



Yoruban Contributions to the Literature on Keloids*

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IN an address at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in January 1970, Dr. Ekpo-Eyo, the director of the Nigeria Department of Antiquities, challenged the claims and widely held views that the so-called "primitive and developing peoples" of Africa had made no worthwhile contributions to the foundation and growth of knowledge. He pointed out that this conclusion had always been the outcome of studies and reviews limited to the written form of literature alone, and cautioned that a true assessment of the contributions of these people to knowledge can only come from careful study of their oral and art forms of literature as these were the only media through which they perpetuated and thus passed on their knowledge to posterity.¹

On this advice, investigations have been carried out in Western Nigeria on Yoruba myth (oral literature) embodied in the Ifa Literary Corpus,² and on the terra-cotta heads (art literature) excavated from different groves in Ife, the religious capital of the Yorubas.

The purpose of these investigations was to find out the contribution, if any, which the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria have made to the body of world literature on keloid, which affects about 6% of the population.³ This paper reports the

findings and details the hitherto unrecognized contribution of these people.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The studies on the Ifa Literary Corpus took the form of interviews of Ifa priests and analysis of tape-recorded divinations chanted by these priests during the interviews.

The main work took place in Oyo, the old "political" capital of Yorubaland. The information received here on the origin of Ifa, the organization of its cult, its training programme and examination system were verified by interviewing other sets of Ifa priests in the Yoruba centres of Igbo-Ora, Ogbomosho and Ife-Ife (Fig. 1).

Studies of ancient art relative to keloids were undertaken in the collections of archeological findings now housed in the Ile-Ife and the Lagos Museums.

RESULTS

We begin by outlining the background related by the Ifa priests against which the subsequent findings in the study of the Ifa Literary Corpus as outlined below were assessed. An early examination of the origin of Ifa, the organization of its cult, the training and reputed integrity of its priests and devotees, will place the reader in a position to judge fairly accurately the degree of reliance which can be placed on the text of the oral literature out-

* Based on part of a thesis on keloids approved for the M.D. degree, Birmingham University, England.

lined, handed down as it is, from one generation to another, and, as most will contend, through a medium which places it at great risks of adulteration and misinterpretation down the years.

Ifa Corpus, according to Abimbola, is the most important genre of Yoruba oral literature. In form and in context it is its richest and most complex literature, embracing broad themes concerning Yoruba thoughts and beliefs. Its cult is the best organized and most venerated among the Yorubas.²

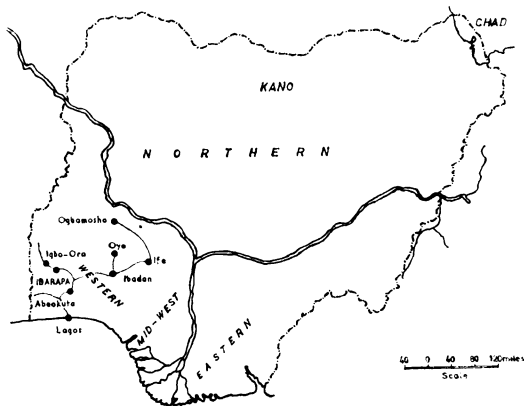


Fig. 1. Map of Nigeria showing Western State and Ibarapa District with Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba tribe and their religious capital, and Oyo, the old "political" capital of Yorubaland. The Niger river, Africa's third longest and some 2600 miles, enters Nigeria from the west and is her most striking physical feature, The Niger's principal tributary is the Benue, at Lokoja, about 350 miles from the sea.

There are various mythological expositions put forward about its origin:

Several state that Ifa in the company of other major deities came from heaven and first landed in Ife, which the Yorubas believe to be the cradle of mankind. We are told that the gods were sent to Ife from heaven to establish order on earth by God Almighty. Ifa is believed to have played the major role in this divine bidding because of his great wisdom. During his sojourn on earth, Ifa had eight children and a number of disciples, all of whom he taught the secrets of divination.

According to another myth quoted by Denneth, Ifa was born at Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba people. He was a skillful medical man and an eminently successful diviner. He was popular and was regarded as a true prophet. People from every part of Yoruba country flocked to him and his fame was so great that hundreds of people begged him to admit them as disciples and apprentices. He chose only 16 men out of these.⁴

The history of Ifa thus dates back to the early history of the Yoruba people. How deep-rooted their beliefs are, concerning the importance of

Ifa divination in their daily lives, is revealed in the following Ifa verse:

Ifa lo Ioni
Ifa lo lola
Ifa lo lotunla pelu e
Orunmila lo jino mereerin Oosa daaye"

(Ifa is the master of today
Ifa is the master of tomorrow
Ifa is the master of the day after tomorrow
To Ifa belongs all the four days established by God on earth).

It should be pointed out here that the ancient Yorubas had a four-day week.

At the head of the Ifa cult is the Araba, who is the supreme high priest. After him comes 15 other major priests of varying ranks, as well as many minor ones.

The cult itself is not a secret society, although some of its deliberations are held as secrets which the uninitiated must not know.

The opportunity to train as an Ifa priest is available to all male children throughout Yorubaland, and in some people's opinion, the training is a supreme example of sacrifice in human endeavour.² It demonstrates that the human memory can be stretched to an almost limitless extent for retention of knowledge.

Most apprentices start their training between the ages of 7 years and 12 years. If the training goes well, it lasts between 10 and 12 years. Few, however, are reputed to make the grade.

Throughout the period of training, the master priest and his trainees live together as brothers. The training starts on teaching the would-be priest how to use the paraphernalia on the divination system to find out the appropriate chapter (called ODU) and verse (called ESE), in the Ifa Literary Corpus. The divining chain (Fig. 2) is one of the first instruments in the paraphernalia of Ifa, about which he learns. He is taught how to recognise the various combinations of half-nuts of the divining chain that make up each chapter of the corpus. He learns about the signature of one chapter every other day, or in the case of dull boys, one every week. Each trainee's progress, of course, depends entirely on his own memory and intelligence, and this part of the training ends when he has learnt to use the divining chain to recognise the respective signature of the 256 chapters in the Ifa divination corpus.

By far the most important part of the work

of the student Ifa-priest, is the learning by heart of a number of verses from each of the 256 chapters. The verses are memorised at the steady rate of one per day, or in the case of long ones, the master priest could divide the verse into two or three parts, and devote the day's tuition to each part.



Fig. 2. This illustration shows an Ife priest in a divination session. Surrounding him are the paraphernalia with which he consults the "oracle". Hanging on a hook on his extreme left, and also from his hands, are divining chains.

Each verse is learned in the form of recitation in the first instance. The master priest says one complete sentence at a time and the trainee parrots the words after him several times, until he is able to retain the whole sentence in his memory. This is done for each sentence until the whole verse has been covered. The onus is on the student to find time to repeat the whole verse to himself several times.

Learning how to chant the verse itself is reserved for a much later part of the training. A clever trainee, however, acquires the art of chanting Ifa verse by parroting his master when learning the verse at his daily sessions, and by attending regular assemblies of Ifa priests every first day of the four day Yoruba week.

What is most important to emphasize in the context of our theme, is that the verse is memorised with such great reverence that not a single word is missed. *It is considered to be extremely*

sacrilegious for anybody to add to, or subtract anything from the corpus. The verse must always be learned in the form in which it had been preserved and disseminated from ancient times. It is believed that in this way, the texts in the Ifa literary corpus have been kept free from errors, and the corpus therefore remains till today one of the most reliable genres of Yoruba oral literature.

At the end of his training period the trainee is submitted to a stiff examination by his peers, usually consisting of all the chief priests in the tribal grouping.

One other factor that is believed to have helped in preserving the text of the Ifa Literary Corpus free of errors by addition or subtractions, is a practice during the regular meeting of all Ifa priests in a given area, at the house of the Chief Priest, on every first of the Yoruba four-day week. At each a member is selected to introduce the meeting by chanting an appropriate Ifa divination with supporting chorus responses by all present. Should the chanter make a mistake, he is immediately warned, and ordered to correct this. If this recurs, or he refused to correct himself, he is thrown out of the meeting in disgrace with resultant loss in reputation in the community as the news spreads.

Two chapters in the Ifa Literary Corpus called Osasee* and Ejiogbe† were found to be of relevance to keloid formation. These show clearly that the ancient Yorubas knew about keloid and made some very important observations on its character and mode of presentation.

OSASEE

The person for whom Osasee is cast
Is warned by Ifa that all the children he would have
Should not have facial marks;
Should he decide to give his children facial marks,

It implies that he does not want children that will please him.

The reason is that
If any of the children survives
His facial mark scars would be raised.
The only remedy is for him to leave his children
Without any facial marks.

Ifa also says that he should perform sacrifices for his children

* Osasee is one of the minor 240 chapters (Odu) of the Ifa Literary Corpus. It is a combination of Osa on the right and Ose on the left.

† The first and most important of the principal sixteen Odu of Ifa.

Because they are going to be rich and important persons.
If he takes all these precautions, his children would survive,
And be comforters to him.

But he is warned not to give his children facial marks
So that the facial marks may not be raised.
This is the path through which Ifa makes his predictions
He said: "The kind-hearted would die
The wicked would die and go to the eternal sanctuary."

By this time next year
May we have a place to go
And eat maize gruel*
This Ifa divination was performed for *Jenrola*
Offspring of facial-mark artists in the ancient city of
Ijumu.

"Could he possibly have children?" he asked.
He was assured that he would have children.
"What should he do?" he asked.
He was told to perform sacrifice with ten pigeons, ten
cocks,
And ten "Oke" ** full of cowries.

He was told that after performing the sacrifice
He would have children—
But he must not mark the children with facial marks.
He said that he heard what he was told.

When he had a child.
He went and gave it facial marks; for
He was perplexed:
He said that since he was an offspring of facial mark
artists
It would not be proper for him not to give his child
facial marks.
The child would not look like him.

He therefore gave the child facial marks.
When the child grew up a little,
The facial mark scars started to swell.
He was surprised, because his own facial mark scars
were not raised.
In the end he became annoyed and killed the child.

On the second occasion
Because he had performed sacrifice on account of children
He had another child.
He wondered whether that child would be different from
the first one.
He took the child again and gave it facial marks

Thus he again marked another child with facial marks
And as the child grew up
The facial mark scars started to swell up.
He resolved to leave the child to grow up more
He thought that if it grew up
The facial marks would not be swollen any more

But as the child grew up
The facial mark scars remained elevated
The child was not well
The scars continued to grow
He was surprised that the child's facial marks did not
look like his,
And he thought the child would become a bad child,
And grow up to be totally different.
He therefore killed it.

After about seven times like that,
He left the seventh one without facial marks.
Before the seventh one reached the age of maturity,
He started to have money
He had plenty of other good things.

Jenrola then called again on his Ifa priests
He said that it is true that he had lost many of his
children
And now that one is alive
The only one that stayed
How could he have more?
How could he have more?
How could he have more children?
He started again to perform sacrifices and
His wife's prayers were again answered.

When his wife did have the child
He told his Ifa priests that since he was from a family
of facial-mark artists,
They should help him try their best
To make the child stay alive
He wanted it very much to have facial marks;
But when they marked the child with facial marks
The scars were swollen again.
They were frightened.
They started to perform sacrifices repeatedly.
Then the Ifa Priests changed their position
And went into the forest
Plucked the herbs of Ifa for him
And with it washed down the swollen facial marks.
The scars were still there,
But all the swelling
Turned into water
And dripped down.

It was just like a person with a lesion on the leg
A person with a bad leg,
Whose leg was swollen
But later burst open,
And the water dripped down.
The facial mark scars that remained were not swollen
But were like those on the father's cheeks
Who started to praise his Ifa Priests
While his Ifa priests praised Ifa—
Because that is exactly how Ifa priests employed their
good voices
To praise Ifa—saying
"The kind-hearted man would die
The wicked would die and go to eternal sanctuary."
By this time of next year
May we have a place to go
And eat maize gruel.

*"We will have a place to go and eat maize gruel." This refers to the annual festival of *Egungun* (Ancestor god) observed every year to propitiate the dead.

***Oke*—A container which takes 20,000 cowries which is the equivalence of five shillings.

Ifa divination was performed for *Jenrola*
 Offspring of facial-mark artists in the ancient city of
Ijumu
 Making of sacrifice brings blessing
 Neglect of sacrifice blesses no man
 Travellers to *Ipo*
 Travellers to *Oja*
 Come and find us amongst many children.

As to the results from studies of the Ancient Yoruba works of art, a number of terra-cotta sculptures which have a bearing on Keloids were found. Figures 3, 4 and 5 are photographs of well-known terra-cotta heads excavated from Ile-



Fig. 3. Terra-cotta head with keloidal scars. The beaded collar indicates clearly that it has been broken from a figure. It was found by Frobenius in the Olokun grove, Ife, Nigeria in 1910.

Ife, Western Nigeria. Radioactive analysis of carbonized materials deposited on the figures has been used in dating them as works executed about the ninth century A.D.^{5, 6}

It can not be controverted that these heads are portraits because the individuality of each face is fully realised and shows no trace of caricature. Furthermore, the excellence of the workmanship,

the dignity and serenity of the expression, attest to the sculptor's skill and attention to details.

On these works can be seen a number of vertical lines which cover most of the face. These marks are of similar pattern to tribal facial marks still used today by the Tewara Tribe of Southern Bornu, Northern Nigeria. It is important to emphasize that contact between the Yorubas and the Nupes, Fulanis, Hausas and Kanuris, north of the Niger, had been well established for a long time.

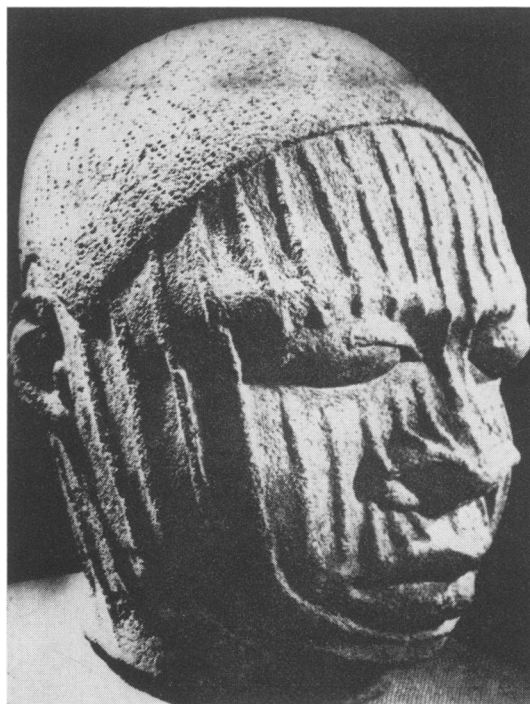


Fig. 4. Terra-cotta head with a cap and heavy facial scarifications (keloidal scars), excavated from the Grove of Iwinrin, Ife, Nigeria by Frobenius.

The vertical lines on the face (Figs. 3 and 4) were seen to be elevated above the general level of the facial contour, and contrast with those on another work executed about the same period, in which the lines were represented as grooves (Fig. 5).

DISCUSSION

Literature according to Buckle⁷ is the form in which the knowledge of a community is registered and perpetuated for posterity. Viewed from this perspective, literature therefore embraces a written, spoken or oral, and an art form.

It has always been the practice in medical circles when reviewing the literature on a subject,

to limit this to the written form of literature alone. Such reviews judged on Buckle's parameter must lead to conclusions which may not represent the *whole truth*, for it seems apparent that a comprehensively structured historical account of a subject can only emerge from a review, if and when it is approached from the broader perspective outlined above.

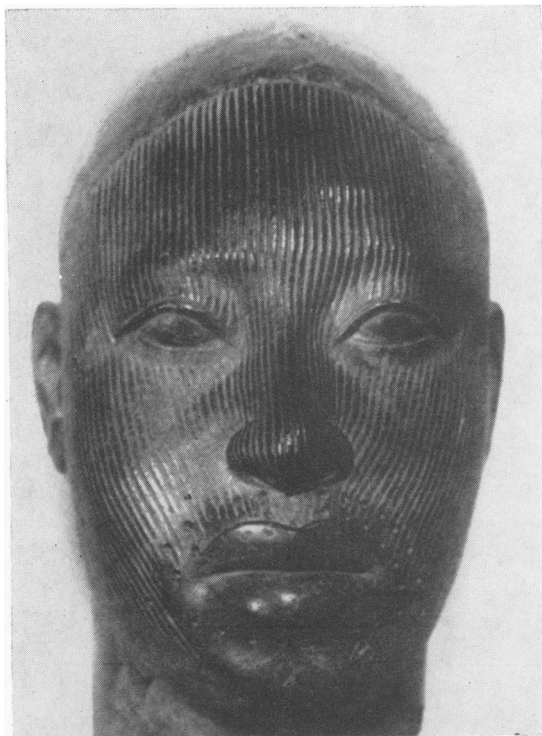


Fig. 5. Terra-cotta head showing facial scars which, in contrast to those in Figures 3 and 4, are represented by groove lines running down the face.

The Ifa divination quoted above indicates that the ancient Yorubas not only knew about keloids, but made some very important observations on their character and presentation. They knew, for example, that it frequently appears in the same family, that in such a family it does not affect all the members. They knew that there is a time interval between the infliction of the trauma that produces keloid and the appearance of the lesion. They also knew that once a lesion appears it grows in size and has no remedy except when "the Divine power is suitably appropriated to intervene in bringing about its resolution".

How much more information has recent reports in the literature added to these observations, apart

from those on histological appearances, and on the results of radiotherapy?

It may be contended that the above account is based on mythology and that we cannot place serious scientific value on this. In the defense of a contrary view, it is to be realized that the most commonly accepted theory amongst scholars and psychiatrists, is that myth is a mode of symbolic expression objectifying early human or group feelings and experience. Boris summed this up in his remarks that myth teaches us historical facts, although disguised as legend. That the actual experience it attempts to express and explain is admittedly exaggerated and at times cloaked in supernatural figures, does not remove the basic truth that there has been this central original experience. With this in mind, we ought to assess the literary value of oral literature, and thus the place of this study and our conclusions in the present text. Even written literature can only be accepted with similar reservation and on similar basis.

As regards the findings and observations on the terra-cotta sculptures, Willett⁸ emphasized in his analysis that the ancient works of Ife were paramously portraiture, that they differ from the partly impressionistic and restricted naturalism of the Nok tradition, north of the Rivers Niger and Benue confluence. He believed that the Ife figures represented their models in a realistic manner and these views are shared and echoed by other African art scholars and analysts.⁹

It follows that the only reasonable conclusion to draw is that Ife sculptors of the terra-cotta heads have been faithful to their models and that on Figs. 2 and 3 have been represented for posterity, lesions which conform with abnormal scari-fication marks of a keloidal type.

On the evidence from these two neglected areas of literature, oral and art, there is an indication that the Yorubas had not only recorded their awareness of keloidal lesions, but had also described some of its now well known characteristics about ten centuries before its reputed first description in the literature by Alibert in 1806.

SUMMARY

The contribution of the ancient Yoruba people of Western Nigeria to the world literature on keloid was investigated by studies carried out on

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ment for community residents, and improve the delivery of health services. Where resources are not sufficient to provide training and employment programs, agencies should combine their efforts to obtain their respective goals. The Children and Youth Project and the Public Service Career Program are federally subsidized with matching municipal funds. They were able to unite with a private agency, the Hannah Harrison School of the Young Women's Christian Association, to expand their respective services for disadvantaged residents of the District of Columbia.

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the Ifa Literary Corpus and on a number of archaeological excavations in Ife, the religious capital of the Yoruba tribe. The results show that the ancient Yorubas left records on keloids which antedated the first descriptions of the lesion in the world literature by Alibert and/or Retz by about ten centuries. These records also demonstrate the familiarity of these people with many of the well known characteristics of the lesions.

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