RESEARCH ARTICLE:

If Bronze, Why Not Wood? A Case for the Repatriation of the Yoruba Ere Ibeji

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Abstract

In light of the current trend of repatriation of illegally acquired African art which are scattered all over galleries and museums in Europe and the Americas, consideration should also be given to the Ere Ibeji of the Yoruba. These figures are not mere objects of curiosity for Western fascination, but they are strongly tied to the birth and death of twins in Yoruba culture. This paper seeks to revisit this tradition based on literature, in line with its resultant art forms in a bid to contribute to the gamut of existing knowledge on the Yoruba twin tradition, as well as to (re)generate contemporary understanding(s) of the subject matter. Perhaps, this will aid the understanding of the significance of Ere Ibeji to the Yoruba; thereby contributing to the call for their return. The paper recommends that local preparation for the return of these artefacts should include training and re-training of the museum custodians of the cultural objects, construction, and renovation of structures to house the artefacts, and the reinforcement of legal frameworks to protect the cultural objects from illegal displacement. The paper concludes with a note that the return of looted artefacts should not begin and end with the bronzes of Benin and Ife alone, these wooden effigies from the western part of Nigeria also matter.

Keywords: *ere ibeji; Yoruba; repatriation; looted; artefacts*

Introduction

Apart from Covid-19, other significant contemporary issues are currently generating conversations and debates between stakeholders in the art and culture sector from different parts of the world. One of such issues is the repatriation of the art pieces which were 'stolen' from different parts of Africa by colonial elements. The term 'stolen' is emphasised because it is still being debated whether the artefacts were stolen or not. Understandably, such *nomenclaturising* is coming from a political standpoint, all in a bid to retain custody of these artefacts. Nonetheless, the researcher thinks Africans have been subjected to enough cultural injustice and insult already; debating whether their indigenous artworks were stolen or not is merely aggravating the case. Their art pieces were stolen; illegally, and forcibly removed from their original contexts by the colonisers. These decontextualised artworks are now scattered all over Europe and America; hung on walls and housed in glass boxes in museums and galleries as objects of curiosity.

As part of the efforts towards healing and reconciling the colonial past of Africa, there have been major socio-cultural and political moves and talks towards the return of these decontextualised artefacts. One of such political moves was made by the French President Emmanuel Macron when he declared in 2017 that the return of African heritage to its ex-colonies would be a "top priority"[2]. In his words "I cannot accept that a large part of cultural heritage from several African countries is in France."

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[2]This is according to Gbadamosi, N. (2021) in an article titled "Stealing Africa: How Britain Looted the Continent's Art." The article was published by Aljazeera. It was accessed via https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/10/12/stealing-africa-how-britain-looted-the-continents-art.

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On the 27th of October 2021, there was a live viewing, on Arise News channel, of the return of the *Benin Bronze Cockrel* to Nigerian delegates by Jesus College, Cambridge University in the United Kingdom. This return happened 124 years after the bronze artefact (among several others) was stolen from the Benin Kingdom by British Troops in 1897.[3] Regardless of the dark history that surrounds the displacement of this bronze Cockrel from its original habitat, its return by the Jesus College is seen as one of the first productive efforts towards the return of these displaced artefacts to Africa. Following such a lead, in November 2021, the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, France also returned 26 artefacts stolen from the Republic of Benin by French colonisers in 1892.[4] This trail of culturally and politically sensitive repatriation moves got the researcher thinking about the Yoruba dimension to colonial looting of artefacts. The result of a simple google search of the term *'Ere Ibeji'* presents an assembly of wooden twin figures, usually male and female. Almost all the figures are presented frontally, with different forms of body adornments, ranging from cowries to beads and metals. The heads of the figures are often exaggerated, as well as the male genital indicating the male figure, while the breast of the other is carved conspicuously to emphasise the gender it represents.

In the researcher's opinion, the most interesting aspect of this simple google exercise is that about 90 per cent of the *Ere Ibeji* images presented on this google page were either photographed in a gallery or museum space in the 'Global North'. The *Ere Ibeji* figures, which are of African origin for the use of Africans, are now being held hostage in glass boxes by different museums, galleries, and private collectors[5] all over Europe and the Americas. In this context, the ideal situation is for these pictures to have been taken while the figures were in use in Africa and by Africans, fulfilling the purpose for their creation. These wooden figures need to be returned to their origin, Africa. This leads this article to its focus. In the light of the current trend of repatriation, considerations should also be given to the *Ere Ibeji* of the Yoruba. The figures are not mere objects of curiosity for western fascination, but they are strongly tied to the birth and death of twins in Yoruba culture. Thus, this paper seeks to revisit this tradition based on literature in line with its resultant art forms. This is in a bid to contribute to the gamut of existing knowledge on the Yoruba twin tradition, as well as to generate contemporary understanding(s) of the subject matter. Perhaps, this will aid the understanding of the significance of *Ere Ibeji* to the Yoruba; thereby contributing to the call for their return. The subsequent segments of the paper entail the review of the literature concerning the Yoruba's belief system on the origin, care, and death of the twins, as well as the creative process and visual symbolism of the *Ere Ibeji*.

The Legends and Beliefs Surrounding the Yoruba *Ere Ibeji*

The Yoruba culture is one of the most researched and documented cultures in the world. Such documentations include its twin traditions. It is with such understanding that this author chooses to select from and explore the available literature on the Yoruba twin tradition. The Yoruba, according to Leroy *et al.* (2002:132):

> *…are an ethnic group mainly occupying Southwestern Nigeria. Mainly for genetic reasons, this very large ethnic group happens to present the highest dizygotic twinning rate in the world (4.4% of all maternities).*

[3] 1897 was the year of the Benin Invasion by the British Colonial troops. The British troops carted away several royal artworks from the court of the Oba of Benin, Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi (ruled 1888–1897), who was also known as Overami. For further reading on the 1897 Benin Invasion: Igbafe, P. (1970). The fall of Benin: A Reassessment. *The Journal of African History*, 11(3), 385-400. doi:10.1017/S0021853700010215

[4] This is according to Shirbon, E. (2021) in an article titled "Cambridge College, Paris Museum returns Looted African Artefacts." The article was accessed via https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/cambridge-college-returns-looted-bronze-nigeria-setting-precedent-2021-10-27/.

[5] An example of such private collection is the *J. Richard Simon Collection of Yoruba Twin Figures.* The collection is available at: https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/media/index?ObjectType=&ObjectMuseum=&ObjectCollection=8&ObjectMedium=&MediaType=Image&Country=&People=&Chapter=&action_=Use+Filter

Also, Sheree (n.d.) submits that amongst the Yoruba, "forty-five of every 1,000 births result in twins; this is four times the number of twin births in the United States." The high rate of twin deliveries in the Yoruba ethnicity according to Nylander's 1979 study (cited in Leroy *et al.,* 2002), "could depend on dietary factors such as the consumption of special species of yams containing oestrogenic substances. Generally, the high infant mortality rate stands against the survival of twins." Leroy (1995, cited in Leroy *et al.,* 2002) also submits that "because of a high rate of premature delivery and the lack of adequate medical care and health infrastructures in traditional Nigeria, the perinatal mortality of twins used to be very high". More so, the survival of twins was also threatened on cultural lines. There was a time when twins were killed in Yoruba culture. It was considered abnormal for a human being to give birth to more than one child at a time. In understanding how this bizarre culture of infanticide was brought to a halt, a summary of two accounts presented in Chappel's (1974) article on the history of the Yoruba twin cult, will suffice.

A certain group of traders, according to Chappel, travelled to a trading region close to the Oyo empire, called *Isokun*. Although the killing of twins was a law in Oyo at the time, residents of *Isokun* were however exempted as they were outside the Oyo land. A family amongst the traders gave birth to twins. They were confused, not knowing what to do as they were close to the Oyo empire where twins were not allowed. To seek guidance, they consulted the *Ifa* priest who told them that there was no problem in keeping the twins alive, if they perform the necessary rituals for the twins. As part of the rituals, they were required to dance in public with the twins every five days. As they did this, everyone took pity on them and gifted them with money. Through this process, the parents became rich. It was believed that the twins were the originators of their good fortune. The news of their wealth reached the *Alaafin* of Oyo. He decided to leave them with their twins. This singular act by the *Alaafin*, as well as the wealth, people believed, was because of the twins' presence in their parents' lives, led to the gradual stoppage and eradication of infanticide in Yoruba culture. Therefore, the first line of one of the many songs, composed to eulogise twins in the Yoruba societies to date reads: *"Fine looking twins, natives of Ishokun…"* Here is the complete lyrics of the song as presented by Olaleye-Oruene 1983 and Courlander 1973 (cited in Leroy *et al.,* 2002):

> *Fine looking twins, natives of Ishokun,*
> *Descendants of treetop monkeys.*
> *Twins saw the houses of the rich but did not go there,*
>
> *Twins saw the houses of great personages but did not go there*
> *Instead, they entered the houses of the poor.*
> *They made the poor rich, they clothed those who were naked.*
>
> *Majestic and beautiful looking twins, natives of Ishokun,*
> *Let me find means of eating, let me find means of drinking.*
> *Majestic and beautiful looking twins, come and give me*
> *The blessing of a child.*

All these legends, alongside the Yoruba's belief in reincarnation, formed the basis for the reverence attached to twins both alive and dead in Yoruba societies. Therefore, regular prayers are made, and sacrificial gifts are laid in front of a special family shrine devoted to the ancestors. This is in congruence with the reverence for the dead in the Yoruba religion. Leroy *et al.,* (2002) explain that "it is thought that about two generations after death, every human soul has a chance to return to earth in the body of a new-born, mostly within the same family. The welfare of any family is entirely dependent on that of its ancestors."

For twins, with regards to reincarnation, there are several believed implications and complications, if certain modes are not expressly adhered to. Resultantly, this necessitates and justifies the love and care that is shown to them, even after death. Both Eyo (1990) and Mobolade (1971) agree that, traditionally, the Yoruba regard twins as divine children who can bring affluence to either or both of

their parents or impoverishing them according to how well they are treated. Mobolade further explains that the *Ibeji* can be a source of good fortune to their parents in difficult times. Through their believed supernatural tendencies, it is suggested that the twins can cause their mother to discover money in odd places. Leroy *et al.,* (2002:134) also state that:

> *It is believed that twins can bestow happiness, health, and prosperity upon their family. However, since they can also bring about disaster, disease, and death, they will be treated with all due respect, love, and care. Their upbringing is therefore far more permissive than that of other children.*

It is most likely that all these accounts on the twins' tendencies to make their parents rich emanated, or are related, to Chappel's account earlier paraphrased. Nonetheless, as a result of such financially beneficial tendencies, amongst other attributes, legend tells us, in the words of Mobolade (1971:15) that:

> *Ibeji parents used to assemble in a town near Badagry where an Ibeji shrine was situated. It is believed that the Ibeji god and its worship originated there. In this town, the visitors (Ibeji parents) would offer sacrifices to the Ibeji god. Energetic dancing and singing would then ensue.*

These are some of the practices of the twin cults of the Yoruba. Leroy *et al.,* (2002:134) observe that "the first-born twin, whether a boy or a girl, is always called *Taiwo*, meaning 'having the first taste of the world', whereas the second is named *Kehinde*, meaning 'arriving after the other'. Although being born first, *Taiwo* is considered as the younger twin." Among the Yoruba, legend has it that although Kehinde arrives last, he or she however is the elder of the two. It is believed that while they were both in heaven (or in their mother's womb), Kehinde being the elder sent Taiye into the world to survey the situation of things. Although Taiye comes first, he or she is carrying out Kehinde's mandate. That is why part of Kehinde's eulogy reads *"Omokehinde gbegbon…;"* which means that Kehinde takes over the position of seniority on arrival.

Death does not bring an end to the reverence and affection shown to the twins by their parents. Thus, when the unfortunate demise of one or both the twins occurs, the Yoruba transfer such care onto a wooden figure that had been commissioned and carved in honour of the dead twin(s). Mobolade (1971:14) asserts that "it is customarily believed that an *Ibeji* child is as powerful when it is dead as it was when alive; therefore, the Yoruba carve figures to represent either of the two that is dead or both if both are dead." In carving these wooden representatives of the dead twin(s), basic anatomical sensibilities, distinguishing the male from the female are adhered to. Also, Leroy *et al.,* (2002:134) submit that, "as the Yoruba believe that twins share the same combined soul, when a new-born twin dies, the life of the other is imperilled because the balance of his soul has become seriously disturbed. To counteract this danger a special ritual is carried out." Such rituals are often carried out in line with the dictates of the Babalawo. He consults the *Ifa* oracle and announces all that the parents would have to do in counteracting the danger. This includes contracting a carver to create wooden figures in the stead of the dead twin(s). It is these surrogate wooden figures that the Yoruba refer to as '*Ere Ibeji*' (See Fig. 1).

Figure 1: *Ere Ibeji*, Yoruba, Nigeria. Wood, Glass Bead, Metal, Cowries, 25 cm (National Museum of Scotland). Courtesy of https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-africa/west-africa/nigeria/a/ere-ibeji-figures-yoruba-peoples

The *Ere Ibeji*; Their Aesthetic Orientations and Their Significance

Klemm (n.d.) asserts that "the figure is thought to be a focal point for the spiritual energy of the deceased twin who, according to Yoruba traditional thought, resides in the supernatural realm where he/she is cared for by a spiritual mother." Therefore, these figures are cared for as if they were alive. According to the instructions of the *Ifa* priest, the mother of the dead twin(s), prepares feasts for, and in honour of the dead twin(s), for children around. During such sacrifices, according to Mobolade (1971), the mother gives the wooden surrogate of the dead twin the same care and affection given to the living twin. This ranges from food to clothing, to physical touch and display of affection. If she eulogises one, she does the same for the other. Also, Leroy *et al.,* (2002) and Southgate (2004) believe that when the surviving twin comes of age, he or she takes over the care for the dead twin's figure. Eyo (1990) and Klemm (n.d.) posit that the *Ere Ibeji* is ritually washed, fed, clothed, and carried in a cloth wrapper on the mother's back as a real baby would be carried. Eyo also points out that the parents may dance around in the marketplaces asking for alms. An example of this occurred in Challenge, a busy area in Ibadan, Oyo State Nigeria in the mid-1990s.

There were children following and taunting a woman. The woman, dressed in the traditional Yoruba attire – *Iro* and *Buba*, had a baby strapped to her back and in her hand was a blue plastic doll, wrapped in a colourfully patterned fabric. The doll had some beaded strings wrapped around its neck. She was seriously engaged in a Yoruba song, while she danced. Apart from the kids who seemed to be having their fun, following, and watching this woman sing and dance; a large amount of the adults around seemed indifferent. Everyone just went about their businesses as usual. It was assumed by the researcher that she was known for her insanity. However, after learning about the *Ere Ibeji* tradition several years later, the researcher understood the significance of the encounter in Challenge in Ibadan. As sacred beings, the *Ibeji* sometimes make their parents go through some seemingly bizarre ordeals. According to Mobolaji (1971), "often the *Ibeji* may tell its mother to dance about begging for alms. This type of *Ibeji* is known as '*Onijo'*, that is 'dancers', although the *Ibejis* do not dance themselves." Hawking Palm-oil, salt, and beans amongst other things are some of the things and occupations the *Ibeji* sometimes require of their parents.

Specifically, Eyo (1990) points out that "it is important to note that the figures do not represent gods (*orisa*) although they are often referred to as such." Eyo further tenders that there are two main reasons for creating and caring for the *Ere Ibeji.* The first reason is so that further evil may be averted from the family and over the surviving twin, if there are any. The second reason is linked to reincarnation. It is believed that if the wooden surrogate of the dead twin is well cared for, then his/her spirit might consider returning to the family. Hence, carved in all parts of Yorubaland, according to Southgate (2004), "the wooden figures of the twins are stroked and caressed until a rich patina develops, much like statues in churches rubbed featureless by the devout." In addition to this, from time to time, according to the *Ibeji* ritual dictates, the mother prepares a feast for children around in honour of the dead twin(s). Specific foods such as beans, sugarcane, palm oil, beancakes, etc. must be part of the meals prepared for the feast (Mobolade 1971).

Carved majorly in wood**,** Houlberg in Shannon (2009) says that "most traditional *Ere Ibeji* average about ten inches in height, varying slightly by region. Smaller figures can be about half this height and scale to accommodate being taken along on frequent travel by the caretaker." The full *Ere Ibeji* figure may be carved in under one week. However, Trentin (2009) observes that "while *Ere Ibeji* serves the same purpose throughout Yoruba societies, carving styles vary by city and region. Some cities have very distinctive styles, while others are closely related to those of nearby towns." In the opinion of Trentin (2009), over the years changes have been noticed in the carving styles of the *Ere Ibeji.* This is somewhat inevitable because artists have their own individual creative leanings, just like any other skill in traditional Africa, was passed down to generations through the apprenticeship system. Regardless of these individual creative tendencies, there are still a substantial amount of visual consistencies in the carving of the *Ere Ibeji* through the times and regions in the Yoruba land. In this case, the *Ifa* priest serves as the agent for controlling and enforcing the adherence to visual standards

and quality. As art is not just produced for art's sake in Africa, there are several ritualistic and cultural beliefs and structures that must be upheld and adhered to in the production of the *Ere Ibeji*. In the words of Curry (2009):

> *The Ere Ibeji is formed out of the wood of the ire tree. This tree is chosen for its softwood and ease of carving. There are three types of ire tree in West Africa: the ire basabasa, or ire rubber; the ire odan, or iredan; and the ire ona, or irena. The correct wood to use for carving Ere Ibeji is the irena, because only it will react to the ritual sacrifice of both preparing and caring for the twin. In preparation for carving, the entire tree is given a rooster, adiyeilagbe, as a sacrifice before cutting down. Once the tree is prepared, many Ere Ibeji may be carved from the same source, though each Ibeji requires an adiyeilagbe as part of its commission. The carver will only choose to use the ire ona unless the family commissioning the Ere Ibeji does not properly compensate the carver.*

The payment made to the carver is majorly comprised of consumable items. Specifically, as listed by Curry (2009), "this includes two dried fish, two snails, two dried rats, two kola nuts, two alligator peppers, four kegs of palm wine, and sixteen pieces of big yam." Other materials include "four calabash-full of beans, four calabash-full of corn, four tins of palm oil and two cocks or hens depending on the sex of the deceased twins. In addition, parents must bring food and drink to the carver every day until the piece is finished." Both parties involved – the parent of the deceased twin(s) and the carver - are expected to do their due diligence to each other so that the right wood is used for carving the *Ere Ibeji,* following the cultural dictates in such matters. This is considered important because according to Curry (2009), "if the wrong wood is used by the carver, the entire ritual must start over, beginning with the consultation of the *Babalawo* or diviner". Curry (2009) further explains that there are six stages in the production of the *Ere Ibeji*:

> *First is the sisa, where the log of the ire tree is cut into the correct size to accommodate one Ibeji, between nine and twelve inches on average. Next, the adze and chisel are used to define the major body sections, onalile, such as the head, torso, and legs. In aletunle, the various body parts are refined. The rough carving of the figure is complete in the smoothing stage, or didan. In the finfin, the aesthetic patterns are added to the external body. Finally, the face marks of the father's lineage, analogous to human scarification, are carved. The scrapings of the Ere Ibeji, including the face marks, are regarded as very effective medicine by the Yoruba. Upon receiving the Ere Ibeji, the mother may never burn the wood of the ire tree again.*

Though the death of the twin(s) may have occurred at infancy, the ritualistic *Ere Ibeji* carved for such twin(s) is however presented, with the help of the visual forms, in its adult age. Leroy *et al.,* (2002) point out that **"***Ibeji* effigies appear as wooden erect adult beings about ten inches tall. They stand in a "hands-on-the-hips" position, generally on a round or quadrangular baseplate." Also, Sheree (n.d.) adds that "*Ibeji* figures are carved as the same sex of the deceased twin but as an adult." A probable reason for this symbolic portrayal can be seen in the statement made by Chappel 1974 (cited in Smessaert 2009) that "the principal function of the *Ere Ibeji* is to serve as a repository for the child's spirit so that it may return to this world and resume its journey to adulthood." Peculiar to the tenets of the Yoruba aesthetics, one distinctive trait found in most *Ere Ibeji* figures, irrespective of their region of origin, is the relatively large portrayal of the head. There are two possible schools of thought in the understanding of what the exaggerated heads symbolise. The first school of thought is in line with the general exaggeration of the human head in the African system of proportion. The head is usually presented bigger than the rest of the body to connote the reverence it is accorded. It is believed that the head is a person's link to his creator, ancestral spirits, and destiny. As such, it is not to be handled or portrayed ordinarily as the head is believed to serve as a link to one's life force, destiny, as well as ancestral spirits; it is therefore considered as a focal point for the sacrifices offered to and for the twins.

The second school of thought views the matter from a somewhat biological perspective. In this case, the exaggerated heads of the *Ere Ibeji* are linked to the fact that babies' heads are usually relatively

bigger than the rest of the body. In concurrence, Smessaert (2009) opines that "because the *Ere Ibeji* commemorates a deceased child, and since infants, in particular, have significantly larger heads in proportion to the rest of their bodies, it is reasonable to assume that this characteristic, references infantile proportions." Whichever of these explanations one chooses to lean towards, the underlying idea is that the heads of the *Ere Ibeji* were not presented larger in proportion to the rest of the bodies as a result of the carvers' deficiency in skill. If that were the case, then the uniformity in the head size of the *Ere Ibeji* would not have been so consistent. This again alludes to the fact that the art of Africa was never produced for art's sake. There are pertinent reasons behind most perceived abnormalities; reasons which are best known to the creators and originators of the art. Thus, it is important for such art to exist or in this case, be returned to the cultural space for which it was created.

Figure 2: Late 19th-early 20th century male and female *Ere Ibeji* figures made from carved and painted wood, wearing high headdresses and strings of beads.

In Figure 2, though the formal presentation of the figures is quite idealistic, one would observe that more time was devoted to intricately portraying the cap-like hairdo of the figures. This further points to the significance the Yoruba hinges on the head. Also, special care was taken in distinctively distinguishing the gender of the two figures from each other. After carving, various symbolic materials are attached to the carved *Ere Ibeji* figures, usually to connote their importance, as well as their ritualistic inclinations. For instance, Curry (2009) states that "an *Ibeji* robe covered only in cowries is reminiscent of those worn by Shango priests, as well. Bundles of cowry shells, worn at the wrists or ankles, always signify wealth instead of a particular *orisa*. No aesthetic addition is without significance" (See Figure 1).

Twins belonging to affluent families are usually distinguished by the quality and visual aesthetics of the clothes they wear. In cases where one of the twins were dead, the living twin still wears the same clothes as the wooden surrogate of the other. The aesthetic patterns on the clothes the twins wear often have their connotations. While patterns such as the zigzag point to ancestral attachments and ritualistic references; colours such as purple are used to signify affluence. The nature of Shango and even the twins, which is characterised by an admixture of peace and viciousness, is usually communicated by a blend of white and red. While white signifies the peaceful and calm dimension of the twins and Shango, the red colour on the other hand points to their vicious and forceful tendencies. Their mysterious nature as well as their witty tendencies are also encoded in their attire using dark blue hues (Curry 2009).

Leroy *et al.,* (2002) observes that "many *Ibejis* are partly covered with a crust of dried camwood powder." Expatiating on the Camwood powder[6] Curry (2009) tenders that:

> *Camwood powder osun, is derived from the tree Baphianitida, found in West African countries. The dye comes from the bark and heart of the tree, and like indigo, it is soluble in an alkaline*

[6] This is according to Curry (2009), in the article titled "The Materials used for Ere Ibeji". Edited by Roy, C. D. The article can be accessed via https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/45?start=2

solution, making it suitable for the application. The red camwood powder colour may signify Shango for some families and is used to decorate and protect the Ere Ibeji.

Generally, as pointed out earlier, the care given to the figures, characterised by carrying, caressing, and rubbing, explains the smooth surface that most *Ere Ibeji* carry. Body markings and a variety of facial scarification, depending on the family lineage of the dead twin(s), are other visual elements that are found on some twin figures. Other physical aesthetic qualities of traditional Yoruba sculptures, according to Smessaert (2009), include "resemblance (*jijora*), balance (*idogba*), clarity (*ifarahan*), smoothness (*didan*), detail (*fifin*), skillful embellishment of the form (*ona*), innovation or creativity (*ara*), and aliveness (*idahun*)."

Conclusion

This plunge into literature is necessary to further emphasise the point about the importance of the *Ere Ibeji* to the Yoruba culture as functional creative objects. In fact, the aesthetics of these figures are not complete without them performing the functions for which they were created. The smoothness and shiny nature of the objects, as they are seen and admired today, are a result of use, care, and caressing by the mother of deceased twins who commission traditional carvers to produce these surrogates in the stead of their deceased children. At the risk of taking things to the extreme, it probably will not be out of place to say that these *Ere Ibeji* figures that are currently being held hostage in foreign spaces are people's 'children', or at the very least, the only surviving connections people have to their deceased children. If due respect shall be given to the Yoruba tradition with regards to twins, then these displaced artefacts must be returned home.

Understandably, not all the *Ere Ibeji* figures existing in foreign spaces were illegally acquired. Some were specially produced for western collectors and tourists as objects of fascination. Nonetheless, the various commissions and bodies of enquiry and negotiations such as the Legacy Restoration Trust, Open Restitution Africa, and the National Commission for Museums in Nigeria, should sieve through these artefacts to determine the circumstances surrounding their acquisition. For history's sake, the presence of these wooden figures is essential in times like these, when plastic dolls and photographs have replaced the wooden figures, the people started this tradition with. How do we then refer to and understand our cultural values and history when we have no visual reference? The famous Nigerian Writer, Chimamanda Adichie recently gave a speech[7] at the 2021 Humboldt Forum, adding to the voices of those demanding the return of these African artefacts. With reference to an *Ikenga*, which is peculiar to the Igbo of Nigeria just as *Ere Ibeji* is peculiar to the Yoruba, she says "it is easy to forget as we stare and admire them behind cold and clinical glass barriers, that these are objects that are religious, spiritual, sacred. Art lives in history, and history lives in art. Much of what we call African art are also documents, they tell stories." If these stories are to be properly told and clearly understood by the generations to come, then art must corroborate the accounts. In fact, with art, verbal accounts would almost amount to reiterations, sometimes unnecessary.

At this point, it is important to address and perhaps proffer an alternative perspective to the popular excuse that 'Africans may not have the capacity to take proper care of their cultural heritage, thus justifying the continued existence of these artefacts in foreign territories.' It is important to add a note here that Africa does not need to prove herself deserving of her cultural heritage. These artefacts were not created to be admired by foreigners. They were made to be used according to the dictates of the creator(s). That said, some fundamental local issues would have to be properly addressed in preparation for the return of these cultural objects – the *Ere Ibeji* figures. Firstly, there is a need to train and re-train the would-be custodians of the repatriated objects. Curators, museum administrators, art historians, and all other professionals who would be saddled with the responsibility of caring for these objects should be properly trained and prepared in accordance

[7] The speech was accessed on YouTube via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1Cxhq0gF6E

with the best global standards. This will ensure the care and attention given to the artefacts and museum guests.

Secondly, the museum facilities in Nigeria require improvement. New architectural structures, which are specifically erected to suit the physical, historical, and contextual nature of the repatriated objects, should also be provided. It is laudable that such an initiative has been launched in preparation for the return of looted Benin bronzes to the Benin Kingdom. The proposed Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) is being constructed to house repatriated Benin bronzes. The new museum, as reported by guardian.com (2020), is the result of a collaboration between the British Museum and partners in Nigeria, which includes the Legacy Restoration Trust. Such international and inter-institutional partnerships should be replicated in other parts of the country in preparation for other categories of repatriated cultural loots such as the *Ere Ibeji*. Considering the decades of historical and cultural injustice different African societies have suffered from the absence of these objects in their local territories, such initiatives are the least the international community can do as a political gesture of restitution.

Thirdly, the Nigerian state should be proactive by reinforcing its legal frameworks to safeguard its cultural artefacts. Examples of such are the Antiques Act of the 1974 and 1979 Act which established the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (Onyido, 2020). In this regard, laws and policies that specifically protect these repatriated artefacts and other indigenous cultural objects from theft and illegal displacement, should be reinforced in light of confronting contemporary realities. To round up, it is important to note that this article is not an effort to shift the current focus from the Benin Bronzes. Rather, it is a call for discursive inclusion in the negotiations for repatriation. The return of looted artifacts should not begin and end with the bronzes of Benin and Ife alone. These wooden effigies from the western part of Nigeria also matter. They are not mere objects of curiosities. They are objects of life and death to the Yoruba mothers for whom the *Ere Ibeji* were created.

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