Bada J.B. *The Family*, 1997

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002.



**Plate 2**

Uzukwu Collins, *Lion Fighter*, 1990

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009.



**Plate 3**

Doyin Ogundipe, *Drummer*, 1983

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002.



**Plate 4**

Urhiae Ebina, *Unity in Diversity*,

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009.

Portraiture and model ideas are necessary tool in the development of artistic skill in students in sculpture section. One of these ideas was executed between 1995 by *Urhiae Ebima* (plate 4). Many would agree that working on portrait is one of the principal ways of knowing a visual artist's dexterity in rule of measure and mood expressions accuracy and sometimes explicit or implicit connotative meanings rather than visual resemblance. Thematic applications of images (both substantial and economic) in these three works mentioned above are nevertheless noteworthy-considering their total, visual, and formal simplification.

For example, the curves and the abstracted, cultural gown suggestive of Nigeria map connote the Nigerian three major ethnic group's portraiture in one body. The irregularity in the structure of the base adds some attraction to the work. The *Drummer* (plate 3) was produced in 1983. Drum is a very vital part of African socio-cultural tool used at different occasions. The service of a drummer is engaged during entertainments, cultural and religious festivals. It is a regular theme among Nigerian artists. Males dominate this musical profession. But in Ife art school garden, there is an abstracted *Female Drummer* (plate 5, 6, 7 and 8). It is a testimony to the fact that drumming is no more solely male affair. The *Bata* maestro, Ara, a Yoruba female *Bata* drummer is a recent example. The feel of motion that encompasses the genres relating to drum and dance also quietly radiates in Kayode Adebayo's *Drummer* (plate 8) works produced in 1992.



**Plate 5**

Allan Oladugbagbe, *Drummer*, 1991  
Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009.

**Plate 6**

Durin, *Female Drummer*, 1995  
Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009.

**Plate 7**

Ajayi Adesola, *Saworo Ide*, 1992  
Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009.

**Plate 8**

Kayode Adeboye, *Drummer*, 1992  
Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009.

From all indications, it seems student sculptors are more inclined to sculpt socio-economic issues than any other. This is because in the Socio-economic Issue category, eight (8) identifiable works have been thematically grouped. Because of the vast number of works and the diverse nature of themes grouped under this category, a careful study of the themes resulted in the grouping of the works into different sub-categorizations. These sub-categorizations are Abuse and economic vices, Academic, Agricultural, Family, and emancipation. Other themes are hunting (plates 9-16). Hunting has been the major preoccupation of the traditional African man, just like farming (plate 9). Depicting a form relating to hunting needs the convincing actualization of the exact part of the man's body that is most directly involved in the hunting process. Such a theme, no matter how interesting it may seem, it requires total attention of the artist, both in the technical skill application and visual interpretation of the work as indicated in the of Solomon Makinde; the *Hunter* produced in 1990. Two other works were produced between 1991 and 1999 in the garden; are *The Sling* (1991) and *Apeja* (1992).



**Plate 9**  
Solomon Makinde, *Hunter*, 1990  
Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002.



**Plate 10**  
Chike *Palm-wine Tapper*, 1990  
Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009.



**Plate 11**  
Halim Sona, *the Sling*, 1991  
Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002.



**Plate 12**  
Oyetunde Oyedokun, *Beggar*, 1990  
Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002.



**Plate 13**  
Emmanuel A., *Alagbede*, 1992  
Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009.



**Plate 14**  
Yemi Awolowo, *Apeja*, 1992  
Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009.





**Plate 15**

Morayo Awe, *Family Planning*, 1992  
 Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009.



**Plate 16**

Luke Osaro, *Scavenger*, 1998  
 Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009

The crisis of social inequality and parental neglect has been one of major concerns of non-governmental agencies and international health organisations. The problem of the *Scavenger* as virtually represented here (plate 16) has been a recurrent malignant socio-environmental problem that is gradually brewing political and economic crisis in the country. This set of youths have been occasionally used and instigated to disrupt economic stability. And like many of the party scavengers and homeless youths, they eventually become hoodlums and later a national problem. It is therefore highly probable that such issues will be topical in the arts and sociology class. The same goes for human and natural disasters and deprivations, like hunger and famine, and abuses of various kinds.

Entirely unaligned with the vices narrated earlier is the intellectual and polished environment of the academia. Between 1983 and 2000, three (3) sculptures depicted academic themes. Some of these images sculpted in Ife are *Baby holding Biro*, *Dekegation* and *Great Ife*



**Plate 17**

Bayo Oyeleke *Great Ife*, 1983  
 Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002.



**Plate 18**

Bayo, Okunola, *Dekegation*, 1998  
 Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002



**Plate 19**

Tunde Babalola, *Baby Holding a Biro*, 2000  
 Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009

Throughout the decades, however, only one work was produced on agricultural theme. This shows a decline in the thematic consideration of agriculture-based themes. It also shows that artistic interest in such theme is limited to the garden, such interest is expressed in Dialogue (plate 20), a fish fountain. This explanation of thematic reasoning also justifies the title- *Dialogue* for this fountain expressed in two intertwined fishes. They rightly appear to dialogue through their swirling shape with one another. The work has, from this point of view, been sub-categorized within the fountain distinction.



**Plate 20**

Christianah Adediran, *Dialogue*, 1984

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002

Human being, endowed with more sophisticated intellectual faculty than lesser animal as represented in one of the garden sculptures in the Ife Art School is here discussed based on human constant interaction and dependency on cosmic. Genres relating to philosophy are always recurring themes in visual representations and presentations in the world over. There is hardly an artist in this part of the world that would not want to treat the issue of destiny, no matter how trivial or pedestrian—at least in the common artistic presentation medium. It provides many angles to seeing fortune in itself, human development and multiplication, and the psychological relationship between man and cosmos and both of them in relation to the sustenance of the earth. Badmus Abiodun's *Ori-inu-maba-todeje* (plate 21) conceivably sustains the Yoruba philosophical maxim of *ori-inu and ori-ode* (inner and outer essence of man). In this, case *Ori* epitomized the human head and the imagery is rendered conceptually to represent the visual reality of the inner and outer belief. Badmus's realistic figure sculpture is tilted and has a featureless face which symbolized the inner head (*ori-inu*) with a stretched left hand which held a mask-like outer head (*ori-ode*) and a typical Yoruba style of casual dressing (*dansiki*) which was also realistically treated. Interestingly, the figure's right hand confidently held a magical horn (*ase*) which supposedly provoke the imagistic of the inner head.



**Plate 21**

Biodun Badmus, *Ori-inu-maba todeje*, 1990

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002



In all, socio-economic themes enjoyed the widest attention of the sculpture students in all the schools, which may ultimately lend credence to a general observation and a hypothesis developed from an overall art students' behavioural pattern that is now advanced through this research: It is what invariably concerns, disturbs a creative mind most (especially the artist's successful survival in the academic environment) that the artist mostly creates or visually interprets. The socio-economic factors in the country, obviously, affect the artist's survival most. It is, therefore, most likely that such thematic category will advance the most variety of artistic genres in most of the art schools in the country, the year of their execution notwithstanding.

Many artists are engaged in visual recording of historical or political events. From ages past, art has served as a compendium of visual history of a people or race. The Historical *cum* Political thematic issues, in total, have three (3) works (plate 4, 22 and 23). The *Oduduwa* (plate 24) in sum is monumental structurally fascinating. It reduces the aesthetic appreciation of content to the familiarity of formal presentation. However, the impact of abstraction and stylization in human's life should not be underestimated as it leads to thoughts about spirituality and the sub consciousness, in fact sometimes to logic and the unexplainable. Many artists therefore, at one point or the other, express their feelings in abstraction. Some do this in non-figural abstraction and others in semi-abstraction. Many of the arrays of works in the gardens are in abstract. *Oduduwa* (plate 24) is a semi-abstract work. Rendered in reinforced concrete, the subject matter of this monumental piece is still interpretable in its apparitional symbolism.



**Plate 22**

Samuel Elezua, *Protest*, 1984

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002



**Plate 23**

Oriloye Gabriel, *Ode-Awo*, 1997

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002

Religious and Political issues also have fair representation in the sculpture gardens. There are five (5) works all together. The richness of the traditional religions in Nigeria could be savoured through the visual expressions of these themes. The traditional religious and cultural stature of Ile Ife will, however, count in the ready affinity of the visual and literary for artists to explore the native foundation. The choice of indigenous languages for themes like Unife is commendable and should be encouraged among schools (plates 24, 25 and 26)



**Plate 24**

Balogun Martins, *Oduduwa*, 1983

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002



**Plate 25**

Bolaji, *Bondage*, 1983

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002



**Plate 26**

Gloria Ewuru, *Hand*, 1984

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002

Just like the Religious *cum* Philosophical thematic issues, Sport also has two (2) works and the works are players, one on machos, the other a creative dribbler reminiscence of the famous Okocha Nigerian football player (plates 27 and 28). Sports as themes were given attention throughout in the garden. The theme gives an avenue for the student sculptors to exhibit their prowess on technical ability to logically express human anatomy.



**Plate 27**

Ogundipe Jide, *Footballer*, 1989

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2002



**Plate 28**

Tolu Sobowale *Basketball man*

Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2009

The abstraction quality in these thematic concepts mainly illustrates the depth of abstract thinking that goes into technological ideas. The manifestation of modern thinking and exploration in the limitless possibilities of artistic hybridism has developed strikingly in this school. Metal work is one of those that began this millennium in the garden; it was executed in the year 1991 by Allan Oladugbagbe (plate 5) under the supervisions of Agbo Folarin and Idowu Adeyanju.

A great deal of supposition in the new world of artistic thinking would balance the fact that themes in abstraction, technology, conceptualism and reductionism have been vigorously explored in the subsequent decade, which already can be presumed to be eclectic and hybridist in nature. In Ife Art School at the dawn of the 1980s, the realistic rendition favoured by Asaku Gyakpor and the articulation of geometrical exploration in abstract construction that was approved by Agbo Folarin manifested in the sculptural expression of the late 1980s and the 1990s. From the late 1990s to date, sculpture lexis has changed greatly in favour of the exploration of new materials and techniques towards the production of above-life-size works. Forms are exaggerated with elongations. Recently, when more lecturers were recruited, there has been no radical departure from the stylistic stream of the previous decades. But there have been rather, the introduction of new media and techniques, such as found objects and aluminum cold cast. Emmanuel Nkerluwem's and Kelvin Nordiana's works (plates 29 and 30) are typical examples.

**Plate 29**

Emmanuel Nkerluwem, *Okada*, 2008  
 Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2010

**Plate 30**

Kelvin Nordiana, *Hawking*, Found objects, Aluminium cold cast, 2009  
 Photograph by Oladugbagbe, Allan, 2010

### **Conclusion**

Nigeria is not only rich in cultural and artistic history but also has immense natural and mineral resources that traverse the geographical and ethnical boundaries in the cardinal points that form its physical state. In considering the evolution of human creative activities, materials are shaped to convey certain idea or emotion of visually interesting forms. Sculpture, it is obvious, was the only major projector of the artistic prowess and unbelievable ingenuity of Nigeria's ancient civilization. It is this side of our artistic nourishment from the old- the treasured bronze, terra cotta, wood and stone works—that has continually sustained those academic and artistic helm of most of our higher institutions that have Fine and Applied Arts in their curricula today. Interrelationship of all manners is also a sign of modernity.

Therefore, hybrids of icons have continued to surface in all aspects of art and social expression. If the sculptures are not studied nor documented, in not too distant future, contextual art may supersede skill-driven art works. Theoretical defense for style and freedom will be vigorously explored by some students that are technically deficient in draughtsmanship, and they will ultimately wrongfully apply the theory and philosophy of modernism and postmodernism. A trend which all art departments are moving towards is foreshadowed in their recent outdoor and garden sculptures. A collection of the garden sculpture in Ife art school, therefore, stands as a veritable means of a first-hand assessment of the standard of any of Nigerian art schools. The sculpture garden, apart from its usage and its relevance to the academic programme, offers interesting visual presentation by the departments and it aesthetically and environmentally glorifies the entire university.



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