

42. The forum was planned for the day after the opening of the exhibition (April 14, 1996) to hear and discuss concerns common to many Khoisan groups. It was attended by over seven hundred people. Delegates from the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa (WIMSA) included people from the Kuru Development Trust in Ghanzi, and from Nyae Nyae, Bagani, and the Aminuis Corridor 17 in Namibia; the South African San Institute (SASI), the Griqua National Conference and South African Griqua Research and Development (SAGRAD), the Khoisan Representative Council, which has Khwe, !Xun, and Griqua representatives; the Khomeni of the southern Kalahari; people from the Richtersveld; the !Hurikamma Cultural Movement, and the rightist Kleurling Weerstandsbeweging (KWB), the Coloured Resistance Movement of the Western Cape.

43. See Yvette Abrahams, "Miscast," *South African Review of Books* 44 (1996): 15–16, Rustum Kozain, "Miscast," *ibid.*, 14–15, and miscellaneous letters in vol. 45 of the same, including my responses.

44. Smitsdrift is a camp of !Xun and Khwe communities in the Cape created for ex-mercenaries who worked for the South African army in Namibia and Angola. The representative for the Smitsdrift community at the forum was a Dutch Reformed minister, Mario Mahongo. His (and others') objections to nude casts were grounded in contemporary Christian objections to exposing the naked body.

45. Sixpense Hunter at the forum held after the opening of the *Miscast* exhibit.

46. Morphet, "Miscast," 96.

47. Paul Lane, "Breaking the Mould? Exhibiting Khoisan in Southern African Museums," *Anthropology Today* 12, 5 (1996): 7.

48. The writer continues: "It is very difficult to retain the memory of the beauty of a skin bag or the sublimity of face, in the context of the medical instrument on display and the detailed instructions for cutting off and preserving a Bushmen's penis or ear for posting to the 'scientist.'"

49. See, e.g., Steven Robins in the *Sunday Independent*, May 26, 1996, 23.

Chapter 11

Omada Art at the Crossroads of Colonialisms

Paula Ben-Amos Girshick

This essay focuses on the court art of the Edo Kingdom of Benin in present-day Nigeria during the last half of the nineteenth century, a period of historical transition when that kingdom, an imperial power in its own right, fell to British colonial domination. It addresses the questions: what are the artistic implications of such a transition from colonizer to colonized? And, how—and in what artistic contexts—are issues of colonial power and identity explored?

The answers to these questions will emerge from the analysis of the social position and artistic production of one group of palace artists, the Omada, an organization of young men who were personal and domestic servants of the king. Their official duty was to carry the state sword, or *ada*, when accompanying the king in his public appearances. In this position, as the late Ovia Idah explained, "The Omada were to the Oba [king] like the angels to Jesus."¹ It was forbidden for them to leave the palace grounds without the Oba. When not escorting the king, they performed general maintenance jobs, such as sweeping the place, and in their spare time, they played at wrestling or learned how to carve. The Omada rather than the better-known guild carvers (Igbesanmwan) or casters (Igun Eronmwon) are the focus of my analysis because they occupied a unique interstitial position within palace art production and this marginality provided them—and no other Benin court artists—with the space to explore the issues of power, domination, and identity that are central to the colonial experience, whether of the colonizers or the colonized. As Homi Bhabha has argued, it is those "'in-between' spaces that provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."²

Although Homi Bhabha's intent is to investigate the interstices *between* cultures (and subcultures), it is equally valuable, I would argue, to examine *internal* differ-

ences, that is, to look within one culture at the in-between spaces where identities, interests, and values are negotiated and strategies of representation are formulated.

The last half of the nineteenth century, a period that encompassed the reigns of Obas Adolo (ca. 1850) and Ovorranmwun (ca. 1889), was a time of crisis for the Benin kingdom. The net of control it had cast over its tributaries began to unravel. At the same time, the British imperial presence was threatening the long-standing trade patterns and, indeed, the very sovereignty, of Benin and its neighbors. In this time of transition, as we shall see, it was the Omada artists—and not those in the guilds—who expressed the complexities and ambiguities of Benin's precarious position.

FROM COLONIZER TO COLONIZED: BENIN IN THE LAST HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Any discussion of colonialism in relation to Benin cannot be limited to the moment of British conquest—February 18, 1897—and its immediate aftermath. Instead, it must take into account that imperial domination was not a new experience for Benin or its neighbors in that region of the Guinea Coast. And it must recognize that the British capture of Benin was the outcome of a colonizing process that actually had its beginnings forty years earlier.

From at least the fifteenth century on, the Benin state was organized around warfare and tribute extraction based on its superior military organization, political power, and economic wealth. The exact nature and extent of Benin's rule varied over time and through space.³ In early nineteenth-century Lagos, for example, Benin suzerainty involved the collection of annual tribute and control over the investiture of rulers and chiefs but little interference beyond that.⁴ Conquest was an accepted, ongoing aspect of the political system. According to the local Benin historian Jacob Egharevba, it was the custom for kings to declare war in the third year after their succession to the throne.⁵ Ruling princes of the empire who refused to pledge their allegiance at that time were considered rebels, and war was declared against them and their towns. In Benin oral traditions, the commencement of their empire-building was associated with the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century Oba Ewuare, who was credited with establishing the political structure of the kingdom and giving it its basic nature and divine underpinning. Thus, warfare and conquest were built into the state structure and were a key element of the kingdom's self-definition.⁶

By the nineteenth century, however, the political focus of the empire had shifted to maintenance and consolidation rather than conquest.⁷ The kings who ruled then—Oba Osemwede (ca. 1816–51), Oba Adolo (ca. 1850–88), and Oba Ovorranmwun (ca. 1889–97)—were faced with a serious erosion of their political power by other local polities as well as by the British. At the beginning of the century, Benin trade with the interior was disrupted by civil wars in the Yoruba kingdoms to the west and north and by Itsekiri assumption of control over the

river approaches to Benin territory to the south and east. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Muslim emirate of Bida raided the northern territories of Benin for slaves and forced them to stop paying tribute to Benin. By the 1880s, Benin armies were preoccupied with villages on the northwestern and southeastern borders of the kingdom that were in a state of rebellion. On all sides, then, the political and economic control of the Oba was increasingly weakened.

The greatest threat to Benin was the British, whose ever-escalating encroachment from the 1840s on menaced the livelihood and well-being of the kingdom. Initially, British interest in the area centered on the slave trade and, after its abolition, on palm oil. As the trade expanded during the 1840s, the Benin River became an important center and traders living on the coast lobbied the British government to establish a permanent representative, resulting in the appointment of a consular official in 1849. Two years later, the British established a protectorate in Lagos and thus ended Benin's authority over that polity. As an outcome of the Berlin conference of 1885, the British were granted a "sphere of influence" that covered the coast between Cameroon and Lagos Colony as well as the middle and lower Niger (under charter to the Royal Niger Company), effectively surrounding the southwestern and southeastern flanks of the kingdom. The establishment of the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1891, followed by its ominous renaming as the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1895, brought more administrators and a sizable constabulary.

The drive was clearly on to control more territory inland. A station was set up at Sapele, right on Benin's doorstep, and its resident officer went to Benin City in 1892 and successfully negotiated a treaty placing the Oba under the protection of the British Government. As Alan F. C. Ryder points out, the treaty clearly established "a new acquisitive interest in Benin by the Protectorate."⁸ At the same time that they were placing themselves under British protection, the Oba and chiefs could observe the British taking forceful action against independent polities in the area, from their subjugation of the independent Yoruba state of Ijebu-Ode to the overthrow of powerful local leaders such as Chief Jaja of Opobo and Chief Nana of Brohimi. In the 1890s, the British Foreign Office was clearly stating its interest in annexing Benin.⁹ All this finally culminated in February 1897, when a British expeditionary force captured the capital and sent Oba Ovorranmwun into exile.¹⁰

The processes that led to Benin's colonization were thus set in motion at least forty years before the actual imposition of British rule. The issues that colonialism raises were consequently also present before 1897: questions of domination and subordination, power and powerlessness, culture and control. Even though these issues had been part of Benin's version of colonial domination, they took on a new light as Benin faced its own probable conquest. The handwriting was on the wall, but who was going to see it? The answer to this question lies in Homi Bhabha's suggestion, put forward at the beginning of this essay, that in moments of historical transformation, one should look to the margins.¹¹ In the main part of this essay, I explore the centers and margins of nineteenth-century Benin court art in order to demonstrate that it was at the margins of royal artistic production that

the handwriting was read and inscribed, that questions of cultural difference were raised, and that established boundaries were challenged and realigned.

CENTERS AND MARGINS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BENIN COURT ART

At the center of nineteenth-century artistic production were the hereditary craft guilds: the wood and ivory carvers, Igbesanmwan, the brass casters, Igun Eronmwon, the iron smiths, Igun Ematon, the weavers, Owina n'Ido, the carpenters, Owina, and the leather workers, Isekpokin.¹² These guilds traced their origins back in dynastic time, some to the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century warrior kings, others to those who laid the foundations of the kingdom itself. In the case of the carvers' guild, some traditions ascribe its founding to Ogiso Ere, the second ruler in a previous dynasty. Members of the craft guilds lived in wards adjacent to one another not far from the palace. They shared a common artisan status in Benin society, higher than that of farmers because of their special skills and knowledge, their service to the Oba (and his economic support of them), and their urban residence. However, the prestige of artisans was never equal to that of chiefs, priests, or war leaders, because they had to work with their hands.

Guild members saw themselves as devoted servants of the monarch, rooted in the life of the court. Their monopoly of artistic production for the king, and through him the aristocracy of chiefs and priests, was maintained in principle by the threat of death. In reality, this threat was rarely carried out; instead, the monopoly was maintained by the practice of adopting into the guild anyone found in violation.

Internally, guilds were divided into age grades. In the carvers' guild—the focus of this discussion—there were three grades: the youngest, the Iroghae, consisting of young men just learning their craft, who performed menial tasks but were not allowed to go with their elders to the palace to perform ritual duties for the king; the middle grade, Urhonigbe, consisting of the young men who did the actual carving and as a result of entering this grade were introduced to *itaemwin*, secret palace activities; and, lastly, the senior grade, Ekhaemwe-Oba, consisting of the title holders, the senior men who held one of the three titles possessed by the guild. These titles were based on appointment by the Oba. The individual who possessed the highest ranking of these was the leader of the guild and his home was the religious center for the members. The shrine located in his home was devoted to the patron deity, Ugbe n'Owewe, the ancestral protector of the guild. The grades of Igbesanmwan were not age grades in the strictest sense but were a religious-political hierarchy through which individuals advanced in relation to their ritual preparedness and the willingness of the Oba to promote them.

Although they owned and managed farms in the villages around Benin City, the members of Igbesanmwan viewed carving as their full-time occupation. Carving was considered to be "in the blood" of all males born into the guild and every young

man was expected to carve. A newly born male child was taken before the group ancestral shrine by his parents, who prayed to the patron deity, "Whatever act of carving is taught in Igbesanmwan, this child must know it." For the members of the guild, carving was a ritual activity inspired by their patron deity, Ugbe n'Owewe, who came to them in dreams and taught them designs. Each act of carving was a sacred act for which the individual had to be prepared through ritual cleansing.

The members of Igbesanmwan saw themselves as possessing a set of patterns that had been handed down from generation to generation by Ugbe n'Owewe. These patterns were what set them apart from other craft groups in society, particularly the Omada, and they were dependent on their protective spirit to provide and maintain their inspiration. They were similarly dependent on the Oba and felt that they existed solely to serve him. They relied on him not only for economic recompense for their carving but for their social standing, since any respect that they had within the social system came from their being servants of the king.

The carvings, castings, and other art forms created by the guild were used variously to establish communication with the spirit world, commemorate important personages and events, and decorate shrines, houses, and ceremonial attire. Their use was strictly regulated by sumptuary laws, which provided the support for a complex hierarchical aristocratic system. As I have explained elsewhere:

Looked at synchronically, possession of art forms by an individual was a visual objectification of his position in the ranking system. Looked at diachronically, over the life time of this same individual, such possession was an expression of his progress towards self-completion. [Grant] McCracken has suggested (1988: 88) that we look at consumption as a "cultural project", the purpose of which is to complete the self—or, to put it in terms more congenial to Edo culture, to fulfill one's social destiny. It was through the possession and display of art objects that individuals attained the goals of social achievement they had set for themselves.¹³

Thus, the objects created by the guild artists were central to the social system and to the individual's sense of where he was in that system.

At the margins were the Omada, a term that is usually translated as "pages." These were young men who served as personal and domestic servants of the king. In contrast to the case of the guilds, oral historical information about the Omada is hard to come by in Benin. During my research in 1966, I was unable to find traditions about when the Omada organization was created and, especially, when its members began to carve. Informants claim only that the Omada started carving "a very long time ago."¹⁴ However, it was possible to utilize the family traditions of ex-Omada and chiefs to establish that Omada carving existed during the period that is the focus of this essay—the reigns of Oba Adolo (ca. 1850) and Ovorranwmen (ca. 1889–97). This lack of any traditions of origin is significant. In Benin society, nearly every important organization, and every culturally meaningful object has its own story of origin, including—in fact, especially—guild art forms.¹⁵ The absence of Omada history is a clear indication of their marginal artistic position.

This marginality or interstitial position can be seen in reference to three central components of the palace art system: the Oba, the chiefs, and the carvers' guild.

The Omada and the Oba

Recruitment to the Omada in the nineteenth century was open to all Edo youth. Boys were usually entered by their parents between the ages of six and ten, when they would otherwise have been trained by their fathers to farm or follow a craft. Boys were sent for a variety of reasons: to foster good relationships with the king, to promote advancement for a child from a disadvantaged family, or to provide a solution to family conflicts such as custody disputes or cases of child neglect. Boys whose behavior was deviant and uncontrollable were given to the Omada for disciplinary action, much as such boys in American society may be sent to military academies. There is some evidence as well, however, that rulers of subject states sent their sons to be "finished" at the Benin court.¹⁶ In short, the composition of the Omada at any given time might be heterogeneous in terms of its members' socioeconomic backgrounds, urban or rural origins, and possibly even ethnic ancestry.

Being inducted into a period of servitude placed Omada in a marginal position, not as absolute slaves, but as persons no longer rooted in their own kin and neighborhood. Their social definition at that point totally depended upon the king. Their marginality was further emphasized by the fact that they were expected to go about naked during their time in the palace. Upon entrance to the Omada, youths pledged a sacred oath of loyalty to the king, swearing on the altars of Ogun, the god of iron and the enforcer of strict oaths, and on that of the Oba's ancestors, never to harm anyone in the palace and to keep all that they learned a secret on threat of death. Once this oath was taken, Omada were expected to be totally loyal to the king; in fact, during their stay in the palace, they were expected not to "serve any juju" (in other words, venerate any deity), as this would interfere with their total commitment. Some Omada, however, secretly made sacrifices to Ogun whenever they carved, in order to keep their tools "cool."

When youths had time off from their royal duties, they were expected to keep busy and some were instructed in carving by more senior members. The learning situation was similar to the modern classroom. There were no ritual preparations or prayers before commencing carving, nor did they work in isolation, like the guild. In fact, sons of chiefs who had accompanied their fathers to the palace sometimes joined in the training sessions. After a group of novices had been in the palace for a few years, the king could request that the senior members give them a carving proficiency test. Those who showed sufficient skill were freed from further learning and became established experts, which meant they were qualified to teach others and could also accept commissions from the Oba and chiefs. The economic benefits that accrued to these carvers in the form of payment by the king and chiefs in goods, cowries, and food was seen as an important way to accumulate capital for

later use in purchasing a title or otherwise advancing one's status. Thus, as the late Oba Akenzua II explained, "Things were sold out by the Omada long before the arrival of the Europeans."¹⁷

The competition implicit in the system of examination was an important mechanism for maintaining the quality of carvings. In the guild, members felt responsible for upholding the good name of their organization, and the quality of their work was controlled by the assignment of the objects to experts and by the criticism of the elders. The Omada had no need to keep up a reputation as good carvers; their concern was to be good servants of the king. The motivation for acquiring proficiency in carving, then, was the hope of monetary reward and the chance to attract the attention of the king, and these could only be achieved through success in competition. In contrast, Igbesanmwan was a family organization whose relationships were based on kinship. For them, service to the Oba was a ritual duty, not a means to advancement. The belief that all could carve by divine inspiration militated against the development of a competitive spirit, as did the religious nature of the carving activity itself.

In their capacity as palace servants, the Omada were well situated to improve their status. Occasionally, a superior carver would come under the personal auspices of the Oba and would receive particularly valuable assignments, and upon leaving the Omada would receive a minor title, Oba's craftsman (*owin'oba*). But whether or not they received this special attention, all Omada benefited from the king's obligation to set them up well upon their release from service. Graduation from the Omada, a ceremony called "clothing the Omada," also initiated them into the Ibierugha, the initial grade within the Iweguae palace association, which was the preliminary step for moving up in the palace hierarchy. Once out of the Omada, men rarely carved again. Instrumentality was at the heart of Omada art production and thus ensured its marginality. With the explicit requirement that Omada "not serve any juju," their creations were removed from the sphere of creativity that derived from and served supernatural powers. From the standpoint of the Oba and palace, carving was a way to keep idle hands busy and at the same time acquire attractive decorative objects; from that of the Omada, carving was a means to the end of social advancement.

The Omada and the Chiefs

The Omada were able to take advantage of their position to maneuver in the tangle of political alliances and enmities, both among chiefs and between chiefs and the king. As pages, they functioned as "gatekeepers," controlling access to the king. Moreover, the Omada were allowed to move around throughout the entire palace, whereas chiefs were restricted to the quarters belonging to their particular palace association. They therefore had access to a wide range of people and activities, and gained possession of valuable knowledge. By offering gifts of their carvings and their services, they were able to develop relationships that would aid them after they left the palace.

Thus, politically astute carvers could use both their art and their access to negotiate themselves into positions that the status hierarchy did not normally allow.

Omada and Igbesanmwun

It is generally believed by members of both the Omada and Igbesanmwun that the Omada initially learned carving from guild artists. Because of their freedom of movement, they were able to observe the guild members carving in their special workroom in the palace. Although observation is an acceptable mode of learning in Benin, it is not always favored by those being watched, and as a consequence the relationship between pages and guild members was fraught with tension. Guild members complained to me in conversation that the Omada had stolen their designs, while ex-Omada argued that by virtue of their royal service, they were entitled to utilize whatever they had learned in the palace.

COURT ART AND ICONOGRAPHY, CA. 1850–1897

Guild Carving. In the mid nineteenth century, guild carvers created decorated royal altar tusks, ivory horns, gongs, figurines, bracelets, and other ornaments and wooden commemorative heads, altars of the hand, boxes, rattle staffs, commemorative heads, and other shrine objects. On decorated objects, the majority of figures are usually in frontal, static poses in a symmetrical, often hieratic composition. The central figure is the king or a particularly high-ranking chief, queen mother, or priest, flanked by lesser chiefs and retainers and surrounded by symbols of power (ceremonial swords, leopards, crocodiles, etc.). The monarch is always represented in full coral bead regalia. When Europeans appear, often in profile, they are depicted in sixteenth-century Portuguese attire and shown in positions of support for the monarchy, recalling the time when Benin so benefited from the trade and military assistance of the Portuguese.

Royal altar tusks—the epitome of nineteenth-century guild art—abound with images of power. Some refer to the occult powers and divine ancestry of kings, especially Obas Ozolua and Esigie, the great warriors of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; to palace ritual specialists like Osa and Osuan, who controlled devastating supernatural forces to harm enemies of the state; and powerful symbolic animals such as the leopard and the elephant.¹⁸ Guild art was aimed at the promulgation and reinforcement of royal hegemonic ideology. Benin kings used these art forms to shape history, that is, to ensure that significant events in their own reigns and those of their ancestors would be remembered as they wished. Since Igbesanmwun carvings were created directly in response to royal commissions, and could be rejected by the king if he were not satisfied, they quite naturally reflected the concerns and political agendas of royalty, as the detail of the carving below shows. Guild art did not therefore lend itself very well to confronting the changing fortunes of the king, or the weakness of kings vis-à-vis their chiefly rivals or foreign threats.

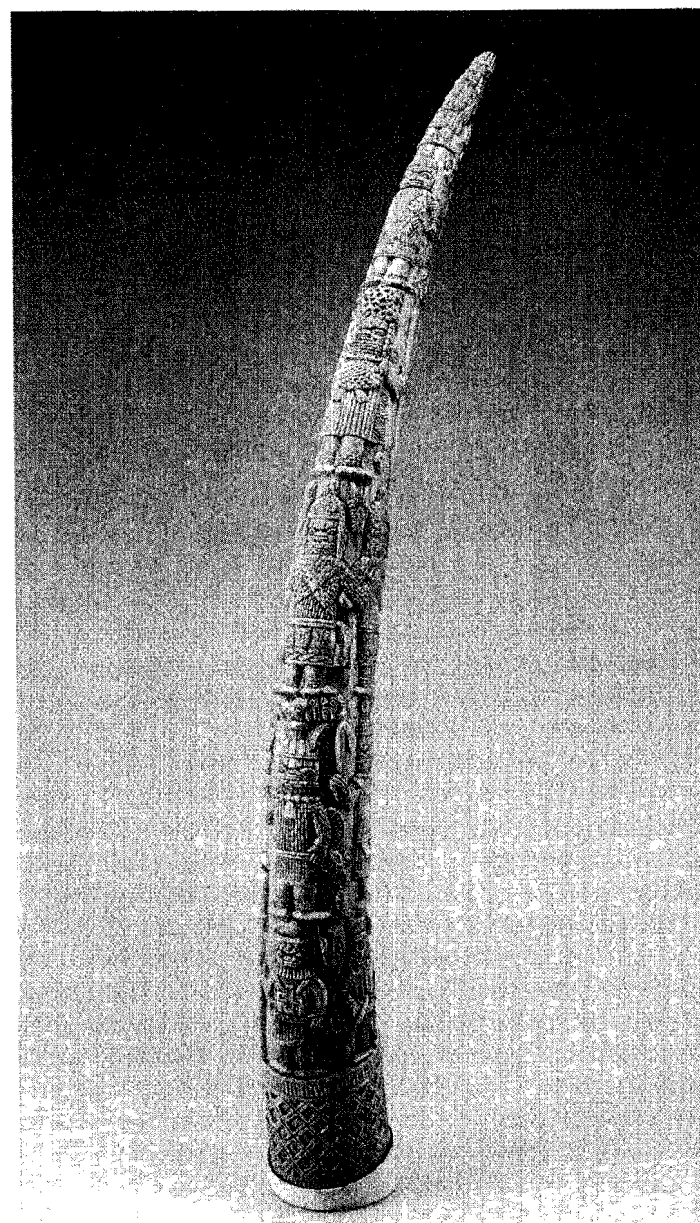


Figure 11.1. Carved royal altar tusk, late nineteenth century. 44 inches. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus Perls, 1991 (1991.17.104).

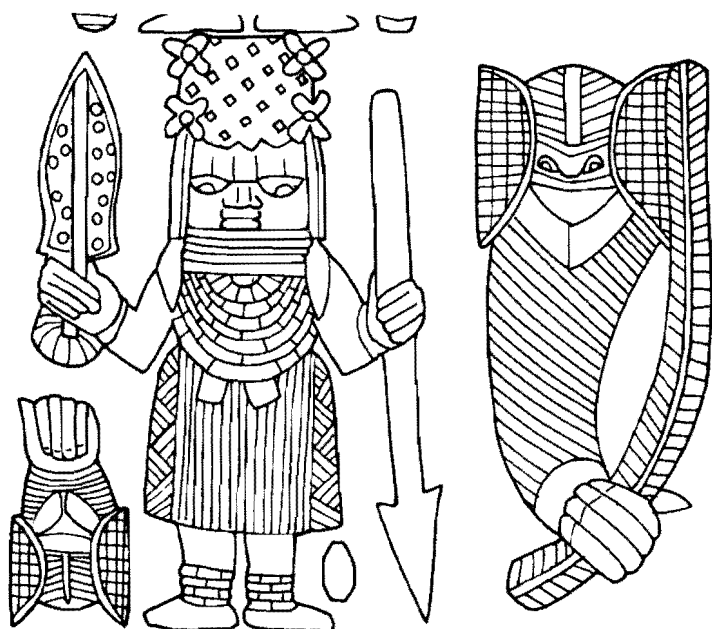


Figure 11.2. Detail of carved royal altar tusk shown in figure 11.1, showing Ozolua the Conqueror. Drawn by Joanne Wood. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Omada carving. During this same period, Omada carvers were making prestige objects, which included rectangular wood kola nut boxes, stools and chairs, beams, doors, panels, and incised coconuts and coral beads, all decorated with bas-relief designs.¹⁹ As I have pointed out elsewhere, “the relative positioning of the figures with the total carvings tends to be informal and unordered, without the strict emphasis on symmetry, balance and hieratic composition so characteristics of objects made by Igbesanmwan. Moreover, the figures themselves are frequently portrayed in profile and can be seen in poses of movement or even relaxation, while those represented on [guild-produced objects] are mainly in frontal and static positions.”²⁰

Most important, the distinctive social proportion of king to attendants is often violated, with the Oba appearing below and sometimes smaller in size than the chiefs and attendants around him; for example, on the top of a stool now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art a supporting chief looms over the Oba.²¹ While these violations of stylistic canons might derive in part from the type of training and variable skill of the Omada carvers, they also reflect a more distant and perhaps even ironic view of royal power.

To a large extent, the Omada employed the same artistic vocabulary as Igbesanmwan: Obas in full coral regalia, sometimes with mudfish legs, supportive palace

chiefs and a variety of attendants, including Omada themselves, symbolic animals and reptiles, and power objects. Yet their interstitial position—their marginal status, heterogeneous origins, and instrumental attitude toward art production—opened up a space for the Omada to create very different types of imagery from that of the guild. Kate Ezra discusses the “strange hybrids of form and imagery” in Omada carving:

The palace pages create[d] ancient, ritually sanctioned types of objects, such as the *agba* [ceremonial stool], as well as newly introduced foreign ones, such as the chair. In decorating them they [drew] on the time-honored motifs devised long ago by Igbesanmwan to express deep, philosophical concepts, but they also depict[ed] people and things that had only recently appeared in Benin, and had no spiritual connection to the concept of kingship. They often juxtapose[d] those images in odd but amusing ways, crowding them in off-beat, asymmetrical compositions. Omada works are a witty and lighthearted contrast to the solemn, tradition-bound nature of much of Benin art.²²

Indeed, their art is striking in its violation of the norms of guild art, whether casting or carving. On the Omada-made stools, boxes, and coconuts are a range of images that never appear in guild art, either because they are totally secular or because they are tabooed. Thus we find scenes from daily life: a European shopkeeper seated on a chair before a table propped up on a casket, with rows of bottles and wine glasses laid out in front of him and bolts of fabric hung above, an iron worker at a forge, a palm wine tapper, a young girl carrying a tray with food on her head.²³ This latter image is particularly interesting because on her left is a kind of metacommentary—a representation of carved rattle staffs and a commemorative head on an ancestral altar (perhaps a playful reference to the handiwork of their rivals, the Igbesanmwan guild). Even more unusual are the depictions of naked couples, in one case in the act of sexual embrace, a subject matter that never appeared in guild art.²⁴ With such images, Omada art pushed at the boundaries of the artistically permissible and thinkable.

At the same time, Omada work began to deal with the changing fortunes of the kingdom. The iconography of Omada carving, far more than that of the guild, expresses the unraveling of Benin hegemony, its political instability, and its vulnerability to British expansion. This is most evident in the depiction of Europeans, whose threatening presence loomed on the Benin horizon.²⁵ Omada art communicates a deep ambivalence toward Europeans, a mixture of enchantment with their material culture combined with distaste and even ridicule.

The Edo have a long history of contact with Europeans and their material culture; indeed, many terms for material culture in the Edo language are Portuguese loan words.²⁶ Five centuries of trade with the Portuguese was followed by trade with the Dutch, French, and English, a commerce that involved headgear, horsetails, shirts and cloaks, coral and glass beads, luxury fabrics, and brass pans and bowls. Hats and other items of regalia were incorporated into Benin guild art and were



Figure 11.3. Omada wood carving of a European shopkeeper, part of a box, 28 inches long. Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Gift of Arturo and Paul Peralta-Ramos (56.6.63 A+B).

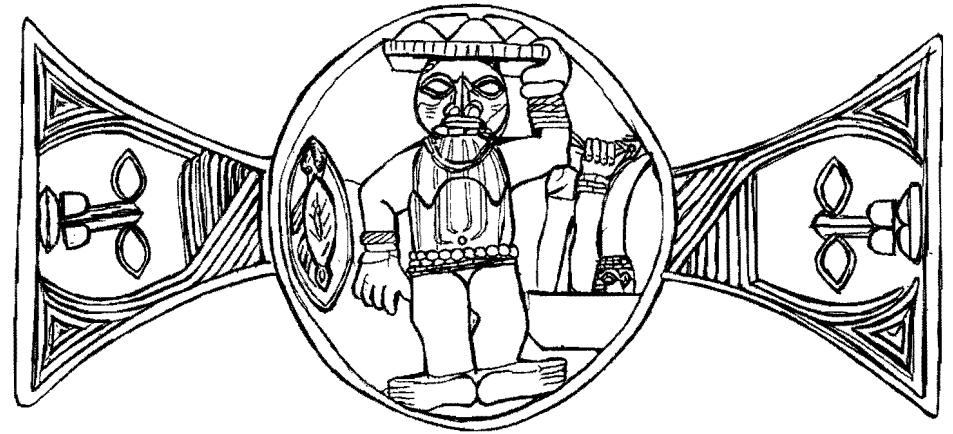


Figure 11.4. Omada carving of young girl with tray, drawn by Debra Wilkerson.

“Edoized,” as several scholars have demonstrated by tracing of European prototypes for Benin regalia.²⁷ Sixteenth-century Portuguese costumes and weapons are the primary unmediated representations of European material culture in guild art.²⁸ What is unique about nineteenth-century Omada iconography is that, for the first time, the predominant material signs of prosperity and power are imported objects: boats, barrels, parasols, bottles, jugs, coffers, tables, cannons, guns and other weapons, and other everyday European objects.²⁹ For example, Felix von Luschan illustrates a wooden box belonging to a Frau Erdmann (quite probably the wife of the German merchant whose pre-1897 photographs of the palace Benin appear in von Luschan’s book) on which are depicted two Europeans stretched out in lounge chairs, while another kneels in front of a long row of casks and boxes. Representations of writing also appear on the boxes.³⁰ The fact that these material objects now so clearly announce their origins suggests an awareness of—and even an abdication to—more powerful forces understood to come from outside the kingdom.

In Omada art, Europeans are conventionally depicted as single male figures, although in a few cases, a European stands in the hieratic pose reserved for Obas and high-ranking chiefs, between two smaller European supporters holding parasols.³¹ White men are typically depicted holding an umbrella with a crooked handle in the left hand and a curved sword in the right. Their faces, frequently bearded, often have puffy cheeks and upward slanting eyes. They are always dressed in what looks like striped pajamas, with a gun or other weapon at the waist. The only bit of variation in their costume is in their brimmed hats, which have either a rounded or a flat crown. When not lounging or sitting, they stand, perhaps atop a horse or on a crescent-shaped boat.



Figure 11.5. Omada wood carving of a European in a boat, 15-1/2 inches. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus Perls, 1991 (1991.17.63ab).

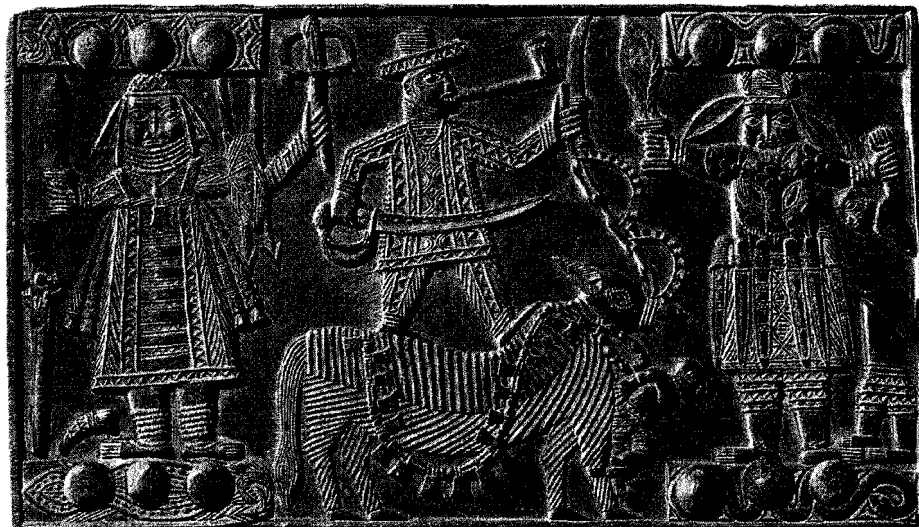


Figure 11.6. Omada wood carving criticizing European manners. Courtesy the Field Museum, Chicago, Illinois (neg. no. A99516).

These depictions of Europeans are rife with humor and sometimes even ridicule. While parasols, swords, boats, and horses are all status objects, there is often a clear element of mockery involved. For instance, the European is shown forced to hold his own parasol, which implies a loss of status; or he is placed in a peculiar position, for instance, standing on, rather than riding, his horse. On a carved stool in the Field Museum, what may at first glance appear to be a straightforward depiction of the custom of pipe smoking is in fact a criticism of European manners. The Edo consider it highly improper to appear in public with something in one's mouth. The same sort of ridicule is even more explicit in a carved chair in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It shows a representation of a European lying sprawled on the ground, a nearby wine goblet suggesting that he is drunk.

The frequent representation of Europeans in profile is yet another example of mockery. The frontal pose is the most exemplary in Benin art; the king *never* appears in profile. Those shown that way are lacking in social graces or aesthetic appeal. In fact, profile highlights the very features of Europeans that Edo consider the most unattractive: their pointy noses, thin lips, and flat behinds.

When Edo and European figures are depicted in the same space, the depth of the ambivalence in the treatment of Europeans and European material culture is best revealed. On a stool top in Hamburg, a king stands on a coffer.³² To his immediate left and right are neither Omada, nor chiefs, but rather two profiled Europeans, who are casually seated and facing him. One has his knees crossed, which is an improper



Figure 11.7. Omada carved chair depicting a drunk European. Courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus Perls, 1991 (1991.17.62).

public position, and his chin rests nonchalantly on his hand. The other holds a pistol pointed jauntily upward. Compared with the rigid formality of Edo royal accompaniment (see fig. 11.1), this depiction crosses boundaries to the point of disrespect.

Yet in other depictions of Europeans together with the king, the foreigners are sometimes of equal height with the monarch, a striking violation of Edo status

perspective. Even more, in figure 11.6, the stool in the Field Museum, the European figure is in the central hieratic position. He is flanked by Edo kings, who are possibly two versions of Oba Ozolua.³³ Is this striking and ambiguous image to be read as Europeans being contained by the ancestral power of warrior kings, or are the Edo themselves being overpowered?

So it was at Benin's own fin de siècle that Omada art opened up the possibilities of imagining the kingdom in new and highly disturbing ways. In both its style and its imagery, Omada art speaks of disorientation, of a world flooded with powerful foreign objects, a world in which the central focus—the divine king—can be overshadowed and displaced. In 1891, a Yoruba trader, significantly named Thompson Oyibodudu, which means, literally, “black white-man,” was captured violating Benin trade restrictions. Oyibodudu was then brought to Benin to be sacrificed. As the executioners went to cut off his head, Oyibodudu reportedly called out: “The white men that are greater than you or I are coming to fight and conquer you.” Six years later a British military expedition captured Benin City and sent the king, Oba Ovorranmwun, into exile.³⁴

NOTES

The research on which this essay is based was supported by a grant from the Foreign Area Fellowship Program, for which I am very grateful. I thank the late Oba Akenzua II, the late Ovia Idah, and the numerous other carvers, from Igbesanmwun and the Omada, who generously shared their knowledge. Lastly, my thanks go to my daughter, Ilana Gershon, whose comments helped in the formulation of this essay.

1. Ovia Idah, personal communication, 1966.
2. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1–2.
3. Very little attention has been paid to Benin's relations with its colonized neighbors. See Biodun Adediran, “Pleasant Imperialism: Conjectures on Benin Hegemony in Eastern Yorubaland,” *African Notes* 15, 1–2 (1991): 83–95, for a discussion of Benin imperialism in the eastern Yoruba corridor, and Isidore Okpewho, *Once upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), on images of Benin's colonial power among its former tributaries.
4. Alan F. C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485–1897* (London: Longmans, 1969), 241.
5. Jacob Egharevba, *Benin Law and Custom* (Lagos: C.M.S. Niger Press, 1949), 35.
6. Sandra Barnes and Paula Ben-Amos, “Ogun, the Empire Builder,” in *Ogun, Old World and New*, ed. Sandra T. Barnes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1989), 44.
7. The following historical discussion is drawn mainly from R. E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, ed. Peter Morton-Williams (New York: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1973), and Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans*.
8. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans*, 21.
9. *Ibid.*, 266.
10. *Ibid.*, 22–23.
11. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 2.
12. The following discussion of Igbesanmwun and Omada is drawn from my work in the early 1970s, esp. Paula Ben-Amos, “Social Change in the Organization of Woodcarving

in Benin City, Nigeria" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1971), and "Professionals and Amateurs in Benin Court Carving," in *African Images: Essays in African Iconology*, ed. Daniel McCall and Edna Bay (New York: Africana Pub. Co., for the African Studies Center, Boston University, 1975), 170–89.

13. Paula Ben-Amos Girshick, *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Benin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

14. Henry Ling Roth, *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors* (1903; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 196, citing the British trader Cyril Punch, who visited Benin in the late 1880s and 1890s and reported seeing a "court official" carving an ivory tusk, who may have been an Omada. Brass plaques from the sixteenth century depict naked young men standing alongside kings and holding swords. Whether these are the forerunners of today's Omada is impossible to determine.

15. For stories of the origin of Igbesanmwon-created objects, see Ben-Amos, "Professionals and Amateurs in Benin Court Carving," 176.

16. Rowland Abiodun cites the Owo tradition that the sixteenth Olowo, Osogboye, was "sent to Benin as a crown prince by his father to learn the court arts and customs and bring them back to Owo." Abiodun, "The Kingdom of Owo," in *Yoruba: Nine Hundred Years of Art and Thought*, ed. Henry Drewal and John Pemberton (New York: Center for African Art, 1989), 96.

17. Oba Akenzua II, personal communication, 1966.

18. For the dating of tusks and the analysis of their iconography, see Barbara Blackmun, "From Trader to Priest in Two Hundred Years: The Transformation of a Foreign Figure on Benin Ivories," *Art Journal* 47, 2 (1988): 128–38, and "Oba's Portraits in Benin," *African Arts* 23, 3 (1990): 61–69, 102–4.

19. Scholars have not yet established a chronology for Benin objects made of wood, as they have for the brasses and ivories, and therefore the dating of Omada carving is uncertain. Philip J. C. Dark, *The Art of Benin: A Catalogue of an Exhibition of the A. W. F. Puller and Chicago Natural History Museum* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1962); William B. Fagg, *Nigerian Images* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., 1960). Stylistic and iconographic correspondences with nineteenth-century guild ivory carvings suggest that a mid nineteenth-century date for many of the Omada works considered here is plausible. For the purposes of this essay—but with the clear understanding that future research may prove me wrong—I consider Omada carvings that are found in European collections formed from objects removed in 1897 to date from the nineteenth century. See C. H. Read and O. M. Dalton, *Antiquities of the City of Benin and from Other Parts of West Africa in the British Museum* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1899); and Felix von Luschan, *Die Altertümer von Benin* (Berlin: Vereinigung wissenschaftlicher Verleger, 1919; reprint, New York: Hacker Art Books, 1968). For further discussions of Omada art, see Ben-Amos, "Professionals and Amateurs in Benin Court Carving"; id., *Art, Innovation, and Politics*; Justine M. Cordwell, "Some Aesthetic Aspects of Yoruba and Benin Cultures" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1952); Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992); and Catherine Hess, "Unconventional Carving: Stools and Coconut Shells," in *The Art of Power / The Power of Art: Studies in Benin Iconography*, ed. Paula Ben-Amos and Arnold Rubin (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, 1983), 41–49.

20. Girshick, "Professionals and Amateurs in Benin Court Carving," 171.

21. Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin*, 263, pl. 128. For other examples, see Luschan *Altertümer*, figs. 846, 849.

22. Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin*, 266–67.

23. Luschan, *Altertümer*, fig. 842, p. 489. The palm wine tapper: Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin*, fig. 127.

24. Luschan, *Altertümer*, pl. 124, lower left. Nude images and representations of sexual relations do appear in Yoruba wood carving from this period (Roy Sieber, personal communication, 1997), and the Omada inclusion of similar motifs may reflect Yoruba influence.

25. For a discussion of European portrayals in guild art, see Kathy Curnow, "Alien or Accepted: African Perspectives on the Western 'Other' in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Art," *Studies in Visual Anthropology* 13, 1 (1990): 38–75.

26. See Hans Melzian, *A Concise Dictionary of the Bini Language of Southern Nigeria* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1937).

27. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans*.

28. Luschan, *Altertümer*, and Donna Kathleen Abbass, "European Hats Appearing in Benin Art" (M.A. thesis, Southern Illinois University, 1972).

29. See Maria Helena Mendes-Pinto, Introduction, *Os descobrimentos portugueses e a Europa do Renascimento* (Catalogue of the XVII Exposição Europeia de Arte, Ciência e Cultura in Lisbon. Lisbon: Conselho de Ministros, 1983).

30. Luschan, *Altertümer*, figs. 842, 846, 858–59, pl. 124.

31. For instance, *ART/artifact*, ed. Susan Vogel (New York: Center for African Art, 1988), 54, and Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, *Benin: Europäerdarstellungen der Hofkunst eines afrikanischen Reiches, aus dem Staatlichen Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden*, ed. Siegfried Wolf (Leipzig: Prisma-Verlag, 1972), pl. 32.

32. Luschan, *Altertümer*, pl. Y.

33. Barbara Blackmun has pointed out the distinguishing characteristics of Oba Ozolua in Benin art. For another example of the same pose, see Luschan, *Altertümer*, pl. 124.

34. Thompson Oyibodudu quoted in Robert Home, *City of Blood Revisited: A New Look at the Benin Expedition of 1897* (London: R. Collings, 1982), 17.