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The Evocative Powers of Yorùbá Art: Archetypal Representations of *Ejò* (Snake) and *Ẹyẹ* (Bird)

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Abstract. This paper discusses two Yorùbá emblematic forms, the snake (*ejò)* and the bird (*ẹyẹ*), which are mostly used and referred to as decorative motifs for the embellishment of bare spaces on different Yorùbá art genres. Although the forms have received enriching scholarly attention, they have mostly been treated undeservingly as motifs rather than icons. The present study employs the theories of iconography and iconology to investigate the representations and connotations of the snake and the bird in Yorùbá art. The study gathered existing scholarly submissions on the representations and the symbolisms of these forms and then interrogate the *odu* Ifa to establish that the forms of *ejò* and *ẹyẹ* are cultural icons in their own right. The paper also submits that the historical familiarity of the Yorùbá people with *ejò* and *ẹyẹ*,likethe animals in their geographical environment and their mythological association with these animals, have formed the basis of their iconological awareness.

Keywords: Yorùbá, forms, *ejò*, *ẹyẹ*, iconology, *odù*-Ifá, snake, bird, motifs, art

1. Introduction

The Yorùbá people mostly occupy south-western Nigeria. They occupy states such as Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Òyọ́, Ekiti, Kwara, Kogi and Osun. With a population of over 30 million (Akande, 2015 p. 1), the Yorùbá people constitute one of the largest cultural groups in sub-Saharan Africa. In the process of migrations, inter-ethnic wars and, especially, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Yorùbá people have spread to other places such as the Benin Republic, Togo, and parts of South America (Aina, 2003 p.8). The Yorùbá have also been displaced to the *diaspora*, where they constitute a sizeable proportion of the population of the Caribbean, Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti and Trinidad.

Filani (2012 p.1) notes that the Yorùbá people are known for their rich cultural artistic traditions. They produced the best examples of *àdìrẹẹlékọ,*[1] basketry, busts, figural art, woodcarvings, and metal arts, to mention a few. The history of their ancient art tradition places them as one of the most prolific producers of naturalistic sculptures in bronze, brass and pure copper from Ile-Ife and Owo areas. They are also noted to have a remarkable art tradition of stone carving. The evidential facts of this tradition can be found at the Esie museum (Pogoson, 1990 p. 42-51) where over 800 pieces of soapstone carvings of the Yorùbá are displayed. Coupled with these, Carroll (1967) and Adesanya (1999) attest to the sumptuous woodcarving traditions of the people all over their land, but the authors observe the elaborate finishing and monumental wood-carving style of the Ekiti-Yorùbá (located in the north-eastern part of Yorùbá-land).

Intriguingly, almost all Yorùbá art share the use of similar subject-matters and the characteristic surface embellishments with a reserved corpus of forms and motifs. The forms and motifs employed have, for a long time, been in regular use that they have coalesced into a repertoire from where all Yorùbá art genres select. Often, Yorùbá artists seem to loathe empty spaces, they seem to have the 'compulsion' to fill them up (Akande and Onipede, 2020 p. 56). When such compulsions 'come over them', they easily employ any of the several forms and motifs within the traditional form and motif repository. The forms of the imageries in the corpus have over time become fixed and seem to have acquired universal interpretations within the Yorùbá cosmos. I must say that there exist variations in the interpretations of the forms and motifs from one locality to another, but these are few compared to the ones that have an almost universal iconology. At this point, the view of Vasina (1984 p. 101) needs to be recalled; she observes that when a piece of art acquires a fixed graphic representation and the generally accepted interpretations of its form, such art or form is qualified to be considered an icon. From

this point of view, I will prefer to address these objects from a perspective different from other scholars who have studied the forms and motifs from a semiotic point of view. Notable Nigerian scholars on Yorùbá forms and motifs on Yorùbá shrine walls and *àdìrẹ ẹlékọ* have, for the most part, made use of the word semiotics in their analysis of Yorùbá forms and motifs. However, I have my reservations about that, and I will tackle this in the theoretical framework of the present study.

2. Theoretical Paradigm and Objectives of the Study

I will like to distinguish between symbols and icons in order to elevate the forms and motifs that I will discuss here, from the level of signs and symbols to that of images and, indeed, icon. It is interesting to observe how we hear a word, a phrase or a sentence and consequent series of thoughts (imageries) flash through our minds. The other side of this experience plays out when we see emblematic forms or images, and the memories of such images take us through a series of thoughts and visions (almost, definitely, further imageries). In my attempt to collate and gather reflective interpretations of notable emblematic Yorùbá forms and motifs, I contemplated locating an appropriate theoretical paradigm or perhaps the visional matrix through which I should see and interrogate the art. Simply because I was thinking about art and its meanings, the first theory that came to my mind was the semiotic theory. It then occurred to me that the art and their meanings that I contemplate are much more inclined towards imagery; whereas, semiotics has much to do with signs symbols and meanings and, especially, as these features interplay in languages. Furthermore, the semiotic theory has its origin outside the visual arts, even outside languages.

Semiotics took its root from the study of the physical signs or physiological symptoms resulting from sicknesses and diseases in clinical practice (Sebok, Thomas, 2001 p. 4). The experiments on sicknesses and symptoms were carried out by Hippocrates (460-377 BC), the founder of Western medical science who aimed to establish *semiotics* as a branch of medical science. The application of semiotics to other areas of study, such as language, can be traced to the time of Aristotle (384-322 BC) (Edghill & Mckeon, 1941). Aristotle in his work, *Theory of Being,*confine signs into three parts, namely; the physical sign, referring to the sign, symbol or symptom; secondly, the *referent*, which is the person to which the sign is directed; and thirdly, the meaning of the sign. It is observable that from the very root of semiotics, pictures and images are not given priority. Coupled with this obscure beginning of the semiotic theory is the convoluted and ambiguous definition of the word 'sign' itself (Budrevicius, 2012 p.116), the central terminology in the theory.

In my analysis of selected Yorùbá forms in the present engagement, I resort to the theory of iconography and by extension, Iconology of Panofsky (1939), a theoretical undertaking that is pivoted on 'subject matter' or 'meaning' and 'forms' (Panofky, 1939 p.3). I engaged the graphic forms of selected Yorùbá forms and motifs with the aim of finding a deeper understanding of the art from the verbal allusions, references to their theme in *odù* Ifa. In this study, I select only two strongly emblematic of the Yorùbá decorative forms, in order tonot just search out their one-word or one-phrase interpretations as done in other studies but to delve into the implications of their appearances in various art forms, thematic mention and interpretation within the Yorùbá culture and cosmos. The selected forms are *ejò* (snake) and *ẹyẹ* (bird). These two forms have been employed by two different cultures to signify healing. The upright snake on a staff is the symbol of healing in Western medicine, whereas, on the Yorùbá Osayinstaffbirds are usually represented (Adepegba, 1991). I will gather the submissions of notable scholars on the iconology of the forms of *ejò* and *ẹyẹ* and then crosscheck the veracity of their submissions in the *odù* of Ifá, an established reliable source of Yorùbá history and culture. From this point, I will refer to the art as forms employed as motifs, since this paper engages their formal appearance rather than as motifs in a design. I will take the forms out one by one and deal with each without reference to their usage as decorative embellishments.

3. Interrogating Existing Literature

Enriching studies have been carried out on Yorùbá forms and motifs. Many of the literature on Yorùbá forms and motifs have visited the subject from the point of view of particular Yorùbá art genre. For instance, Ibigbami (1978), Beier (1984) and Fatusin (1992) discussed the varied extent to which forms and motifs are employed in the embellishment of Yorùbá pots.Okediji (1989), Campbell (1989), Akande (1989) and Folaranmi (2002) have all worked on Yorùbá shrines and wall paintings and have found similarities in the forms and motifs on Yorùbá shrines and wall paintings with the ones on utilitarian art such as *àdìrẹ ẹlékọ,* calabash carving, pottery, door panels and even other genres of art such as woodcarvings and metal arts. Folaranmi's work is particularly rich in its interpretation of the motifs on the wall paintings of the palace of the Aláàfin (king) of Ọ̀yọ́.

One of the recent monographs that dedicated its entire volume to Yorùbá forms and motifs is that of Filani (2012). Rather than approach the subject from the perspective of merely identifying the motifs and gathering associated meanings to them, Filani focuses on how these forms and motifs have been used directly and extemporised by eight Yorùbá artists; four (Ben Oyadiran, Ayo Ajayi, Tola Wewe and Wole Olagunju) were educated in established Western art-school types, and the other four (Muraina Oyelami, Jimoh Buraimoh, Wale Olajide and Segun Adeku) had their art training in informal but organised short-time art workshops by religious institutions and private bodies. Filani investigated how these artists have incorporated traditional forms and motifs into their art and compared their applications with one another. He observed that the artists directly use motifs that were gathered from traditional Yorùbá arts and they, along the process, extemporised their own forms and motifs, based on the traditional one they appropriated. He also documented the unique motifs of the different artists.

Areo and Kalilu (2013) traced the origin of a dyingYorùbá-land to accidental discovery, they supported this by reciting *èjì ogbè,* an Ifá divination verse that attributes the discovery of dying in Yorùbá-land to Ọ̀rúnmìlà, through *àlùkò, odídẹ́ré, àkùko, lékeléke* and *àgbùfon*, birds found in Yorùbá-land. However, the authors view the association of the origin of death to birds in an Ifá verse as a way of claiming the antiquated origin of the tradition among the people. The author then looks into the typology of *àdìrẹ ẹlékọ.* They identified the motifs in the realm of geometry, figurals and onomastics.

Elsewhere, Areo and Omisakin (2016) identified standardised extant traditional Yorùbá motifs on *àdìrẹ ẹlékọ* in Osogbo, a Yorùbá town renowned for cloth-dying. The authors classified the motifs found on Osogbo *àdìrẹ ẹlékọ* into five, namely:
"Adaptation or transliteration of traditional *àdìrẹ* motifs, designs based on geometric shapes, lines of different sizes and direction, motifs based on the observation of natural objects such as flora and fauna around them, motifs based on external influences and changes occurring in their environment and finally corporate design which involves the combination of several units of design to form a whole, and usually imitating the grid structural arrangement of traditional *àdìrẹ ẹlékọ*." p. 38.

Areo and Omisakin document the developments and newly introduced motifs to the existing corpus over time. Many of the names given to the motifs are extemporisations based on their forms or sources of their derivation.

4. Analysis of Selected Forms

4.1 Representations and Iconology of *Ejò*

Ejò is the snake. It is a very common animal in the jungles of Africa, especially in the dense rain forest zone where Yorùbá people live. *Ejò* is one of the animals they comein contact with regularly in their daily lives, both in traditional communities and in contemporary ones. The ubiquity of this animal in Yorùbá-land and the awareness of its potentialto cause harm, and indeed death, is enough reason to dread it, earning it its dreaded reputation.

Scholars from different disciplinary spheres have attempted to gather the interpretation of the imagery of *ejò* in Yorùbá art. However, generally speaking, the representation of the curled *ejò* (plate 1) in seeming concentric circles is believed to be iconic of the unending and continuous cosmos of the Yorùbá. However, Parrinder (1967 p. 23) states that when the *ejò* is represented in an upright position (plate 2), it emblematises the connection between the earth and the spiritual. Pemberton (1977 p. 11) mentions the association of the *ejò* with Obatala, a Yorùbá divinity. Pemberton describes the depiction of a large *ejò* on the *ìyá nlá* drum of Obatala. The *ìyá nlá* drum is the main showpiece of Obatala worship. Campbell (1995) keys into the general belief that the image of the *ejò* represents the unending world of the Yorùbá, whereas, Folaranmi (2002) submits that the representation of *ejò*, the circular snake icon, 'is a common feature on Yorùbá and Dahomey carved panels and doors. It is a symbol of regeneration, long life, potency, truth, fierceness, wrath, wealth and guile.' Folaranmi, in the same study of the mural on the walls of the palace of the Aláàfin of Ọ̀yọ́, observes that the representation of the *ejò* in the mural is reminiscent of the founding of the first settlement of Ọ̀yọ́ by Aláàfin Oranmiyan, with the help of a charmed snake that was made for him by the Borgu king. The representation of the *ejò* is, therefore, a reminder of the historical favour bequeathed by the *ejò* for finding a settlement for the Yorùbá; at which point, it may be considered a type of totem.

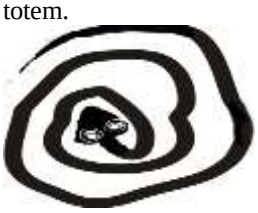

PLATE 1
CURLED *EJÒ*

PLATE 2
UPRIGHT *EJÒ*

Ordinarily, the submissions of scholars on the connotations of the *ejò* seem to portray the animal as one that is economically beneficial, positive and endearing, whereas, its iconological reputation contradicts its actual physical attributes. In reality, the *ejò* is a dangerous and slippery animal, dreaded by many. In fact, quite many people dislike the uncanny and slippery nature of *ejò.* Indeed, Campbell (2008 p. 128) particularly refers to *ejò* as a disliked figure.However, its iconic attributes can be equated with that of the lion; a ferocious destroyer, but still regarded as the king of all animals. And as its kingly posture symbolises greatness and dominance, the Yorùbá people associate with it as a way of coveting its kingly attribute. According to Folaranmi (2002), Yorùbá people believe that some animals possess physical attributes as well as spiritual powers that can be harnessed by humans to boost their personality. *Ejò* happens to be one of such animals.

Campbell (2008 p. 126) corroborates Pemberton's position that the*ejò* is associated with Obatala, Yorùbá-land's chief deity. He mentions that shrine paintings of Obatala usually include the *ejò.* Campbell quoting Eleburuibon (1989 p. 71) also writes that in one of Obatala's praise poems he was compared with a boa.

Campbell (2008 p. 136) made a plausible argument for the acceptance of the *ejò* as an icon of good omen when he observes that the ability of the *ejò* to shed its skin from time to time is a sign of renewal and 'a metaphor for continuity, rebirth, renewal, and regeneration.' This position accounts credibly for the iconology of the *ejò* as an icon of continuity as agreed by many.

In the study of Areo and Kalilu (2013), they suggest that the icon of *ejò* emblematizes the Yorùbá belief in reincarnation; a belief that people who once lived and died can be reborn and live through the world over again. They opined that the representation of the curled *ejò* denotes the cyclical paradigm of the reincarnation belief. This position is arguably linked with Campbell's earlier submission.

A further argument for the plausibility of the positive iconology of *ejò* in Yorùbá art is that the Yorùbá believe that 'in the beginning (*nígbà ìwá ṣẹ̀*), *ejò* was said to be a harmless animal; at that time it didn't even have a venom. According to Babalawo Fasakin Araoye of the Ajanbata family compound, Ìṣàlẹ́-Ọ̀yọ́ (Akande, 2021), an Ifá *odù,*[2]*ọ̀kànràn òun ọ̀sá* (also known as *ọ̀kànràǹọ̀sá*), the representation of *ọ̀kànràǹọ̀sá*'s permutations on an Ifá divination tray shows *ọ̀kànràn* on the right-hand side and *ọ̀sá* on the left-hand side. The *odù* runs thus:

Ọ̀kànràn 'sàá
Babaláwo Igbá ló d'ífá fún Igbá
Wọ́n ní kó rúbọ Èṣu ọ̀dàrà, kí Igbá má baà fọ́
Ọ̀kànràn 'sàá
Babaláwo Ìkòkò ló d'ífá fún Ìkòkò 5
Wọ́n ní kó rúbọ Èṣu ọ̀dàrà, kí Ìkòkò má baà lu
Ọ̀kànràn 'sàá
Babaláwo Ejò ló d'ífá fún Ejò
Wọ́n ní kó rúbọ Èṣu ọ̀dàrà, kí ó lè fi orì ṣẹ̀gun ọ̀tá
Igbá gbọ́rúrú ẹbọ, ó kọ'tí ọ̀gbain 10
Ìkòkò gbọ́ rúrú ẹbọ, ó kọ'tí ọ̀gbain
Ejò nìkan tí nbẹ lẹ̀yìn tí nsẹbọ, ẹbọ ti ẹ̀ ló dà ládà jù.
L' Èṣu bá fún Ejò l'óró
Kàkà kí wọ́n tún fi Ejò d'igi
Ejò fi orí ṣẹ̀gun omo aráyé pátá porogodo 15
Rírú ẹbọ ní nfín, àìrú ẹbọ kí dà
Ejò wá nyin àwọn Babaláwo rẹ̀
Àwọn Babaláwo nyin Ifá
Ifá wá nyin Olódùmarè

Meaning:
Okanran Osa
The diviner that divined for the gourd (igba)
The gourd was advised to sacrifice to Èṣu, for it not to break
Okanran Osa
The diviner that divined for the pot (ikoko) 5
The gourd advised sacrificing to Èṣu, for it not to perforate
Okanran Osa
The same divined for Ejò
The snake admonished to sacrifice to Èṣu, for it to acquire a venomous bite
Igbá was informed about the sacrifice but refused to carry it out 10
Ìkòkò was informed about the sacrifice but refused to carry it out
The snake, the last one of them, heeded the call to sacrifice
Èṣu endowed Ejò with its venomous bite powers
Humans no longer use Ejò as a rope to tie sticks

Ejò employs its venomous powers to dispel its enemies
15
To sacrifice leads to acceptance, as refusal incurs misfortune
Ejò then praised its diviners
The diviners, in turn, praised Ifá
Ifá praised Olódùmarè (the Supreme Being)

The narrative of the *odù* relates the story of Ejòfrom the time the Yorùbá refers to as *ìgbà ìwá ṣẹ̀* (the beginning of being). In the story, at that time, Ejò had no poison and it was used by men as ropes for tying sticks on the farm. Ejò became a laughing stock among men. Ejò got fed up with its predicament and went along with Igbá (gourd) and Ìkòkò (pot), who also had grudges against the demeaning nature of human beings, to consult Ọ̀kànràn Ọ̀ṣá, an Ifá diviner, to find solutions to their problems. Ọ̀kànràn Ọ̀ṣá the diviner, whose name doubles as the *odù,* suggested to Igbá, Ìkòkò and Ejò that they offer sacrifice to Èsù[4] so that their problems may be solved. Out of the three, it was only Ejò that took the advice of the diviner and carried out the sacrifice. The other two refused and their predicament remained with them till today. The *odù* mentions that Ejò was used as a rope to tie sticks together on farms; this reminds me of the warning our parents used to give to us when we were children. They told us not to call the *ejò* by its actual name, but to refer to it as *okùn ilẹ̀* (the rope of the ground). It was the belief that when one calls its name too frequently, it might appear for real.

In the praise-poems of some families in Yorùbá-land, it is not uncommon to come across members metaphorically associating themselves with the powers of the *ejò*. I gathered one of such praise-poems from Otunba Ayinde Ibikunle (Akande, 2021), a 98-year-old member of the Idofoi family of Ayetoro-land.
Ọmọ ejò wẹ̀wẹ̀wẹ abẹ ìràwé
Tí kò gbọdọ̀ buni jẹ
Ọmọ ejò nlá inú ìlú tí òbójú ọde kò gbọdọ̀ pa
Idofoi, akànmájà , Idofoi ewé nlá
Ewé tí kìí rú wẹ̀wẹ

Meaning:
The siblings of small snakes under the leaves
Venomous small snakes that must not bite humans
The children of big snakes (perhaps totemic boa) that live within the town and must not be killed even by veteran hunters
Idofoi, who does not fight, Idofoi the big leaf
The big leaf that does not grow small leaves

In this praise-poem, members of the Idofoi family are equated with the big as well as the small *ejò* in a metaphoric language. This praise-poem is a pointer to the possible development of the iconology of some Yorùbá forms, especially that of animals, owing to their physical strength and mythological reputations. Initially, the features of the animals were used in metaphoric comparison with human strength, and from that point, the animals acquire independent iconology based on the initial comparison of the abilities of human personages with their raw beast powers.

From the foregoing, the iconology of the *ejò* is derived from the age-long association (physical and, especially, mythological) of the Yorùbá people with the animal. The ubiquity of the animal within the geographical environment of the Yorùbá, like every other animal within that geography, make it compelling to locate a position for the animal within the mythology of the people. The factors that afterwards determined the positivity or negativity of the iconology of the animal include the Yorùbá belief in associatingthemselves with certain animals to harness their strength and as a means of improving their human personality. For instance, the constrictive strength of the *erè* (constrictor/boa) and the venomous powers of some other *ejò* are considered covetable by the Yorùbá. In addition to these features of the *ejò* is its intermittent shedding of skin, which is interpreted as its potentials to regenerate and renew, which are indications of the propensity for continuity; a quality, so novel that is coveted for the perpetuation of the entire Yorùbá cosmos. This ability of the *ejò* earned it the iconology of renewal and perpetuityin the Yorùbá cosmos.

4.2 Representations and Iconology of the *Ẹyẹ*

My discussion on the *ẹyẹ* recognises the iconology of the animal from two perspectives; the first is the Yorùbá collective reference to *ẹyẹ* and then their reference to the individual *ẹyẹ* within their cosmos. It is interesting to note that there exists a disparity between the iconology of the two. These disparities are also discernible in the various representation of the *ẹyẹ* in Yorùbá art.

Collectively, the imagery of *ẹyẹ* in Yorùbá cosmology connotes the negative spiritual powers of women, witchcraft, and the esoteric knowledge employed in the manipulation of the world by the womenfolk. Such connotations apply to the generality of *ẹyẹ,* but because *ẹyẹ* encompasses a wide variety of birds, domestic and wild inclusive; the domestic and considerably peaceful *ẹyẹ* are associated with affable iconology. Filani (2012 p. 229) interprets the iconology of the different representation of birds. In his interpretation, the domestic fowl connotes ‘meekness’ (plate 3), the ostrich ‘royalty’, the dove

'peace' and the duck 'procreation.' On the other hand, in his interpretation of wild birds such as the owl (plate 4), which he considers an icon of 'bad omen,' and other wild and exotic birds in different strange poses (plates 5 and 6), he considers as connoting 'witchcraft.' Folaranmi (2002) also interprets the iconology of the ostrich depicted at the palace of the Aláàfin of Òyó as connoting the royalty which is associated with the king. The present study does not intend to dispute these two positions but to corroborate and decidedly push further the discourse on the iconology of the *ẹyẹ.*

PLATE 3
FOWL

OWL
PLATE 4

PLATE 5
STRANGE AND EXOTIC *ẸYẸ* 1

PLATE 6
STRANGE AND EXOTIC *ẸYẸ* 2

Adepegba and Ademuleya (2015) study the symbolic motifs of the appliqué costumes of Remireke masquerade of Ijebu Agbowa-Ikosi. They observe the peacock, *igiowo* (cash crop), cock, Oba's paraphernalia, white horse symbol and others as symbolic to the masquerade community of Agbowa-Ikosi. In their interpretation of the peacock, they submit that the peacock connotes beauty among the Yorùbá and that its representation on the appliqué of Remireke is symbolic of the beauty of the masquerade. The authors consider that the image of the cock on Remireke indicates 'the proclaimer, rise to work,' 'herald … calling attention to the passing of time.' Important to observe is the positive iconology of the peacock and the cock; *ẹyẹ* that are prominent in the Yorùbá cosmos.

I will like to make a case for the Yorùbá dialectic consideration of the iconology of *ẹyẹ* from *ìrẹtẹ̀ ọlọ́tà,* an *odù* Ifá verse recited to me by Babalawo Araoye Fasakin of the Ajanbata Isale-Òyó family compound (Akande, 2021). This *odù* illustrates the basis of the different attitudes of the Yorùbá people in their iconological disposition towards the same animal family. *Ìrẹtẹ̀ ọlọ́tà*, also called *ìrẹtẹ̀ òun òwọ́nrín*. Its representation on the divination board has *ìrẹtẹ̀*on the right-hand side and *òwọ́nrín* on the left. The *odù* runs thus:

Ṣe àpò duru símí kémi ṣàpò duru sí ọ
Adífá fún Òrúnmìlà, Baba nṣawo lọ ìlú Òtà
Adífá fún Òrúnmìlà, Baba nṣawo lọ ìlú ilẹyẹ
Òrúnmìlà mú èjì ko ẹ̀ta, ó lọ oko aláwo
Ó kó ó rò, ó da àníyàn ìrìn àjò ìlú ìléyẹ 5
Ẹbọ ni wọ́n ní kó rú
Kí ẹlẹyẹ ìlú Òtà jẹ k' Òrúnmìlà r'áyè gbé
Wọ́n ní kí Òrúnmìlà ra ẹyẹlé
Kí Òrúnmìlà dá àpò jèrùgbé fún ẹyẹlé
Òrúnmìlà s'awo lọ ìlú Òtà 10
Nígbà ó d'ògànjọ́ àwọn ẹlẹyẹ dé s' Òrúnmìlà
Wọ́n ndún to to to
Wọ́n ndún tò tò tò tò
Èrú ba Òrúnmìlà, Èsù dáa lóhùn pé ṣe bí o rúbọ
Òrúnmìlà bá bẹ̀rẹ̀ sí ní yín ẹyẹlé inú àpò jèrùgbé lékànáá 15
Ẹyẹlé ké tòò, àwọn ẹlẹyẹ sá tọ̀ yìn
Òrúnmìlà kò y'ojú ẹyẹlé sí ìta
Àwọn ẹlẹyẹ sá, wọ́n ṣe bí ẹlẹyẹ tòun ti Òrúnmìlà
Òrúnmìlà rí awo ṣe ní ìlú Òtà
Òrúnmìlà wá nyin àwọn awo 20
Àwọn awo rẹ̀ nyin Ifá
Ṣe àpò duru símí kémi ṣàpò duru sí ọ
Adífá fún Òrúnmìlà, Baba nṣawo lọ ìlú Òtà
Ǹjẹ ìwọ́ l'ẹyẹ, èmi l'ẹyẹ
Gbogbo wa la l'ẹyẹ l'ápò táa lè fi d'érù ba ara wa 25

Meaning:
Rattle your sac and I will rattle mine

The same performed divination for Ọ̀rúnmìlà when he embarked on his journey to Ọ̀tà
The same performed divination for itinerant Ọ̀rúnmìlà when he embarked on Ifá's journey to the town of witches
Ọ̀rúnmìlà gave it serious thought and therefore consulted Ifá
He explained his mission to Ifá and pray for success in the town of witches
Ọ̀rúnmìlà was asked to make a sacrifice
So that the witches of Ọ̀tà will allow Ọ̀rúnmìlà to succeed in his mission
Afterwards, he was asked to buy a pigeon
Ọ̀rúnmìlà was to put the pigeon in his *jèrùgbé*[5] sac
Ọ̀rúnmìlà arrived Ọ̀tà
In the middle of the night, the witches visited Ọ̀rúnmìlà with their birds
Their birds were whistling *to to to*
They were whistling *to to to to*
Ọ̀rúnmìlà was afraid but Èsù reminded him of his sacrifice and what Ifá told him
Ọ̀rúnmìlà started to pinch his pigeon inside his sac
His pigeon whistle too, the witches backed off
Ọ̀rúnmìlà did not bring out of the sac his own bird
The witches ran off, thinking Ọ̀rúnmìlà himself was one of them
Ọ̀rúnmìlà was successful at Ọ̀tà
Ọ̀rúnmìlà started to praise his diviners
The diviners were praising Ifá
Rattle your sac and I'll rattle mine
The same performed divination for Ọ̀rúnmìlà when he embarked on his journey to Ọ̀tà
If you rattle me with your bird, I will also rattle you with mine
We all have birds inside our sac that we use in rattling one another

The story in the *odù* tells the narrative of a time in the past when Ọ̀rúnmìlà, the Ifá diviner, planned to embark on his routine itinerary journey to Ọ̀tà. According to Babalawo Araoye Fasakin, everywhere that Ifá makes references to as Ọ̀tà is a town established by witches and witches dominate in such places. Ọ̀rúnmìlà consulted Ifá to find out if his journey will be successful; unfortunately, he was told that witches dominated Ọ̀tà and except he pretended to be one, he could not live successfully in Ọ̀tà. For him to be successful he was asked to sacrifice to Èsù, and he did so. He was then told by his diviners to buy a pigeon (*ẹyẹlé*) and keep it in his *jèrùgbé* sac so that when the witches come shrieking with their birds Ọ̀rúnmìlà will also pinch his pigeon to make it shriek. Ọ̀rúnmìlà took to the advice of his diviners and got the witches to run, by making them think he also had a bird.[6]

In Yorùbá-land, to say someone has a bird means the person is a 'certified' witch. Invariably, birds are associated with witches, and witches with powers of darkness. This belief may not be too far-fetched from another belief of the Yorùbá that witches fly at night. To be in flight will require wings like that of birds. It is not uncommon to hear people say they saw a bird in the night and were afraid. This is because birds and darkness may as well be a representation of the presence of witches. The birds of the *ẹlẹyẹ*in the *odù* are those associated with witches and powers of darkness, whereas, the pigeon (*ẹyẹlé*) in Ọ̀rúnmìlà's sac is harmless and believed to be emblematic of peacefulness. This is why in the *odù*, the diviners warn Ọ̀rúnmìlà not to bring out his own bird (*ẹyẹlé*) from his sac. If he did, it would be recognised as harmless and the witches would harm Ọ̀rúnmìlà.

It is, however, important to mention that there are other *ẹyẹ* apart from the domestic ones; such as ostriches, pigeon, fowls, etc. And there are other positive iconographic uses of other *ẹyẹ.* Adepegba (1991 p. 30) observes that the birds usually depicted on the *ọ̀pá* Ọ̀sanyìn (the staff of Ọ̀sanyìn), the Yorùbá god of herbal medicine, represent the power of witches in medicinal practice. Adepegba points out that all Yorùbá medicine men make use of the power of witches for healing.

5. Conclusions

It will be observed that the meanings of the Yorùbá forms examined in this paper provoke thoughts beyond the image of the forms, indeed they are evocative of several aspects of Yorùbá thoughts. The forms and motifs discussed so far have been long used and their appearances on different items have been consistent. Equally, they have remained constant in meaning. Therefore, the icon of the snake and the bird are cultural icons in their own right. The historical familiarity of the Yorùbá people with *ejò* and *ẹyẹ* as animals in their environment, and their mythological association with these animals have formed the basis of the iconology of these animals. As observed earlier, the snake on a staff is the icon of Western medicine and there are birds on a staff are the icons of Osanyin, the Yorùbá god of healing.
The use of these two animals in these respects are based on mythological histories and their reputation.
Ejò and *ẹyẹ* are truly iconic; however, these forms, like several others, have become part of routinely represented animals on the surfaces of Yorùbá traditional arts. In the cases when they are found represented on *àdirẹ ẹlékọ,* they become part of decorative motifs and their iconology may not be as impactful as when they are represented on religious

platforms. On such surfaces like tie-dye *àdìrẹ ẹlékọ,* sometimes, these forms may only have been employed to fill up bare space and break the monotony.

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NOTES

1. Resist pattern-dyed fabrics also called batik or *àdìrẹ ẹlékọ*

2. I prefer to use the word image, picture, forms, etc., as against signs and symbols, because sign and symbols

can be ambiguous and sometimes confined to spoken language, body language and symptomatic sign in sicknesses.

3. *Odù* Ifá is the 256 *odù* (verses) Ifá. Ifá is a Yorùbá deity that is consulted through the divination process. The process results in one of the 16 possible permutations of Ifá. Each of the 16 permutations is associated with another 16 sub-verses. The *odù* contains poetic literature of history, wisdom and perhaps all the possible solutions that there can be to any problem.

4. Èsù is one of the arch divinities of the Yorùbá. It is perhaps the closest to Olódùmarè (the Supreme Being) as he is trusted by humans to deliver their supplications and sacrifices to Olódùmarè. Èsù is indeed the intermediary between deities and Olódùmarè. However, Èsù is also noted for causing misunderstandings and mayhem.

5. Apo *jèrùgbé* is the sac carried about by itinerant diviners when embarking on Ifá divination missions to other towns. The sac is where the Babalawo keeps sacrificial items he received from his clients.

6. In the Yorùbá language, when someone is said to 'have a bird,' it means the person is a witch.