

# Notes on Copper Alloy Metallurgy and Sculpture among the Yorùbá

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## Abstract

The meaning and relevance of sculpture to Yoruba existence is complex and far reaching. To further understand the relationship one must investigate all aspects of the medium. One key area that may give insight to a better understanding is the choice of material and what it symbolises to the ancient people. The choice of cuprous metal for a select class of Yoruba (Ife) sculptural pieces are by no means spontaneous. Brass and bronze possess characteristic properties that endeared them to the Yoruba both physical and spiritually. This paper examines what these properties mean to the people and the consequence of this interpretation.

**Keywords:** Brass; Bronze; Copper Alloy; Sculpture; Yoruba.

## 1. Introduction

The knowledge of transforming ore to metal is probably one of the most remarkable breakthroughs in the journey of man towards civilisation. There are no certainties as to the dates or exact locations where the first steps in metallurgy took place but Anatolia in Turkey, the highlands of Iran, Syria and Thailand have shown evidence of early metal smelting that predate 4000 BCE. (Hunt, 1980). While Hunt (1980) has suggested the possibility of independent simultaneous discovery of the art of smelting metal in different locations of the world about the same time, others disagree and argue in favour of a gradual technical development and diffusion of the knowledge of metallurgy (Wertime, 1973). Whatever the case maybe, it is certain that the knowledge of metallurgy significantly changed the way ancient people lived. This paper will focus on cuprous metals – brass and bronze in the Yoruba area of western Nigeria. So meaningful was the impact of these materials in the cultural and religious milieu of the people that they quickly gained a position of reverence amongst other media like clay, wood, stone and quartz. This study explores the importance and beatification of cuprous alloy among the ancient Yoruba. The central question of this work is ‘why is copper and its alloy the most valued and referred material medium for sculptural expression among the Yoruba?’ The findings here will help shed further light on the several unrequited questions that still impede our full understanding of the enigmatic brass and bronze sculptural corpus of the Yoruba people.

## 2. Brief Background and Methodology

Man has mined and worked many metals since the ancient times but probably the most important to man’s religious and developmental awareness are cuprous alloys and iron. These materials played an important role in agriculture, native engineering, warfare and the arts. Copper is arguably the first metal to be explored and worked by man. This is corroborated by the archaeological finds in Cayonu (Turkey) where evidence of smelting copper was discovered along copper wire pins dating back to 7000 BCE. Even older dates for copper working have been suggested from the Zawi Chemi area of northern Iraq. (Wertime, 1973). More recent suggestions to the antiquity of cuprous metal in Africa can also be seen in Kush. The Kushites used bronze weapons when the Assyrians – who had superior weaponry - attacked and sacked them around 663 BCE. Also, early metallurgical history show that a fully developed bronze industry with strong stylistic affinities to southern Arabia existed in Ethiopia by the fifth century BCE. (Childs & Killick, 1993)

In ancient Africa, metals were generally venerated. Like most metal, copper and its alloys were attached with certain spiritual and political symbolism since early times. Childs & Killick (1993) argued, the anthropological significance of indigenous African metallurgy extends far beyond the economic importance of warfare, agriculture and trade. Among the Yoruba, Copper and its alloys enjoyed such adulation in comparison to iron, silver and even gold. Besides their utilitarian and aesthetic importance, cuprous alloy also feature prominently as material medium for religious and ritual expressions. The Ijebu people of the Yorùbá nation, for example, wear copper or brass rings on one of the fingers for protection against attacks from paranormal physical forces (Herbert, 1973). This practise of making wearable ornamentation as protection against evil spirits is in fact common among African tribes. The *Ibo Eze Nri* (Supreme Chief) of eastern Nigeria, wears copper anklets to ‘insulate’ himself from earth forces since he is to remain barefoot. The Berbers of northern Africa also use copper ornaments as talisman or protective charms. How copper and its alloy became so potent and revered in the socio-cultural contortions of Yoruba worldview is what this paper explores.

This researched used both primary and secondary data. The primary data was acquired through interviews with four casters in three different locations of the Yoruba country. The interviewees include Baba Oluyemi, the last surviving early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ile Ifè traditional bronze and brass caster. Other veteran casters

were engaged in Ogbomosho, Ijebu ode and Ibadan. The interviews were mostly carried out in Yoruba except for the session with Baba Oluyemi who was fluent in English - though both English and Yoruba languages were used. In Ibadan, Baba Falore a brass caster and *Ifa* apprentice was particularly instructive with insights into *Ifa* verses where he believes all answers are to be found. Falore is also a part time goldsmith. Secondary data was collected through desk research and materials from the National Museum Library, Lagos, Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan and the Obafemi Awolowo University Library, Ifè.

### 3. Cuprous Alloy among the Yorùbá

Though a copper smelting furnace is yet to be discovered in Ile Ifè, the fact that brass and other cuprous alloys were known to the Ifè people as early as the twelfth century is no longer in contention. Brass in Yorùbá is *ide*. It is not clear yet how or when exactly brass reached the Yorùbá area or how it became an essential medium for artistic and spiritual expression. The Ife heads and other brass items found in and around Ife are not the only signs that brass was once an important material in the area. Adepegba (2001) recounts some *Ifa* verses and praise poems dedicated to Osun, the goddess of river Osun. The verses include *Ose tura*; where Osun was referred to as the wealthy owner of enormous amount of brass, stating that 'she' (Osun) owned so many brass items, 'she' required a shelf to store them all. One of Osun's praise songs states "*she who lulls her children with brass*". This also suggests the plentiful nature of brass in the time of Osun and the quantity Osun possessed. Shrine objects used for Osun worship are all made of brass. The objects found exclusively in the shrine, and used in the worship of the deity, are brass bangles, comb, hairpin, lidded containers and fan.

Brass is an alloy of copper and zinc; however there appears to be no name for zinc in Yorùbá language. This will suggest that the element--zinc--was not known to the Yorùbá of the early times in its natural state. Copper on the other hand called *baba* by the Yorùbá was very well known to them. Relatively recent discoveries suggest a possible large-scale mine for copper in the Benue basin area of Nigeria, which is on the other side of the Niger River (Chikwendu et al., 1981). Invariable, this will mean that the combination of copper and zinc to form brass was imported to the Ife and probably other parts of the Yorùbá area around the tenth to the fifteenth century.

Furthermore, *Ifa* worship and poetry is believed to have existed since the earliest times according to Yorùbá oral tradition. If brass (*ide*) is amply mentioned in the verses of *Ifa*, the question then arises how brass was known to the 'creator' of *Ifa* worship if brass only arrived in Ife area around the tenth century? Two possibilities present themselves here. First, is the possibilities that *Ifa* worship and poetry began much later than oral tradition claims. From the traditional accounts of the arrival of Oduduwa (the progenitor of the Yorùbá race), one may reason that *Ifa* worship started around eight hundred to eight hundred and fifty C.E. This is probable since the tradition states that when Oduduwa arrived Ile Ife, he met Setilu (also called agbo-niregun), an old man credited as the founder, custodian and propagator of the *Ifa* worship and poetry as revealed to him by Olodumare (the Supreme Being). This infers that the worship was in its infancy at the time Oduduwa came to Ife.

The other possibility is that the working and use of brass in Ife predates what the body of knowledge in art history and archaeology now present. If the corpus of *Ifa* is as ancient as tradition suggest (probably first millennium BCE), then one may consider earlier dates for brass activities in Ife and the Yorùbá area as a whole. For this idea to gather enough credibility that may warrant attention and debate, it must still wait for more archaeological discovery that will push the brass dates in Yorùbá country further into antiquity.

Yorùbá smiths are generally known as *agbede*. Although, there are more specific delineation to the general name based on the type of metal the individual works or the type of items the individual makes. The blacksmiths are called *agbede dudu* – *dudu* meaning black, the colour of iron. Other examples include *agbede oko* (hoe-smith), *agbede baba* (coppersmith), and *agbede oje* (Lead-smith). Apart from the above generalisation, copper alloy smiths are called different names depending on the location they practise. They are called *Asude* in Ibadan and Ilorin, *Esude* in Idomowo and Ijebu and *Isude* in Ogbomosho (Adepegba, 1991).

As mentioned earlier, there is as yet no tangible prove of ancient copper or brass smelting in Ile Ife. Adepegba notes that there appears to be no genealogical root for brass casting in Ife. Ben Oluyemi, who was interviewed by this researcher in Ife confirms this. He informed the researcher that he was the last surviving brass caster from the early 1900s in the ancient town. He is not a native of Ife and he was trained to cast by the National Museums authority. Oluyemi is originally from Efon Alaye in Ondo State. This further supports the idea of external influence on ancient Ife brass casting industry.

In more recent times, brass casting may be found in industrial scale only in Obo Ayegunle, Idomowo, Ijebu-Ode, Ibadan, Ilobu, Ogbomosho and Ilorin (Adepegba, 1991). Traditional histories obtained from the different sites suggest that the origin of the skill in the different centres can be directly or indirectly linked to Ife. Only minor technical differences is to be noticed in the various locations. For example, the materials used for the core and outer moulds of sculptural pieces vary and the deity worshiped by the casters also differs from place to place. In Ijebu, Obalufon (proto king in Ife) is worshiped as the patron of the casters while Ogun (god of iron) is worshiped together with Obalufon in Obo Ayegunle. Ogun is solely worshiped by the casters in Ogbomosho,

Ibadan, Abeokuta and Ilorin. In the Yoruba country, the idea that all things of value take root from Ile Ife – the spiritual capital of all the Yoruba people - is not uncommon. It is not completely clear why this is done but partly one may imagine that the practise stems out of a kind of cultural impulse to remain aligned with the enigma of the capital. Therefore, the assertions above that the origins of native metallurgy in the Yoruba area can be traced to Ife may not be wholly founded but at the same time cannot be fully overturned.

Generally, brass casting is now rapidly dying out all together in the Yorùbá nation. The locations mentioned above, like Ife, are now a shadow of their once glorious past. In Idomowo and Obo Ayegunle, brass casting was more or less a community profession, but now, as Adepegba (1991) recounts, in Idomowo, the only trace of casting one may find is in the few goldsmiths who make small crafts for sale and in Obo Ayegunle, only two old octogenarians out of the once vibrant plenty remain – this was far back in 1990, now they are all gone. To a large extent Ibadan shares the same fate, it however may still boast of a few old hands who still practise as blacksmiths and goldsmiths but only as a side job.

#### **4. Sculpture and the veneration of Cuprous Metals among the Yorùbá**

Among the Yorùbá, sculptural art – particularly of portraiture and bodily form - play a vital role in the articulation of the culture. It is in fact integral to the essence of the people. A Yorùbá creation myth relates the story of Obatala (a high Deity) who was sent by Olodumare (the Supreme Deity) to create solid earth. Obatala did not accomplish this task, as he took too much palm wine on his journey and became drunk. Oduduwa, another deity, was sent to relieve Obatala of his task and to fulfil the desire of Olodumare. When Obatala became sober, he realised what had happened and went to confront Oduduwa, who by then was regarded as the creator of the earth. A battle ensued between Obatala and Oduduwa, over the rights to the land. Olodumare intervened and reassigned Obatala to another duty-- crafting and moulding the human body with clay. Obatala, however, moulded only the body. Another mythological actor, called *Ajala Alamopin* (Ajala moulder of destiny), was saddled with the task of moulding the human 'inner head' – the spiritual head. It was believed that before any man is born into the physical world, he/she would visit Ajala to choose a head – destiny. Ajala however was also a drunk and a debtor, so when anyone came to pick a head from Ajala (before setting out on his or her journey), Ajala would run and hide from the guest, fearing it might be one of the people to whom he owed a debt. After seeking out Ajala in vain, the individual was left with no option than to pick out a head for himself without the proper guidance of Ajala. The Yorùbá believe your destiny in life is determined by the choice of head you pick from Ajala's lot. The twist here is that all Ajala Alamopin's moulded works are outwardly identical, giving the impression that they represent the same destiny. However, this is not the case. Each head possesses a different attribute obscured from sight so that the individual only picks a head 'blindly'. The sojourner was left at the mercy of 'luck' to pick out good fortune since Ajala is perpetually unavailable to assist.

From the mythological account given above, one may glean the extent to which sculpture is important to the Yorùbá. Literally speaking, sculpture is at the center of the creation and existence of the Yorùbá people. This ideology is corroborated by Benedict (2013) when he states that not only is the African view to art a communal one, it is clearly an integral part of every other thing. Further, sculpture presents itself as a medium for recording aspects of daily life. It also presents artists with the possibility to reconstruct and document the grandeur of their time for posterity. Several aspects of the culture of a people can be understood by looking keenly at their arts. The sculpture of many ancient civilisations serve as a documentary medium. It affords the present generation the opportunity to peer into the past, the case is not different among the Yorùbá.

As with the Yorùbá in general, sculpture in Ife is intricately woven into the fabric of society. The corpus of Ife sculpture is practically embodied in the series of life size naturalistic brass heads called Ife heads. Many controversies about authorship have trailed the enigmatic head pieces but in all there is to be no doubt about the excellence of quality and sublimity of the corpus. There is little doubt that the Ifè sculptures were made by skilled artists who have mastered the artistry required to cast such transcendent works. The Ifè heads has become a standard and an icon for Yorùbá artistic prowess.

Among the Yorùbá, sculpture delivered in naturalistic style is primarily for documentation and often a mnemonic device just like photography. In the early twentieth century, western anthropologists erroneously built an image of ritualism around Yorùbá naturalistic and neo naturalistic art and it has been difficult to shake off the stigma since. These early researchers defined Yorùbá sculpture mainly in terms of ancestral veneration and other fetishes. This is not always the case. Epko (1977) has argued against this myopic classification that it does not necessarily define the classes of African arts. In the Yorùbá artistic canon, effigies and figures made with the sole intent for ancestral veneration are almost never made from metal and most certainly not delivered in a naturalistic style (Akande, 2011). In ancient times, the Yorùbá reserved naturalistic sculpture (made from whatever material) for three major purposes, these being aesthetic and appreciation, documentation, and the idealisation of the traditional social and political order. (Akande, 2011)

*Odun ere* (the festival of statues) is a yearly festival held in different parts of Yorùbá nation. During this event, all manner of sculptures; naturalistic and stylised forms are put out on display for public admiration and

appreciation. The *Odun ere* is a sculpture summit of sort where every form and matter pertaining to the art and craft of sculpting in whatever material is celebrated. This signifies that sculpture is a physical medium for the presentation and appreciation of Yorùbá aesthetics (Abiodun, 1994). This notion is further strengthened by the Yorùbá saying, *Idarasi ni ere*, which means the sculpture is for beautification. The Yorùbá possesses an innate desire to record and personify cultural life in the physical medium. In doing this however, care is taken for choice of material used. Depending on the purpose of the piece and the status of the patron, different material and style of delivery are chosen. The process of material and stylistic choice are firmly guided by the canons of an informal guild of artists. These canons are unwritten but are widely known -- and adhered to -- by the artists and respected by the patrons. A collective alignment with a specific deity helps in no small way to ensure compliance to rules and processes. This predisposition to visual communication and documentation enhanced the acceptance and propagation of photography when it arrived in the Yorùbá country in early times.

Further, the Yorùbá also use sculpture to as a vehicle for political order. Statues reinforce the supremacy of the royals and socio-political class. Images of past leaders and culture heroes are made and often used as symbols to define the character and ideology of leadership. The figures portray the rulers as persons of divine source and unction. These images are often times deliberately shrouded in a kind of mystery so as to create the necessary aura needed to make them effective in eliciting decorum and allegiance from the masses. Certain secret societies also use this approach to evoke reverence from the non-initiate. An example can be seen in the *Ogboni* cult – a society indigenous to the Yorùbá that performs a range of political and religious functions, including jurisprudence in capital offences.

This work has thus far demonstrated the centrality of sculpture to the belief and world view of the ancient Yoruba. It has also articulated the importance of cuprous alloys as a key material ingredient in the realisation of sculpture's position in the Yoruba society. The question one seeks to find however is why cuprous alloys so valued among the ancient Yoruba.

It would appear that copper and its alloys attained a place of pride in the cultural and religious sphere of African tribal life and the phenomenon is not a thing to be seen among the Yoruba alone. Many African tribes believed that copper possessed powers that prevented spiritual attacks and gave untold advantages to the beholder in wading through the travails of life.

The Tuareg and Moors used copper to decorate their swords in order for it to have the potency to penetrate the magical defences of the enemy and at the same time, protect the bearer from the offensive charms of the adversary. The Tuareg considers iron an impure metal and therefore neutralise it by encrusting it with copper (Herbert, 1973). In other places, the reddish colour of copper endeared the material to the people. The redness of the metal is associated with the life-giving power of blood, which is usually likened to the placental blood, the female force, or a symbol of social transition. The redness of copper also presents the material with another attractive quality, which is its reflective capability. This is particularly important when copper is used for ritual objects; the surface of the objects is kept clean in order to reflect sunlight. This reflective ability suggests aggressiveness and power (Bisson, 2000). These attributes, Bisson (2000) further asserts, present copper as a metaphor of political and social power in many African societies. Another interesting example of the ritual importance of copper can be seen among the Ashanti. The Ashanti are known for abundant expressions in gold, but the Ashanti royal skeleton was buried in a hammered copper coffin with its treasures buried alongside in caskets made of worked copper (Herbert, 1973). Herbert further cites Jacqueline Delange stating, the royal *kuduo*, which is the material support for the soul and the focus of the cult of vitality, is a brass receptacle. The *kuduo* is one of the most sacred objects of the Ashanti kingship, along with the Ashanti royal stool (Herbert, 1973).

When enquiries were made from the interviewees why the alloys of copper -- brass and bronze -- were so venerated among the Yoruba, Falore reported that they possessed certain physical attributes that endeared them to the people of old -- particularly the royals. He claims as told by his forebears, the royals coveted the metal for its non-corrosiveness and rarity in the Yoruba country. This will lend credence still to the notion that the material was brought into the Yoruba country from other places. The idea that a material is not only valuable, but rare in the area, presented a default position for cupreous substances in ancient Yoruba country. That the royals were endeared to the material on the basis of its non-corrosiveness and consequent interminable beauty is one thing, this study however furthers this thought by suggesting that the some worth exaggerated qualities of cuprous materials by the ancient Yoruba is premised on its rarity in the Yoruba area at the time. It will be plausible to assert that the royal class in ancient Yoruba country will very certainly make a big deal about materials from foreign lands. One who possesses such rare material or substances is naturally more revered by the people and this was altogether beneficial for power and control. Baba Oluyemi corroborates this point of the non-corrosiveness of brass stating that the ability to maintain its appearance of beauty and richness, not given to too much degradation over time and rather easy to manage -- just by scouring with a dry coarse cloth to revitalise it sheen -- made it a material of choice for the ruling class. Also, a combination of fate further launched the metal into repute. Its rarity as earlier mentioned, combined with the outstanding craftsmanship of the first casters



presented the alloys in the most glorifying light as people would often see the metal for the first time in form of a naturalistic sculpture. The sculptural piece, often in the image of a royal person or culture hero, would look nothing like they have seen before on account of the presentation of realism that the alloys afforded over clay or wood. Such experiences may have fuelled the imagination of the people and influenced their interpretation of the metal's physical properties in a way that it later attained spiritual vigour in their minds. This gave the alloys value and further disposed it to being widely used in religious context and veneration. It is not uncommon for the Yorùbá, and many other African tribes, to venerate any item or phenomenon that presents a mystery seemingly beyond their immediate understanding. Examples may be found in nature as this provides ample mysteries that apparently transcends logic. The rainbow (*Osunmare*), the Sun (*Orun*), the forest (*Igbo*), mountains (*Oke* or *Ekiti*) are some notable examples with strong religious followership.

Therefore, one may hypothesize that the beauty in appearance, resistance to rust and other physical qualities (easily yielding and easy to work) of copper and its alloys are responsible for its significance to priest and royals alike. Like copper, bronze and brass also have special religious and ritual significance in the lives of many African tribes. Brass (*ide*) for instance, is particularly an important material medium for the *Ogboni* cult in the Yorùbá nation (Williams, 1973). The *Ogboni edan* (Ogboni staff) is usually cast in brass—though the *edan* is also made in other metals like iron, the brass *edan* represents the standard. Brass is also associated with the Obalufon deity of the Yoruba tribe. The unchanging quality of brass is eulogised in an *ifa* verse which records the predicament of Ifa at old age and his transformation into ethereal form (Adepegba, 1991).

Mo fori bale mo diwin  
Mo fori bale mo diwin  
Ikan kii mude,  
Ororo i roje  
Mo fori bale mo diwin

Translates

I bow down, humbled, I am now a spirit  
I bow down, humbled, I am now a spirit  
White ants never devour brass,  
Worms cannot eat lead  
I bow down, humbled, I am now a spirit.

The verse above suggests the eternity of brass in a manner that underscores a godly quality. This concept carries such potency in an era where wood, clay and soft stone were the prime medium for artistic expression. The queer interpretations of the physical attributes of copper and consequent translation of these attributes into a symbol of potent ritual force deepened copper's positioning as an anomalous material among the Yoruba.

## 5. Conclusion

From the review of both secondary and primary data collected, a central pattern emerged. The core reason for the veneration of brass and bronze among the ancient Yoruba bordered around the generous interpretation of the physical attributes the materials possessed which was not to be seen in other metals such as iron. Further to this is the rarity of the materials in the ancient Yoruba country. The combination of these factors coupled with the brilliance of presentation in naturalistic sculpture created a repute for cuprous metals in the area – the respect and reverence given to brass and bronze continued to grow all through the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century and the decline of skilled artisan perhaps due to the itinerant nature of the first craftsmen ultimately affected the continued use of the materials on the scale and status it was known for in the early era. In recent times, the practise brass and bronze casting is only but a shadow of its former glory, though among the traditionalist, the reverence and preference for the materials has remained unchanged.

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