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African Vernacular-rooted Imagery in Yemi Ijisakin's Stone Sculptures

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Abstract: This article presents a critical analysis of the African vernacular-rooted imagery represented in Yemi Ijisakin's stone sculptures produced between the years 2006 and 2016. The focus on this period is to study the kinds of imagery he represents when there is a global artistic shift to installation and conceptual art. In doing this, I argue that even though Ijisakin's stone sculptures are deemed vernacular art, they are not indigenous or historical African art, but a rethinking that references indigenous African cultural registers. The article also focuses on the ideas and meanings the interpretations of the works communicate to the audience. Thus, this article presents his artworks to a mainstream journal given that they have not received any critical analysis on the grounds that his works are regressive and outside the normative standards for referencing African/Nigerian/Yoruba contexts. But his works are important for demonstrating the interdependence of art and culture in Nigeria and producing knowledge on cultural practices.

Key words: African, Vernacular Imagery, Stone Sculpture, Ijisakin, Contemporary Art

Introduction

Yemi Olaolu Ijisakin is a contemporary Nigerian artist who works in different sculptural media but his preferred medium has been stone. He trained as a sculptor at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, where he obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1987 and later was employed to work as an African artist-intellectual in sculpture. That art school is notable for the Onaism movement founded "in 1990 as a project aestheticizing, the process of projecting Yoruba/Nigerian/African culture to the world by creating art with diverse motifs and patterns that have roots in Yoruba artistic concepts of Ona."[1] This observation is important in understanding the rationale behind the works of artists trained in this institution, as they often align their practices with the "Ona" artistic philosophy. As Filani points out, the artists examined Yoruba traditional symbols, motifs, structures, and concepts.[2] In doing so, their artistic practice is deeply rooted in Yoruba art forms, philosophy, and worldview and enriched with present-day ideas and new materials.

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Apart from teaching, he has contributed to the contemporary art scene in Nigeria through the production of stone sculptures since 1987 and has participated in a group exhibition(s) in Nigeria. His first stone sculpture was *Mallam's Head* (1987). Though the period of the study appears short—2006 to 2016—he produced more stone sculptures during this period that have not been interrogated. The research focus on this period, in the 21st century is important, as it falls within a period when the artistic world is increasingly leaning towards installation and conceptual art. To this end, five stone sculptures were selected from his collection premised on the need for a close critical analysis of the vernacular imagery and ideas represented in each of the works. The selected works are *Embrace* (2009), *The Thinker* (2009), *The Priest* (2010), *Mother and Child* (2013), and *After Labor* (2015).

Despite Ijisakin's contribution of works in stone media in a global age, he is excluded from mainstream art historical discourse because his works are considered to be outside the normative standards for referencing indigenous African cultural registers. As a rule, the field of art history disregards such works or describes them as regressive. However, in various African contexts, indigenous culture continues to be a notable and often cited reference for various aspects of cultural production.[3] Thus, Ijisakin's art relies very much on such indigenous cultural registers to align his practice with a major paradigm that has shaped contemporary African art since the 1950s. Ijisakin's contemporary stone sculpture constitutes an extremely important representation of cultural imagery in a material that should be explored, and important in establishing the interdependence of contemporary art with African cultures, especially in the search for significant forms in visual culture. Thus, his referencing of cultural imagery in contemporary stone sculptures could be a means of producing knowledge about specific African cultural practices and world view, by pointing to factors influencing art creation and styles in Nigeria. Furthermore, Ijisakin's use of African cultural motifs is important because it may be read as a necessary condition for contemporary African art creation, and indigenizing representations, as they are mostly rooted in Yoruba culture. This paper, therefore, interrogates Ijisakin's artworks by focusing on his influences and frames of reference, knowledge base, and ideological stances. The relevant question is, can Ijisakin's stone sculptures be narrated as rooted in an African vernacular, given the fact that he is an academically trained artist?

What is vernacular? The term 'vernacular' is defined as that which is native or indigenous and applies to local languages. But the adoption of 'vernacular art' in art history discourse is contested by Ingrid Stevens and Allan Munro, because it carries a certain negative connotation, as it is seen as a colonial stereotype and patronizing usage.[4] Despite this problematic usage of the concept, scholars have continued to adopt vernacular in redefining African visual cultural practices. To this end, while the definition of 'vernacular art' suggests the indigenous art forms produced in many African cultures, Stevens and Munro argue that vernacular is "art outside the mainstream," regional or national art, endemic art that is prevalent in or peculiar to a particular locality or society or confined to a particular region. They also add that it may imply art created by 'self-taught' artists.[5] Self-taught artists are "those individuals who have no academic artistic training and little connection to the mainstream traditions of Western art history."[6] These definitions suggest that the term is not only used to define indigenous African art forms but modern and contemporary art produced by individuals who do not have academic artistic training. In the light of these definitions, I argue that Ijisakin's sculptures are

not 'vernacular art' that signifies indigenous African art or its continuation, neither are they African vernacular sculptures that exist outside formal academic dialogue, as he is an artist trained in Western academic standard. Thus, Ijisakin's stone sculptures may be deemed African 'vernacular-rooted' as they reference indigenous African cultural registers.

My review of Ijisakin's sculptures combines formal analysis and hermeneutics theory to five selected artworks. His interview responses are also employed in gaining insight and girding the interpretations of his works. Given that each art has a history that is connected to a culture, hermeneutics is employed in the interpretations of the present contexts of the art by locating each work within the past cultural history that shaped them. Formal analysis confronts the structures of his works and the possible ideas they reveal. Africa is a continent of multiracial and multicultural populations, and Yemi Ijisakin's artworks allude to ideas of cultural production indigenous to Africa—both as a space and concept. However, his artworks reflect interwoven ideas and beliefs specifically rooted in Yoruba culture, not in a homogenous African culture that is non-existent. Ijisakin notes that "most of the work I execute is based on things that happen within my environment in the southwest of Nigeria, among the Yoruba cultural group."[7] While he does not deny drawing inspiration from other cultures in Nigeria, what mainly inspires him is his Yoruba culture. This is not merely because of alignment to his institutional style but the expectation for a contemporary Nigerian/African artist to draw inspiration from his cultural heritage.[8] This highlights an intentional artistic paradigm for the decolonization of art. To this end, the different thematic stories his work tells are rooted in his rich varied heritage, lived experiences, histories, and various examples of quotidian social and cultural processes.

Can Ijisakin's art be considered African? In response, Ijisakin states: "I consider my artworks African because they are a replica of African cultures and embody symbols that reference elements in African societies and African lived experience."[9] His reflection on Yoruba ethnicity as African culture evokes a cultural referent in which ethnic identity, even if distinct in some ways, tends to overlap and intersect with some cultures in Nigeria. Ijisakin believes that his sculptures signify Africanness because they reflect African subjects rooted in the socio-cultural life of Nigerians. To demonstrate how the work of a contemporary African artist is African, de Jager argues that "what is being produced by the African artist usually relates to Africa in origin and expression and that it shares, for example, many of the characteristics of the African world view and philosophy."[10] The argument by de Jager—like Ijisakin's view—establishes that the diverse references of contemporary African artists to African cultures, philosophies, and world views serve to valorize Africanness in their work. Besides drawing inspiration from an African lived experience, Ijisakin further demonstrates that his stone sculptures are deeply rooted in Africa by sourcing soapstone from his Ile Ife environment. In doing this, he drives the ideology of Africanizing art, not merely through reflecting the rich varied heritage but also the use of local materials.

Even though the representation of vernacular imagery from indigenous and traditional contexts in contemporary African arts is often described as retroactive or reactionary, he is committed to this practice, claiming he "represents vernacular imagery in artworks to propagate indigenous African/Nigerian cultural practices in the contemporary era."[11] That reveals the African consciousness of this artist and echoes a commitment to infusing his works

with African sensibilities as a way of decolonizing forms. In doing this, Ijisakin focuses on engaging the world with ideas and meanings through the interconnectedness of contemporary stone sculptures, African culture, people, and aesthetics. Thus each of his works seeks to tell African/Nigerian/Yoruba cultural stories in ways people can relate to in the contemporary era.

Viewers' interpretation of artworks in part depends on form and content as well as their individual experiences and cultural background. To read his works, the formal structures and subject matter of Ijisakin's sculptures present viewers with opportunities to apply cultural knowledge to unveil the ideas embedded therein. However, his view is significant in providing a critical reading of his works as his expressed intention is to "represent aspects of Yoruba cultural heritage that appear threatened by modernity."[12] Acknowledging threats to the survival of indigenous African cultures highlights how this artist struggles to identify himself with the changing times, as cultural exchange creates hybridity. I contend that while hybridity is evident in all cultures, cultures live by change, which may lead to the extinction of some indigenous practices. Thus, the understanding of his individualistic mode of identifying with the preservation of threatened Yoruba cultural heritage in the 21st century is significant, not merely for reading his works but analyzing them as a response to change because, "the survival of any culture rests on its adaptability to the dynamic forces of change."[13]

Although Ijisakin produces sculptures in different media such as wood, terracotta, and metal, stone is his preferred medium. That is not merely because he sources them locally from his environment, but he derives joy in carving and shaping forms with stone. In narrating the reception of his sculptural medium, Ijisakin observes that the patronage of his stone sculptures motivates him to produce more, noting that his "patrons (and casual observers) often express surprise at the skill used in executing them."[14] Possibly, the viewers were surprised at the sizes of his small, but proportionate stone sculptures, not necessarily because of their thematic preoccupations. Besides, Ijisakin further noted that "observers often mistake my stone sculptures for indigenous religious/ritual objects, which tends to inhibit their appreciation of the works."[15] While such responses reiterate how colonialism sought to condemn and obliterate indigenous forms by characterizing them as idols, in reality Ijisakin's stone sculptures are examples of modern/contemporary modes of representing cultural imageries rooted in an African vernacular and are not associated with any form of indigenous worship.[16] Additionally, historical African art or contemporary African art like Ijisakin's stone sculptures were/are not always objects of worship, nor do they all represent religious figures despite the controversies that abound in their relationship to viewers of African art objects.[17] The stereotype did not stop with indigenous African art, as the colonial government also labelled modern/contemporary African art as idols, devilish and evil "because the arts do not fit their narrow, parochial and judgmental notions."[18]

Analysis of Vernacular Imagery in Ijisakin's Sculptures

Embrace

In presenting the analysis of Ijisakin's stone sculptures, the visual discourse begins with *Embrace* (2009). It is an abstract sculpture that signals the trespassing of individual boundaries as the response of someone in love, especially at the sight of the beloved. Thus, it can be argued that

the embrace of another suggests the expression of love. But, in this depiction, Ijisakin hints at an ironic embrace, where "an individual with evil motive would come to embrace his supposed victim while hiding his evil intentions until he harms the unsuspecting victim."[19] Although Ijisakin argues that ill motives may be expressed through the ironic cultural practice of embrace, not all embrace of an African man and woman in Nigerian space typifies danger.

The sculpture depicts a small abstracted imagery in the round, which reveals an African man and a woman entangled with warm hands in a dramatic composition. A distinction or identity is created in the formal structure of the imageries as the image on the left side reveals an African woman with parallel lines of coiffure that imitates the elegant strands of women's hairstyle. This demonstrates that braiding or coiffure does not merely adorn the face and head, but aids to shape the head in African cultures and construct identity. That style is to highlight, on the one hand, the influence of Yoruba art on Ijisakin, and on the other hand, the prominence given to the head in Yoruba culture. The head at the physical level is an index of individual identification.[20]

The entanglement of the woman's hands with those of the African man hints at a continuum of hands rather than distinct and separate renditions of female and male hands. But at the point of intersection of both hands are several bangles used as ornaments for female personal adornment. Aside from the entangled hands, their legs seem to be entangled as well, possibly to convey not merely the idea of embrace but attachment. On the other hand, their posture highlights a couple dancing rather than just embracing. This is because their dynamic formal interaction suggests that they may be about to begin dancing or enthralled in a dance performance. This work is reminiscent of El Anatsui's *Ambivalent Hold* (1983). However, Anatsui's work presents an embrace of a smaller creature and a larger being, which is symbolic of man's relationship to science in early 1980s Nigeria.[21]

Figure 1: Yemi Ijisakin, Embrace 2009. Stone, 8 x 12 x 5 inches. Artist's collection

Photographed by author

Close analysis of this work reveals that there are no cultural elements that may link this portrayal to a particular cultural group in Nigeria. However, in its thematic thrust, *Embrace*

recalls the history of cultural expressions of greeting in some cultures and dancing at a party, festival, ceremony or other socio-cultural event rooted in Yoruba culture. This is to demonstrate how Ijisakin's sculptures are influenced by the lived experience of people in southwestern Nigeria. The expressive culture of embrace also showcases one of the dance styles entrenched in Yoruba traditional music culture. History reveals that while the Yoruba cultural group had different indigenous music and dance styles before the 1900s, they have witnessed diverse influences from modernized indigenous and diaspora Yoruba music plus dance styles that crystallised into Nigerian highlife.[22]

Although the African vernacular rooted art reflects highlife in Yoruba culture, it also evokes the African sculptural traditions of couple imagery that were designed to enhance the prestige and the ideal of cultural refinement in bond. Such bond in African cultures represents that desired state of completeness, associated with the merging of male and female imageries.[23] The philosophical view that guided Ijisakin's work is the expressive posture of the embrace between a male and female couple. In this regard, the depiction rooted in African vernacular draws attention to a form of performance that emphasizes the emotional expressiveness of the art. On another level, the work hints at completeness which only the act of making love can temporarily accommodate. The aim also echoes duality in a male and female couple in African vernacular rooted sculpture.

The Thinker

His next stone sculpture is a realistic portrayal titled *The Thinker* (2009). This piece constructs a social identity that unfolds the concept of a human entering a reflective mood. Such a title inspires a thematic interpretation that is rooted in African philosophy that has to do with the significance of the human head. Although the formal structure shows a smooth and rough carving of an African man, the dress elements in the portrayal signal the mode of body adornment which an African would do in different ways. In this context, a beaded necklace bearing a large crest hangs over his nude body, as he is adorned with a Yoruba traditional styled cap folded to his right side, and his head is tilted and bowed. Given that his mode of cultural attire draws attention to the influence of Yoruba dress form on the artist, the portrayal is rooted in an African vernacular. However, the posture of the man is to convey the thematic nuance of sober reflection. The man's hands are placed on the drapery wrapper covering the lower part of his body, from the waist to the legs as he appears lost in thought or attempt to gain insight through introspection. That visual practice reflects a Yoruba cultural belief that a "successful life depends on how well one makes use of one's head here on earth."[24] But success in life depends on several factors, which do not deny the proper use of the head. Such reflection on a philosophical belief deeply rooted in the Yoruba worldview emphasizes the significance of the head (ori) as the most vital part of a person and is often demonstrated in Yoruba figural sculpture with the portrayal of the human head elaborately bigger than other parts of the body. However, in this sculpture, the head is treated proportionately with different parts of the body. Such individualistic style aligns Western convention of representation with inspiration drawn from Yoruba cultural heritage and resonates with a major paradigm that shapes contemporary African vernacular rooted art.

Figure 2: Yemi Ijisakin, *The Thinker*, 2009. Stone, 9 x 6 inches. Artist's collections.

Photographed by Author

Further reading reveals graceful linear folds carved on the drapery waist or loin-cloth, evoking the use of a chisel in creating rough texture around the waist of the man. This mode of adornment with wrapper (loin-cloth) tied around the waist is an ancient Yoruba cultural practice that is also evident in a modernist's standing sculpture titled *Sango* (1956) by Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu, (1917-1994). In Yoruba culture, the different loin clothes worn by men were either for hunting, farming, or manual labour.[25] Notwithstanding this stance on some of the functions of loin-cloth, the specific function of the one tied by this man is not easily established, as he is simply identified as a thinker, not by his trade. But it echoes the Yoruba traditional male dress pattern worn for protection and decoration which identifies him either as a farmer or a hunter. Thus, through his dress form, not only is his social identity constructed but his African cultural identity.

In the Yoruba worldview, the head is divided into two—the physical head (*ori ita*) and the spiritual head or metaphysical head (*ori-inu*).[26] Yoruba mythological belief states that at creation, the Supreme Being (Olodumare) directs a lesser divinity (Obatala) to create the physical body, while Olodumare breathes life in through the head but allows each newly created individual the choice of the inner head from a host of similar but distinct heads—the one they choose determines their lot on earth.[27] It further argued that one who chooses a good inner head will be lucky and prosperous, whereas "the person who is persistently unlucky is simply assumed to be an *olori buruku,* the possessor of a bad inner head."[28] Thus, in narrating the idea in this portrayal, Ijisakin claims that it invokes the notion that "whosoever cannot think is dead or would stagnate."[29]

This stance by Ijisakin is contestable as he concludes that it is a lack of thinking that causes stagnation in adulthood. Rather, even if an individual possesses a good head (*ori*) to think, that will not guarantee success in life, since they must work hard for success. This is, however, not to deny the significance of contemplation in adult life which, in Ijisakin's words, is a necessary "part of a man's life, during which he may assess personal successes, failures, achievements, and mistakes."[30] Such a moment of reflection is important as it contributes to self-insight and a self-critical perspective.[31] To this end, his seemingly contemplative pose reflects the place of reasoning with his head as the seat of wisdom. On the other hand, it may be analyzed as suggestive of a man that is worrying rather than thinking, possibly because he is indebted.

Such a personal solitary moment spent thinking reflects an African idea of the significance of the human head as the center of human consciousness. This conveys the idea of "the critical role of the human head, ori, as the body's seat and pilot."[32] Thus, the sculpture is established to be deeply rooted in African vernacular, as it reflects how the physical, spiritual, and material well-being of the thinker depends on how well he can make use of his head, not just in thinking but in acting. In this work, Ijisakin is guided by a philosophy that highlights the importance of the solitary time and space in thinking as important in an individual's life.

The Priest

A different depiction unfolds entitled *The Priest* (2010). Though a realistic African vernacular rooted sculpture, the title introduces a spiritual leader. In Iisakin's view, "the priest is an intermediary in his culture, in this context the Yoruba culture."[33] Although the subject has its roots in Yoruba traditional religion, it hints at using African visual aesthetics in reflecting on spiritual and mythical beliefs.

Figure 3: Yemi Ijisakin, *The Priest*, 2010. Stone, 9 x 6 inches. Artist's collection

Photographed by Author

To demonstrate that this portrayal is rooted in African vernacular, he drew inspiration from a historical Yoruba cultural practice on the sacred duty of a traditional priest. The formal structure, though roughly textured references a man carrying a calabash bowl in his left hand, while he dips the right hand inside the bowl suggesting an attempt to bring out elements for the performance of his sacred duty and act of worship. This work introduces an "Ifa divination priest," however, the portrayed calabash bowl adapted in the dramatic performance of ritual is in dissonance with the cultural element adopted by the priest in Yoruba culture. This is so because a priest uses a tray in Yoruba Ifa divination.[34] Rather than a tray, Ijisakin depicted a calabash bowl as the cultural element used in Ifa divination. This suggests the search for alternative cultural elements not merely in visual culture, but Yoruba cultural practice. That being said, while the hair is rarely left without adornment in Yoruba culture, the priest's head is kept without adornment but roughly textured because of the tools employed in the carving the stone. The thick beaded necklace carved around his neck appears like the collar of his regalia and demonstrates conformity to the Yoruba cultural aesthetic requirement of body adornment in priestly regalia.

In presenting the cultural history of Ifa priests in Yoruba culture, it is worthy to note that "*Ifa* divination among the Yoruba can be said to be as old as the people themselves."[35] An Ifa priest begins training for the performance of divination rituals from his youth, and he is well-known as *Babalawo* (father of secrets). He is also known as a master of "a vast corpus of oral literature known as *ese ifa* often referred to as containing the wisdom of Ifa."[36] In this regard, he is seen as a custodian of oral history, knowledge, and tradition that relates to Yoruba ancestral heritage. However, the ritual an Ifa priest performs for people is based on individual needs. While some individuals need personal protection, others need improved health, achievement of goals, preparation for pregnancy, choice of marriage partner, wisdom, knowledge, and productivity in life. But the continuation of this African religion is threatened because, in some instances where the priesthood is hereditary there are no people to become priests due to the influence of Christianity, Islam, education, and acculturation. As a result of such cultural changes, the ritual that inspired the artist is dying out.[37] Therefore, this depiction of an African traditional religious priest in time and space is an attempt to preserve the history of the Ifa religion in visual culture. In narrating the ideas and meanings the work conveys, Ijisakin notes that it echoes the sacred duty of "a messenger, a warrior, an intermediary between his community and the spiritual realm, or a process of performing divination rituals for the healing of individuals in his society."[38]

This African vernacular rooted sculpture seeks to tell stories about the Yoruba cultural belief, values, and attitude of relying on a traditional spiritual leader for help. Thus, it explores the historical relationship between African traditional religion and culture. On the other hand, it evokes a contemporary art rooted in the service of gods or ancestors, as it is directed to the spiritual realm. In other words, it invokes how an Ifa divination is employed as a means of communication between a person and a god in Yoruba culture. The portrayal communicates forms of ritual knowledge as a tool for social purposes.[39] Thus, the philosophical content symbolizes the belief some individuals still have in the contemporary era in African communities on the role of the traditional priest as a mediator.

Mother and Child

For *Mother and Child* (2013), a different thematic nuance is introduced in a realistic sculptural rendition. Although the subject of mother and child has been represented in different ways in contemporary and indigenous African vernacular rooted art contexts, it relays different social commentary in a society with a high rate of infant mortality.[40] This depiction is a roughly textured stone sculpture of an African mother seated diagonally to her right side as she carries a young baby, her elbow rests as a support for her restive posture. In Ijisakin's view, she is "seated on a rock within her neighbourhood, taking care of her child."[41] It is difficult for a nursing mother to rest her elbow on a hard rock surface during a restive posture; rather it signals resting on a couch for comfort. However, her downward gaze on her baby wrapped in thick cloth demonstrates a vision that may be understood as active rather than static in the African art context.

While it is a contemporary engagement with the mother and child theme, this portrayal exemplifies the practice in indigenous Yoruba art where a woman is depicted as a nursing mother. In this context, the mother is portrayed with braided hair, not merely for identification as a woman but as part of aesthetic expression in *ori* (head). This exemplifies not merely a form of adornment in Yoruba culture, but the influence of Yoruba artistic heritage on the artist. Such connection of body adornment with the portrayal of an African woman nursing her little child resonates with African vernacular expression in visual culture. However, his mode of depicting this sculpture is in dissonance with the naturalism of Ife art that influenced him. The thematic thrust of mother and child is reminiscent of Erabor Emokpae's *Iya Ibeji* (Mother of Twins, 1977). That, however, is a stylized wood sculpture—a medium that is unlike Ijisakin's but it reflects the idea of fertility and motherhood in Yoruba culture as well.

Figure 4: Yemi Ijisakin, *Mother and Child,* 2013. Stone, 11 x 12 x 6 inches. Artist's

Photographed by Author

Even though this portrayal is with stone, it shows evidence of proportion in the entire body and attests to Ijisakin's claim that he is conscious of representing his imagery proportionately.[42] However, this African experience of mother and child recalls the history of Yoruba culture, where a child born by a married woman is described as *Okun* (beads). The beads in this context refer to a type of traditional necklace worn by an *Oba* (king) or an *Ijoye* (chief), as a symbol of his royalty and authority.[43] That describes the revered position that is accorded a child. Therefore, it is accepted that a mother in Yoruba culture is conferred with the power to exercise authority in her husband's home. Also, it traces the history of a Yoruba mother who protects her child through sacrifices to divinity to keep the child from the lure of supernatural spirits.[44]

Given the cultural significance of such imagery, it is deeply rooted in Yoruba values for motherhood and fertility in marriage. According to Ijisakin, it "signifies the fulfilment of motherhood, as it reflects happiness, joy, security, and fulfilment of a mother and her intimacy with her baby."[45] While this reveals the deep wells of African thought on gender-related issues on the birth of a child, it echoes expected gender roles during maternity. This highlights the belief among the Yoruba that when a woman becomes a mother, she is promoted to the esteemed position of being regarded as a precious stone.[46] This is, however, not the same for a Yoruba woman without a child as she is potentially sorrowful and may be reproached for her condition.[47] Therefore, this sculpture might be analyzed as a jubilant mother, rejoicing in the health of her child. The philosophy centers on the Yoruba idea of a happy woman being one who is fertile to embrace a child.

After Labour

After Labour (2015) unfolds differently, drawing attention to a dimension of human activity after a form of labor. Although an African man in a Yoruba rural community may engage in different forms of labor, the most common ones are farming, hunting, and palm wine tapping. To narrate what happens after labor in this portrayal, Ijisakin claims it introduces "a farmer serving himself palm wine after labour on his farm."[48] While Ijisakin's stance constructs the social identity of the portrayed man as a farmer, it is contestable, because there is no depiction of any farming implements to establish his identity. However, the context shows a carved figure of an African man, seated, wearing a singlet and knickers as he carries a big gourd tilted forward, pouring a liquid substance which suggests palm wine into a calabash serving bowl.[49]

The consumption of palm wine in Yoruba communities, as Ijisakin observes "is often served and taken by farmers in a group."[50] This practice of consuming palm wine in groups is exemplified in a painting entitled *Recess Time at Farm* (mid-20th century) by Akinola Lasekan.[51] But in this stone sculpture, a sole farmer is represented rather than a group, which suggests that he worked on his farm alone or the artist chose to focus on him alone, hence he is about to be refreshed without the company of others. As an image rooted in African vernacular, it exemplifies the consumption of palm wine tapped from a palm tree taken as a natural beverage. Possibly, because physical work on the farm is exacting, the indigenous Yoruba farmer consumes palm wine after daily labor to "act as a reliever of fatigue and help to increase output."[52] It can also be argued that an African man consumes palm wine "essentially for pleasure at the end of the day's farming activities."[53] So while the consumption of palm wine is

often viewed as a socio-cultural lifestyle among African men, it is consumed for different purposes. Sale or consumption of palm wine has inspired many contemporary African artists in the depictions that are deeply rooted in African vernacular contexts.[54]

Yemi Ijisakin, *After Labour*, 2015. Stone, 10 inches. Artist's collection.

Photographed by Yemi Ijisakin

The work draws attention to trees from which palm wine is tapped in Yoruba villages. The history of palm wine is traced to the pre-colonial eras in African societies where an alcoholic beverage was produced by tapping the palm tree. These palm trees are particularly important across West Africa.[55] After tapping palm wine from the trees, it may be collected in plastic containers, bamboo tubes, kegs, and gourds.[56] Thereafter it is consumed or sold because of a belief in Yoruba culture that palm wine should be not only fresh and undiluted but also has medicinal functions. Part of the belief is that it cures malaria fever and, when mixed with other herbs and roots, it may be used for other purposes.[57] Perhaps it is for this reason, "palm wine beverages were drunk in traditional societies and are still used in this modern era for different purposes."[58] The reading of this African vernacular sculpture communicates different ideas to viewers but they are mostly rooted in African cultural beliefs. According to Ijisakin, because of the "belief that palm wine has curative substance for curing malaria fever when taken, there is regular intake of *emu* (palm wine) among people in Yoruba culture."[59] However, it is important to note that while some individuals consume it because of health issues, most people consume the substance for relaxation or social pastime. Though the figural sculpture references a farmer in Yoruba culture, such social practice is also evident in many cultures in southern Nigeria.

Hence, Ijisakin is guided by a philosophical idea of preference for indigenous natural beverages over processed beverages.

Conclusion

This analysis establishes Yemi Ijisakin's depicted imagery as being African vernacular rooted. This is because his imagery "is characterised by a search for vernacular symbolism."[60] This is evident in the imagery of his stone sculptures deeply rooted in Yoruba culture. Nonetheless, his works are contemporary African sculptures that indigenize the representations inspired by practices, histories, myths, and traditions in Yoruba culture and communicate themes that valorize "Africanness."

Unlike Yoruba figural sculptures that depict heads elaborately bigger than other parts of the body, the analysis reveals that the heads and other parts of the body of the men and women Ijisakin portrays are proportionate. His stone sculptures illustrate the interconnectedness of contemporary art and African/Nigerian/Yoruba cultural practices, religion, philosophy, and world view. This is evident in the thematic thrusts of the selected works critically analyzed above. Those works aim to communicate ideas and meanings on different historical and socio-cultural African lived experiences, as they represent imagery from "African surroundings." In doing so, Ijisakin's work resonates with Filani's claim that artists of the Ife School engage in creative exploration of images, symbols, and material from their cultural background.[61]

The experience of *Embrace* is supposedly an expression of love, dance style, and performance art. In the indigenous African vernacular art context, the embrace of male and female imagery was not common but twin images or double figures highlight the bond that existed between them. *The Thinker* invokes the Yoruba belief that there is an *ori inu* (inner head) "that contains the whole destiny of man on earth."[62] Regardless of this belief, while thinking is done with the inner head, the African man seated but lost in thought must—like any other individual—work hard to attain success. *The Priest* is a symbolic representation of an Ifa priest performing a sacred duty and act of worship. Such a religious engagement has moral implications not merely for the priest but his community. This is deeply rooted in the Yoruba worldview and belief system, especially in the performance of priestly traditional rituals. It not only reflects societal concerns but also actively engages in the creation and maintenance of religious, political, and social systems in Yoruba society. The religious work represents religious beliefs regarding the veneration of prominent Yoruba deities or *orisha*.[63] Furthermore, in reflecting on the important place of fertility in marriage, *Mother and Child* highlights how a woman who bears a child is revered and honored in Yoruba culture because in Ijisakin's view, her experience is seen as the fulfilment of motherhood. Although water is known for refreshing an individual after labor on the farm in many African/Nigerian communities, Ijisakin's visual narrative draws attention to the use in Yoruba culture of palm wine as a means of refreshment and relaxation after labor on the farm. Through these representations, his stone sculptures are shown to be deeply rooted in an African vernacular.

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Notes

[1] Falola 2017, p. 1.
[2] Filani 1998.
[3] Okeke 1982.
[4] Stevens and Munro 2009.
[5] Stevens and Munro 2009.
[6] Russell 2001.
[7] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[8] Okeke 1982.
[9] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[10] de Jager 1987.
[11] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[12] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[13] Okeke 1982, p. 5.
[14] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.

[15] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[16] Oguibe 2002.
[17] Kalilu 1991.
[18] Ajibade et al. 2011, p. 175.
[19] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[20] Lawal 1985.
[21] Binder 2010.
[22] Zeleza 2010.
[23] This contextualizes the practice in numerous African cultures where twin images were produced to show completeness. See Peek 2008.
[24] Lawal 1985, p. 91.
[25] Oladipo 2016, p. 121.
[26] Ajiboye et al. 2018.
[27] Lawal 1985.
[28] Lawal 1985, p. 92.
[29] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[30] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[31] Staudinger 2001.
[32] Okediji argues on Yoruba belief in *Ori* as the seat of the body, 169.
[33] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[34] Pogoson and Akande 2011.
[35] Pogoson and Akande, p. 20. Traces the history of Ifa in Yoruba culture to antiquity.
[36] Pemberton 2019, p. 1.
[37] Emmanuel 2014, p. 163.
[38] Yemi Ijisakin 2017.
[39] Pogoson and Akande 2011.
[40] Okediji 1997, p. 177.
[41] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[42] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[43] Makinde 2004, p. 167.
[44] Okediji 1997.
[45] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[46] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[47] Makinde 2004.
[48] Yemi Iisakin Interview 2017.
[49] Calabash bowl is one of the most artistic handicrafts found in Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Mali made from large gourds, which grow on the ground like pumpkins, or on calabash tree.
[50] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017.
[51] Robson 2022.
[52] Obayemi 1976, p. 202.

[53] Odejide 2006, p. 27.
[54] Robson 2022.
[55] Atinmo and Bakre 2003.
[56] Robson 2022.
[57] Abiodun 2014.
[58] Dumbili 2013, p. 20.
[59] Yemi Ijisakin Interview 2017
[60] Stevens and Munro 2009, p. 11.
[61] Filani 1998.
[62] Ajiboye et al. 2018, p. 63.
[63] An Ifa priest is a spiritual leader and diviner rooted in Yoruba traditional religion. He is consulted by the king, elites, individuals, families and the community for divination and ritual sacrifices because of mythological belief in his roles.