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## Preservation and Conservation of Yoruba Cultural Artifacts: The Place of Nigerian Libraries and Archives

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### Abstract

*There had been losses of a lot of invaluable Yoruba cultural artefacts and sources of oral information to ignorance, inferno, burglary, and sabotage, biological and chemical "attackers" and to other forms and agents of annihilation. Some of these losses are avoidable and therefore preventable. These avoidable losses have had and will continue to have unquantifiable effects on the rich and cherished traditional values because the richness of the Yoruba cultural values is not unconnected with their cultural artefacts and oral information. The paper briefly examines the origin of Yoruba race and chronicles the history and growth of libraries and their antecedents - writing and printing. Besides, the concerns of this paper are the subjects of preservation and conservation and the dangers inherent in the insecurity of the traditional artefacts. Recommendations that could improve the situation, especially by addressing the problems of gross under-utilization of opportunities provided by libraries and archives in the preservation and conservation of Yoruba artefacts and oral information were offered.*

## Introduction

The Yoruba, whose preservation and conservation of her cultural artefacts are being extensively focused here, are according to King (1986), ancient traditional people of tropical Africa and the biggest religious groups in the continent. They constitute an integral part of Nigeria, the most populous black nation of the world. They also have considerable numbers in Benin (formerly Dahomey). The descendants of Yoruba are also found in Togo, Brazil, Cuba, Sierra Leone, Jamaica, the United States, North Africa and the Islamic world (King, 1988). Yoruba also, no doubt, pull a significant weight in the world civilization.

Geographically, the Yoruba occupy the rain forest and lagoon country of West Africa from Benin (Dahomey) to the beginning of the creeks of the Niger Delta; South to North, from the sea up into the savannah grasslands. The immense contributions of the Yoruba to art, social order, religion and to cultural development and growth cannot be overemphasized. It was observed that the most prolific in art of all tribes and statistically speaking, a tribe that has produced more sculptures per thousand persons than any other tribes is Yoruba (Awolalu, 1979). As to the origin of the Yoruba, Jemiriye (1998) agrees that there are so many theories and stories which have been presented, interpreted, accepted or rejected by different authors. However, he posited that the most supported story of the Yoruba origin is that the Yoruba originated in the Middle East which is somewhere around Upper Egypt in North Africa or Mecca in Saudi Arabia and from there migrated to the South and then got settled in their different present places. They were said to have been led by Oduduwa who utilized his superior force to overwhelm the autochthonous people they met in the area and consequently established a new dynasty. But a cosmogonic origin authority speaks of the pluvial period when Eledumare

(Supreme Being) sent immortal messengers to the surface of the earth to create the world. Obatala was at the head of the party and in their possession were pieces of iron, lump of sand and a chicken with which they were to create the world. On their way Obatala got drunk after taken excess palm wine and lost his paraphernalia of leadership. Oduduwa thereafter took the opportunity of Obatala's unconsciousness and led the party on. Before their landing, the pieces of Iron and lump of sand were set down, and chicken was placed to spread the sand. Ile-Ife was pinpointed as that place where the immortal messengers first landed. What is germane here from the versions presented is that Oduduwa was identified and established as the father of the

Yoruba nation (Adesoji, 2000).

### **History, Growth and Roles of Library and Archives in the Preservation and Conservation of Yoruba Cultural Artefacts**

The word "Library" is derived from Latin "liber" which simply means book. It signifies a place set aside for reading or reference and for collection of books. According to Encyclopedia Americana, a library is described as a collection of books and other forms of records housed, organized and interpreted to meet broad and varying needs of people for information, knowledge, recreation and aesthetic enjoyment.

According to Ollé (1971), libraries are as old as civilization. It can as well be said that they are as old as the arts of writing and printing for these are the two major developments (antecedents) that proceeded and greatly influenced the institution of libraries. In the ancient times, as early as 3000 B.C records on clay tablets were stored in a temple in the Babylonian town of Nippur and the earliest known type of writing was the cuneiform by the Sumerians. The cuneiform were wedge-shaped impressions made on wet clay, depicting daily events. The clay tablets were then allowed to dry and stored, most of the time, in kings' palaces. Assurbanipal, an ancient king of Assyria was the first to have a library of this type who in the 7th Century B.C. had stored and organized clay tablets of which up to 20,000 have survived (Olaosun, 2007). The consultations of these earliest writings were strictly restricted to the kings, princes and princesses and nobility or at the order of any of them. After this, was another form of Egyptian writing called hieroglyphics. They were made on the pith of papyrus reeds which were abundant in the Nile valley. The hieroglyphics consists of pictures or symbols representing wars, worship or business dealings.

In Asia Minor and Greece, monastic libraries developed about the 5th Century AD. Also the Arabic and Moorish rulers in the Middle East established libraries and educational institutions in the Middle Ages, and it was during this period that monastic libraries gradually grew and eventually spread to colleges and universities. The historical development of libraries in China, India, North Africa, Asia Minor and among the ancient Greek also shows that the institution of libraries has a very long history and that libraries are as old as civilization (Ajibero, 1993). The history of libraries in West Africa and by implication in Nigeria is however, not as old, comprehensive and deep as that of China, India, North Africa, Asia Minor and among the ancient Greeks. One of the oldest manuscripts of West African origin is

perhaps an 18th Century copy of the Koran which was written on Vellum and cased in embroidered leather and taken from Ghana to the Danish National Library in Copenhagen (Ajibero, 1993). Although, there may be other versions to the histories of these historical developments, the fact remains that the institution of libraries emerged from the arts of writing and printing and these are the very basis of the world civilization. The emergence of libraries also brought about the ultimate methods of preservation and conservation of the writings and printings for the next generations. It was right at the time that the writings were been stored in the kings' palaces and temples that efforts were as well been simultaneously made and geared towards ensuring that they were well preserved and conserved by the available means of the period. It is good to have a very sound policy of collection development on how to acquire useful information and archival materials. It is as well a good thing to adopt standardized, consistent and easy-to-understand methods of materials' organization. Perhaps, what seems to be most cogent is how to preserve and conserve these information-bearing materials or documents for the next generations to assess. Of what use are our objects of cultural values and archival documents if after making gigantic efforts at acquiring and organizing them in temples, palaces and local museums and eventually got stolen or got lost to careless and avoidable inferno and to some other cheap agents of annihilation?

Ignorantly, preservation and conservation of materials, monuments or objects have erroneously been used interchangeably in so many literatures. Literarily, the two may be synonymous in meaning. For instance, a material may be preserved in its original form while the same material may be conserved in some other forms other than the original. The goal of preservation is to ensure that the information or the object of cultural importance survives and made available in an accessible and usable form for as long as it is wanted. Conservation, on the other hand, is an activity subsumed under preservation. It implies the active use of preventive measures or processes of repair of damaged materials to ensure the continued existence of individual items (Internal Encyclopedia of LIS, 1997). Some authorities have traced the beginning of preservation and conservation of materials to the Age of Enlightenment and the discoveries of Pompeii and Herculaneum. They claimed and buttressed *it* that preservation and conservation are also as old as civilization [ALA- World-Encyclopedia].

### **Yoruba cultural artefacts defined**

The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language defines culture as

the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought. It could as well mean the patterns, traits, and products considered as the expression of a particular period, class, community, or population, It could further mean the predominating attitude and behaviour that characterized the functioning of a group or organization or the intellectual and artistic activity and the works produced by it. On the other hand artefacts or artifacts could be considered as objects produced or shaped by human craft, especially a tool, weapon, or ornament of archaeological or historical interest. Therefore, cultural artifacts could be pinned down to mean any kinds of man-made or man-produced crafts, archaeological and historical objects or works which, in all facets, portray the behavioural patterns, traits, beliefs and thoughts of a people. They are the crafts or art works that help to mirror the beliefs and traditions and other ways of life of some people, community or nation.

Some of these invaluable cultural artefacts have unfortunately found their ways outside the continent via sabotaging efforts of the keepers or custodians. At the Esie National Museum in Nigeria there was a rude shock at the discovery that some African cultural artefacts there have been smuggled to some Asian countries after conniving with the keepers of these artefacts obviously for some monetary gains (The Guardian, Jan. 8, 2008). Similarly, a bandit of armed robbers visited the traditional palace of Olokuku of Okuku in Odo-Otin Local Government Area, Osun State, Nigeria, in the dead of the night, woke up the monarch from his royal sleep and asked him, at gun point, to lead them to where all the artefacts, traditional costumes and crowns and other traditional valuables were kept. Everything was carted away including his staff of office. A similar palace robbery was effected at the palace of Olobagun of Obagun in Ifedore Local Government of Osun State (The Nation, July 26, 2008). The list of these palace robberies and unquantifiable losses of the cultural artefacts to other agents of destruction is endless. It may not be an overstatement to submit that the cultural artefacts and other traditional story-telling heritages and sources are now the targets of both hoodlums and other destructive agents.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Prevention, an adage says, is better than cure. The fact remains that the cost of preserving and conserving or protecting these invaluable traditional values cannot be up to the cost of tracking down those ones that have already found their ways to other continent or totally got damaged or seriously malhandled. In this paper, a brief attempt has been made to fix the place of the Yoruba

traditional artifacts in the cultural values and richness of the Yoruba people. The dangers inherent in exposing these artifacts to claws of agents of annihilation and the needs to jealously safeguard these objects of cultural values were mentioned. Conspicuously, certain things that are not in place are the salvaging policies, methods and means of preserving and conserving the artifacts. The conclusion reached is that appropriate steps have not been taken and appreciable efforts have not been made to really conserve and preserve the invaluable traditional artifacts by ways of salvaging and keeping them in place to be able to continue to tell the Yoruba traditional stories. Libraries (librarians) and archives (archivists) have vital roles to play to win the battle.

In view of the foregoing, it is recommended that:

- (i) modern royal libraries and archives be built in palaces with a 24-hour security surveillance using new technologies to keep watch over the traditional artefacts. The royal libraries and archives are necessary since some of these traditional artefacts are not allowed, by traditions, to leave their royal domains. The efforts to mount the 24-hour surveillance should be a concerted one involving the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, the community vigilance committee and the Nigeria Library Association (NLA);
- (ii) fire fighting equipment, as part of the security measures, should be procured for the royal libraries and archives. These should include extinguishers, hose reels, sprinkles, alarm bells and smokes;
- (iii) technical librarians and archivists who are experienced in the modern methods of preservation and conservation should be made to man the royal libraries;
- (iv) there should be massive and aggressive hunt for the artifacts already carted away to European, American and Asian Museums. The international organizations such as the United Nations Organisations, African Union and the Economic Community of West African States in collaboration with the International Police should rise up to the occasion. These Yoruba cultural artefacts should be arrested wherever they may be in the other continents and repatriated to their African homes;
- (v) there should be stiff punishments for saboteurs who may want to connive with foreigners to cart away more artefacts. Such saboteurs

should henceforth be treated like cocaine pushers and kidnapers;

(vi) there should be a National Policy on the preservation and conservation of the traditional artefacts to be formulated by the National Assembly; and

(vii) Finally, there should be re-orientation about Yoruba traditional consciousness. This will help to send signals to members of the Yoruba nation that their traditional artefacts are sacred and germane to knowing and to telling their traditional histories to the next generations.

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