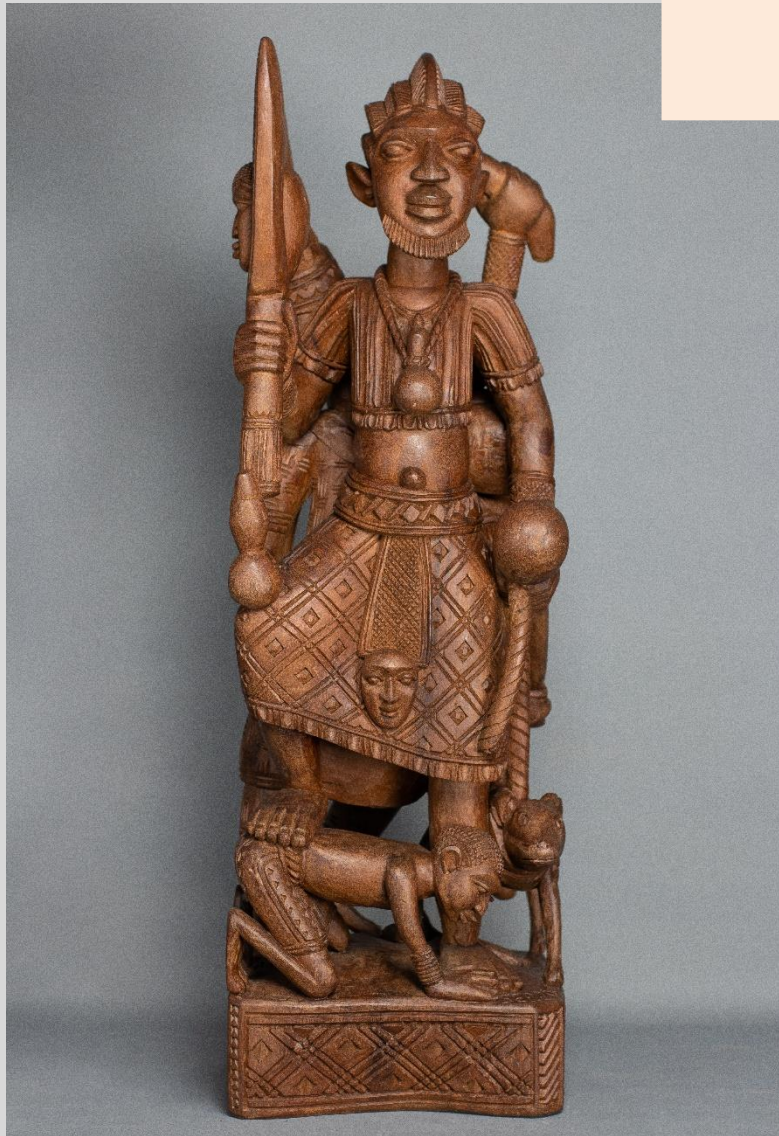




YEMISI SHYLLON  
MUSEUM OF ART  
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

# Artwork Information Sheet 20

## LAMIDI FAKEYE'S OWO EYO



*Owo Eyo (Sango Priest with Cowry)*, 2008, Wood, 77cm (H) © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

## INTRODUCTION

In traditional Yoruba societies, sculptures in the form of veranda doorposts or house posts are usually promoted. These are used to support the walls of houses as well as beautify the facades. Lamidi Fakeye was a traditional Yoruba carver renowned for his intricate wood carvings including a huge collection of Verandah doorposts and other smaller wood carvings. The Yemisi Shyllon Museum is proud to have a large corpus of Lamidi's Wood carvings amongst which is "Owo Eyo," which depicts Sango.

## THE ARTIST

Lamidi Fakeye was born in 1928 and devoted his life to the intricate art of wood carving until his death on December 25, 2009. He started carving at the age of nine, under the tutelage and watchful eye of his father. His training was, however, interrupted at a young age because of his Father's death. Shortly after this incident, he joined master carver, George Bamidele Areogun at the Oye-Ekiti workshop where he continued his training in wood carving. The Oye-Ekiti workshop was run by Father Carroll, an Irish Priest (Morton 2010). Through the work of traditionally trained carvers, weavers and bead-workers, the workshop produced architectural and decorative pieces for Catholic churches across the country.

The Oye-Ekiti workshop and some others like it were the Europeans' first attempt at art training in Nigeria. As a result of the Christian nature of most of the sculptures at the workshop, Lamidi's early pieces have a Christian outlook even though he was a Muslim. He spent five years in the Oye-Ekiti workshop, where he developed his skills extensively under the guidance of George and Father Carroll.

Following the recommendations of Father Carroll and Father O'Mahoney who were both facilitators of the workshop, Lamidi taught in some catholic Institutions from 1955 to 1959 after his training at the Oye-Ekiti workshop (Morton 2010). He also sold

Yoruba traditional pieces privately, received commissions for ecclesiastical purposes and visited scholars and expatriates who showed interest in his work.

Towards the end of the 1950s, Lamidi had an increasing desire to establish his carving workshop just as he was building a strong client base that would help this new venture to be successful. With funding from the British Council, he held his first solo exhibition in 1959. The British Council offered him another scholarship for a solo exhibition in 1961, and this was a huge success. The exhibition's catalogue was prepared by Father Carroll. Lamidi became a creative and independent artist because of these activities and he has fond memories of Father Carroll and George Bamidele (Morton 2010).

Lamidi earned a scholarship to study stone carving at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris from 1962 to 1963 as a result of the success of his exhibitions. He supported himself while he was there by selling wood carvings to the Harmon Foundation. After completing his studies in 1963, he went to the United States for the first time for an art residency. This was the start of a ten-year partnership with Western Michigan University, where he regularly returned as a visiting lecturer to lead art workshops on wood carving. The American market thus became a great place for him to make sales. Lamidi was not very successful in stone carving due to the difficulties he encountered in finding good stones for carving. Therefore, from 1963, Lamidi focused on developing his wood carving style and technique. A style which Elizabeth Morton termed "Neotraditional" to describe Lamidi's technique of creating a bridge between traditional and modern styles (Morton 2010).

## OWO EYO

Sango, the fourth king of the town of Oyo, is an ancestral deity of the Yoruba people. He was described as a powerful king with a thunderous voice and the ability to speak with fire from his lips. There was once a subordinate chief who challenged his rule. Seeing the magic this new chief could perform, other

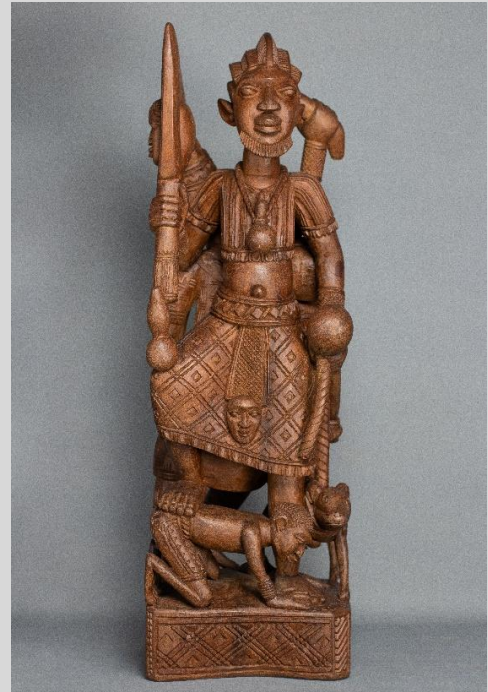
chiefs took sides with him and Sango's authority diminished in the eyes of a majority of his followers, as a result, he killed himself. His devoted followers, on the other hand, believe that he did not commit suicide, but rather ascended to heaven on a chain and was transformed into a deity there. He assumed the role of a pre-existing deity known as "Jakuta" (Brandon 2009). This deity represented the wrath of God and severe punishment for any evil committed. The followers of Sango began offering sacrifices to him after his death and passed on this worship to succeeding generations. They also succeeded in creating a place for the worship of Sango in the religious and political system of the town of Oyo as it became a paramount part of the installation of their Kings.

*Sango's cult spread widely when Oyo became the central town of an expansive empire dominating most of the other Yoruba kingdoms, as well as the Bini and the Fon people, who incorporated Sango worship into their religions and continued his cult even after they ceased being under Oyo's control (Brandon 2009).*

Figure 1.1 is titled Owo Eyo, it depicts a male figure representing Sango. He holds an axe in his right hand which is called the "oshe". His hair is divided into four mounds. His eyes protrude out of little molds with the lids opening up slightly. The nose sits in the form of a triangle and the lips are two thick strips. The beards sit slightly below the lips with linear markings to represent the hair texture. On his neck is a necklace with a gourd as a pendant. In his right hand he holds an axe and in the other hand a gourd, he wears a little top and a skirt. His belly button protrudes slightly above the top of his waist belt. The waist belt is adorned with the pendant-like form of a human face. The skirt has diagonal patterns and ends in frills at its hem. His right foot steps on the waist of a bowing figure (Perhaps a slave or servant).

The natural forces associated with Sango are fire, thunder and lightning. When he speaks, thunder is what is heard. He is referred to by some as the god of lightning. His prominent ritual symbol is the

"oshe", a double-edged battle-axe. Statues representing Sango depict him with the "oshe" emanating from his head and this implies that Sango's essence is to wage war against evil.



**Fig 1.1 Owo Eyo (Sango Priest with Cowry)**, 2008, Wood, 77cm (H) © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

*The "oshe" is also used by Shango's priesthood. While dancing, they hold a wooden "oshe" close to their chests as protection or they swing one in a wide chest-high arc that battles human and spiritual enemies (Brandon 2009).*

Sango chose the "bata" drums as the specific drums to be played for him at festivals during his reign, and it has since become one of the things associated with him. He is said to have used these drums to summon storms and it is still used today by his devotees.

Fig 1.2 depicts the rear view of Owo Eyo, it shows a drummer drumming as he raises his hand to beat the drum. A cap rests on his head, while a drum rests on his lap held by a belt across his shoulder. He is beating the famous "bata" drum; a favourite of Sango. His legs are tilted to the side. He is perhaps in motion jumping from one foot to the other as he drums.





**Fig 1.2 Owo Eyo (Sango Priest with Cowry)**, 2008, Wood, 77cm (H) © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

Beside the drummer stands a young woman who carries a calabash on her head. She has a little bracelet on her wrist which the other figures have as well. She wears a little skirt that stops right above her knee and beside her stands a dog. Her hair is in the typical cornrow style albeit stylized in a sculptural pattern.



**Fig 1.3 Owo Eyo (Sango Priest with Cowry)**, 2008, Wood, 77cm (H) © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art

Fig 1.3 gives a better view of this angle of “Owo Eyo”. We see Sango’s profile view, holding a gourd and the dog by a leash, the drummer’s suspended arm, and the young woman’s full figure. She holds a round object in her hand with a cross carved on its back, in addition to the calabash on her head. They are standing on a platform with linear designs engraved on it.

## CONCLUSION

Lamidi Fakeye brings Yoruba mythology and tradition to life by depicting “Owo Eyo” (Sango Priest with Cowry). This sculptural piece by Lamidi Fakeye exemplifies the artist’s fusion of Yoruba traditional concepts into his highly stylized wood carving, which Elizabeth Morton (2010) termed “neo-traditional”. Lamidi Fakeye’s technicality in wood carving and his resilience with traditional concepts attests to the artist’s love for his culture and tradition.

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