

Nigerian wooden sculptures and their preservation in the National Museum Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

Wood has played important roles in the life of man right from the Upper Palaeolithic period. It was used for fashioning tools, shelter, artistic and religious objects. Wooden logs are useful for fuel, bridges and tools for many occupations from the earliest time to the present, thereby making it possible for man to come to terms with his environment. It is on this basis that museums are making wooden objects conservation very important so that we can appreciate of wonderful works that came from wood. Studies have shown that prior the advent of foreign religions, most Africans wooden sculptures were carved to deify gods in the ancient times. Sculptural wooden objects were believed to possessed mystical powers, while many other carvings also functioned as house utensils before availability of modern technology. Arising from this, museums were set-up in different parts of Nigeria to preserve the socio-cultural heritage of the people against theft, deterioration and destruction by man. Therefore, this work studied the wooden objects in National Museum Lagos, analysis the types, background, their usefulness in the past and present times to the communities that produced them. It also studied the techniques of conserving wooden objects against deterioration in Lagos museum. The study shed light on the importance of preserving wooden objects in the museum as a benefit to enrich the knowledge of tourists, researchers and generations yet unborn.

Keywords: Wooden objects, cultural heritage, Museum, preservation and conservation.

Introduction

The traditional African sculptures are designed for purpose and functions. Most of them in the past civilisation were carved to either serve physical function as door, house-post, stool etc.; while others connote spiritual beliefs and traditional rites, like ancestral figures, divination bowls, ritual drums and so on. These among other purposes are the reasons behind the production of most Nigeria's wood carvings and sculptures. The uses of wood for carving both aesthetic and utilitarian wooden objects are signs of man's ability to understanding the environment in which he finds himself, as well as, redefining potentials in the natural resources to his advantage. Wood has been exploited by man since the Upper Palaeolithic period for fashioning tools, shelter, artistic and religious objects (Feilden 1979; Plenderleith and Werner 1971). Because of the usefulness of wood in fashioning various forms that served as utilitarian objects, such as musical instruments and household utensils in ancient times, and subsequently in the contemporary times as paper and even clothing.

It is obvious that museums are taking wooden objects' conservation very important so that we can appreciate of wonderful works that came from wood. Evidences of the great number of wooden objects collection in Lagos and other museums in Nigeria testified to this school of thought. According to Taylor (1981), there are evidences in archaeological context of wooden carpentry tools and cultural objects that may suggest how sophisticated the woodworkers were in the time past. Wood has been of immense use throughout human history owing to its

combination of valuable properties: it can be worked with tools as simple as stone axes, yet has great tensile strength and durability in relation to its relative light weight (Feilden 1979). It is impossible to conceive of human cultural history without wood, as it has served as the basis for the fabrication of structures, boats, furniture, utensils, mundane items, bridges, musical instruments, scaffolding and bracing for masonry construction, and all manner of sculpture and works of art. It is also the primary component for modern paper (Taylor 1981).

Wood components and strength

Wood is the skeletal tissue of higher green plants. It has two main components: lignin and cellulose fibrils (Taylor 1981; Cronyn 1990). The presence of lignin is in varying degrees; it helps reinforce and preserve the cellulose. The fibrils are bundled together to form the walls of cells that constitute the structure of plants. According to Cronyn (1990), the living cells of a tree contain cell sap made of a dilute solution of sugar, salt, and other metabolic materials. Taylor also supports this claim, by stating that cellulose is easily converted into sugar and dissolved away. However, if the cells are redundant for this purpose, they may contain waste and preservative materials such as tannin and resins. Wood is hygroscopic, that is, it has the tendency to absorb water or moisture from the atmosphere. Wood is also anisotropic, meaning that its physical characteristics in different directions are not similar. This is because the elongated cellulose fibres and cells lie along the longitudinal axis of the trunk or stem. In this regard, when fibres contract or expand, the overall response of the timber in the longitudinal (or grain direction) the radial, and the tangential planes will vary (Cronyn, 1990). When a tree falls, the moisture content of wood equilibrates with that of the environment. In the humid environments, this entails the gradual loss of cell sap, capillary water, and some absorbed water. This natural seasoning hardens the wood and removes a ready food source for fungi and bacteria. Natural drying could lead to too rapid loss of water from a timber, leading to non-uniform contraction or excessive loss of water. This reaction may result in the cracking and warping of wooden objects, as can be seen on some wooden object in the museums. There are other factors that also contribute to crack and decay of wood. Taylor (1981) says, in the earliest times, people tried to dry out wood or preserve it in alum in order to prevent cracks but this was never a successful method. It is possible to treat wood with preservatives before or during use, and wood may also be scorched to harden its nature (Cronyn, 1990).

Belief about wooden objects

The general belief of African wooden sculptures is that, they are gods, pagan and fetish materials that has mystical powers. Underwood (1951), notes that there is a connection of various forms of African art and the spirit. This means that many wooden sculptures produced are fashioned after some spiritual beliefs of a people. Spirits are involved in the natural environment of the deity, and they serve as the essence to prompt all artistic expressions. He states the following propositions for sculptural artistic expressions in Africa:

- i. The deity is the force demanding artistic expression, resided in the object represented.
- ii. The invisible deity inhabiting a wooden object was separated from its artistic representation in the sensible world, yet associated with it.
- iii. The world of spirits (in the second degree of transition) becomes depopulated and the deity resides in the individual conscience.

From Underwood's proposition, we may say that the carvers have contributed immensely to great sculptural expression on the belief of their people. The carvers in a language of common currency, created an imagery representing the spirits in order to protect his well-being, family and the entire community. It should be noted that many objects referred to by Underwood have found their ways into Lagos museum for conservation. Such objects are no longer being

worshiped, there is no strange importance attached to them in the museums where they are kept, yet it is necessary to preserve these arts, and records of the people attached to them intact for generations to read about.

In the same vein, Fai (2010) while writing on Soyinka's dramatic use of sculpture observes that, the Yoruba wooden mask has a force that extends to the world of spirits and gods. The Yoruba wooden mask has the dual effect of transforming the wearer and the ambivalence of serving good and evil ends. This indicates that the Yoruba mask, apart from its spiritual essence, is a symbol of great complexity and ambiguity (Fai 2010). The mask represents the deities in the spiritual realm and the spirits of the departed ancestors, other gods and spirits are represented by masks and statues which are kept in shrines where they are worshiped. In other words, traditional wood carvers were commissioned to carve mask in representation of deity or ancestor.

According to Fai (2010), the ancestors are worshiped through the *egungun* masked figures. The *egungun* is a form of ancestor in Yoruba land. It is a proof that the present generations of the living do not stand alone, nor is the individual ever abandoned entirely to the limits of his own powers. The dead ancestors are believed to be watching over and guiding their descendants. Fai (2010) presents mask as a medium through which gods and spirits become manifest in the world of the living. When the wearer becomes subservient to the spirit of the mask, he is often able to perform with greater skill than his own. When the mask is removed, the spirits depart and the human characters come back to normal and no longer speak with prophetic tongue. Thus, the socio-cultural importance of the Yoruba mask is to serve as a medium of communion and communication between man and the supernatural. Many of the Ibibio, Igbo and Yoruba *egungun* mask/regalia costume are sighted in Lagos and other museums in Nigeria are to preserve people's cultural beliefs.

Example of wooden objects preserved in Lagos museum

A study on preservation of wooden objects in the National Museum Lagos gives us insight into over 45,000 cultural heritage cutting across different medium of production, in which wood is one. The study is on preventive conservation of wooden objects in the Lagos museum, 24,850 wooden objects were examined. The number constituted about 60% - 65% (Adebayo 2003) of the total number of over 45,462 cultural heritage in the 2008 inventory of the museum. Thereafter, 10 samples were selected for discussion because they represented different categories of forms and functions in the sociocultural setting of the past civilisation. These selected wooden objects also represent various aspects of human endeavours in the historical past. These objects are representation of wooden mask; wooden door panels; wooden house posts; wooden-base drums; wooden divination bowls; wooden head dress; wooden staff; and ancestral figures that had performed one function or the other in the past.

The selected wooden objects have good artistic forms and also contain some aesthetic information. These objects also speak for the sociocultural attainment of major geographical locations of communities where wooden objects played significant roles in the past. These objects were considered to be in good condition of fitness under preventive conservation techniques used by the National Museum Lagos. A closer look at each one will help to know how they have been treated while using preventive conservation techniques.



Plate: 1

Title: *Obu*House posts

Medium: carved wood in relief form

Place of origin: Asaga, Ohia, Abia State

Dimension: 4.06m height; 1.76m circumference

This house posts mounted at the main entrance of Lagos National Museum. The house post “welcome” tourists into the museum premises as one walks pass to the gallery and courtyard of the museum to view exhibition on display. The wooden posts might have been placed at the Museum to continue its primary function from where it was brought as house post. The post is taller than what can be accommodated into any store or gallery of the museum. The giant house post caught our attention because it comes under our subject of study. The post is strategically located at the entrance of the museum (plates 1). The pillar measures 4.06m in height and 1.76m in circumference. The wooden post is divided into seven sections. Each section was decorated with various carvings of human and animal representations and other aesthetic design. The house post (plate 1) showed evidence of decay at the lower section. Impact of damage to the post was stopped by conservator leaving the affected area uncorrected. The object was being monitored everyday to see if there is any trait of decay. The conservators always cleaned the object whenever they discovered dust and cobwebs on it.

The human motifs were in various patterns on the wooden post. We observed that the carved figures on some segments were portrayed as mature and young female figures. This fact was evident in the ways and manner the carvers portrayed the breasts. Other noticeable features on the house posts were graphic symbols and geometrical shapes designed as traditional pattern peculiar to the Igbo people. The wooden posts appeared in their natural orange colour, which suggests that they were carved from Iroko-African teak wood. According to K. O. Olukotun (personal communication, March 3rd, 2014), teak is in the category of hardwood that is naturally orange or yellow ochre. Teak is mostly used for the carving of figure of traditional rulers, ancestors and king’s furniture.



Plate: 2
 Title: *Gelede* headress
 Medium: carved wooden mask
 Place of origin: Ketu-Ijale
 Dimension: 0.31m in height; 0.69m in circumference

Gelede wooden face mask was used in *gelede* cult in connection with witchcraft. History has it that it was a popular cult among the Yoruba of Egbado, Shabe, Awori, Ohori, Anago, and Ketu kingdoms, and some other parts of West Africa that have common tradition with the Yoruba, particularly Port-Novo, Togo. It is believed that witches of Ketu founded the cult. They used it to appease the spirit in order to protect the communities against male violent forces (*Lagos Museum documentation book*). *Gelede* ceremony is an annual event at the funeral of member's death. Membership of the society is open to both sexes but women hold some of the most important titles. *Gelede* festival is used to honour many deities and its main function is to entertain *Iya nla*, the great mother whom the Supreme Being has given some mystical powers. The *Iya nla* is believed by witches to have power of life and death and source of fertility over her offspring. The *gelede* dancers are men, but they usually disguise as women. Their costumes are designed to portray women features. The men in the community acknowledge the spiritual power of women through the *gelede* (Eyo, 1977).

The documentary fact about *gelede* (plate 2) stated that it was brought to the museum from Ketu-Ijale in Yewa North of Ogun State. It is 31cm in height and 0.69m in circumference. It was a carved mask with hair style protruding from the head to lap on the nose. We observed two carved male figures hanging on the mask with circular base support to gain their balance. According to G. Oko (personal communication, August 15th, 2011), the mask was painted with indigo dye in order to preserve the carved object. The eyeballs and other prominent features were lazied with outlines of purple colour in order to bring out prominent features. We noticed the paintings on the objects had already peeled off in some parts possibly due to scratches sustained through contact with other objects or possibly because of age. The underneath colour, which is the wood colour appears in white that suggest its origin of cedar (hardwood). According to K. O. Olukotun (personal communication, March 3rd, 2014), cedar wood are used for carved wooden masks which are later painted with dye. However, the age and time of acquisition of the object by the museum was not known to the workers in the documentation unit. From our observation, the object was physically fit and stable under preventive conservation method of Lagos National Museum. The object is kept in the store where conservators monitor it on a daily basis in order to prevent deterioration.



Plate: 3

Title: *Ose Sango*

Medium: carved wooden staff

Place of origin: Igbesa

Dimension: 0.57m in height, 0.5m width and 1.53m circumference

Ose Sango (plate 3) is Sango's axe or staff made of wooden object. It is a symbol of Sango's identity and power. Sango worshippers carry the *ose* as an emblem of intimacy with Sango and symbolic power to keep away evil. The Sango staff is believed to be endowed with magical powers. Thus, they are sometimes kept at the entrance of a farmland with the belief that thunder will strike trespassers. The same is believed to apply to anyone who swears falsely by Sango staff. The staff for Sango, the god of thunder, bears the symbol of a double axe. On Sango's altar are placed carved mortars for pounding because Sango was king of Oyo, the largest of the Yoruba kingdoms. His cult is mainly restricted to areas that were once under Oyo domination (G. Oko personal communication, August 15th, 2011).

According to *Lagos Museum Day Book*, this particular Sango staff is from Igbesa town in Oyo State. It is a wooden baton, bearing axe motif and structured in the form of T-square. It represents the axe head dedicated to Sango strength and power. The *ose* is carried around by a Sango priest possessed by Sango spirit during festival or ritual to honour Sango. The *ose* (staff) is believed to be an instrument used by Sango to cause thunder strike with extraordinary ease and grace. The object appears in plain black colour, possibly carved from a very strong wood. The height of the object is 0.57m, while the head shape of the T is 0.5m and circumference is 1.53m. The object is fit and stable in terms of conservation condition; it shows no sign of decay. The Sango axe is monitored in the store, while conservator checks for any sign of deterioration on a daily basis.



Plate: 4
Title: *Ekpo* face mask
Medium: carved wooden mask
Place of origin: Calabar
Dimension: 0.91m in height and 0.59m circumference

This *Ekpo* mask (plate 4) is from Calabar. It is a face mask that has a moveable jaw and two protruding eyeballs. It has ring designs on the top with two coiled horns like those of a ram. The wooden carved mask depicts the head of a ram. It is painted in very dark colour and its height is 0.91m and in circumference is 0.59m. According to G. Oko (personal communication, August 15th, 2011) the indigo paint is a form of preservative against termites in the traditional culture of Nigerians. The dark indigo painted colour is a preservative against termites. There was no sign of decay or insect attack on it when it was observed. The object is fit for storage under preventive conservation of museum. This particular wooden object might have been carved from *Mba* (*Funtimia eiastica*).

G. Oko (personal communication, August 15th, 2011) stated that the masks signify the *Ekpo* cult or society in Ibibio culture. According to the documented information of *Lagos museum day book*, *Ekpo* society uses black masks, often naturalistic in appearance with movable jaws, to maintain social order and appease the ancestors. It also signifies the ancestor and it is credited with mysterious powers. This belief buttresses the respect that the public has for cults through different carved mask. Eyo (1977) also stresses that some *Ekpo* masks are for cult or society, while others are for festivals and dance within age groups. There are two categories of *Ekpo* mask: the ones that talk and sing, and the ones that are usually silent. *Ekpo* originated from Cross River State, among the Efik and Ibibio people. But later the use of *Ekpo* mask diffused into Benin kingdom and Igbo land because of inter-boundary connections. The object is preserved naturally in the store and it is being monitored on a daily basis to see if there will be any sign of deterioration.



Plate: 5

Title: *Ukhure*

Medium: carved wooden staff

Place of origin: Benin City

Dimension: 0.62m in height and 0.15m circumference

Ukhure (wooden rattle staff) (plate 5) was brought into the museum from Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria as a representation of cultural heritage from Benin kingdom. It is a traditional staff that illustrates ancestral power and symbolizes nobility in Benin. It is a mark of authority and prestige within the family unit and entire community of Benin. The oldest member of the family owns *ukhure* as a symbol of power and authority. *Ukhure* is usually preserved or kept in the family ancestral shrine. In the royal court of Benin, a single carved staff represents Oba and his death. Like *ofo* staff in Igbo land, *ukhure* staff is preserved in the custody of the eldest son of the family. In the palace of Oba of Benin, *ukhures* are usually displayed on the altar to represent past Obas of Benin kingdom (G. Oko personal communication, August 15th, 2011).

The *ukhure* in plate 5 was carved as a folded palm signifying solidarity and power in Benin. It is a good example of Benin kingdom belief in culture and tradition. The object was carved with symbols and motif peculiar to the Benin people. It was carved from kola nut (*Cola acuminata*) or Iroko tree (*Chlorophora excels*). The object was later dipped into black dye in order to achieve long-term preservation. The wooden object's height is 0.62m and 15cm in circumference. There was no sign of decay or insect attack on the staff. The physical structure of the object is stable and fit for storage under preventive conservation of museum.

The painted dark colour was the indigenous method of preserving the object from termites before it was acquired by the museum. In the Museum, the object is preserved under close monitoring on a daily basis whether or not there will be reaction from agents of deterioration manifesting on it.



Plate: 6
Title: Mumuye figure
Medium: carved wooden figure
Place of origin: Wamba town
Dimension: 0.64m height; 0.38m circumference

The object (plate 6) is Mumuye figure from Wamba town in Adamawa State. The Wamba and Mumuye communities were the original owners of Mumuye ancestral figures. According to G. Oko (personal communication, August 15th, 2011), the historical fact about the carving and uses of this figure led to the establishment of the two neighbouring communities. However it was named after Mumuye town because of their involvement in producing the carved figures. The people of Mumuye town believed that the carved figure is a representation of god and it must have the same name within the community. The carving and uses of the figure diffused beyond Mumuye to Wamba, Chamba and most areas in Plateau and Taraba States.

In the traditional society of Muri Division of Adamawa State, Mumuye ancestral wooden figure represents the Supreme Being La, with whom the sun is identified. The Mumuye wooden figure is carved with flappy ears and is preserved in the house in order to protect the household against enemies, diseases and death. It is believed by the people that the object has the power to punish guilty persons and offenders in case of crime. It is sometimes brought out into the open to welcome important guests (Eyo 1977).

This particular Mumuye figure (plate 6) is painted in dark colour which might be used to preserve the object. It is 0.64m in height and 0.38m in circumference. There is no sign of decay or insect attack on it. The object is stable and fit for storage under preventive conservation of museum. We perceived the figure was carved from a single log of hard wood; this is evident in its physical structural fitness. It is preserved naturally in the store and it is being monitored on a daily basis to see if there will be any sign of deterioration. In case of deterioration, conservators move into action to save the object from losing its shape.



Plate: 7
 Title: *Erelbeji*
 Medium: carved wooden twin figure
 Place of origin: Ibadan town
 Dimension: 0.29m in height; 0.17m circumference

Ere Ibeji (twin figure) (plate 7) was brought from Ibadan in Yoruba land to Lagos National Museum. According to G. Oko (personal communication, August 15th, 2011) the former owner was Pa Akindele Tijani of Isale-Odo, Aje in Ibadan. It may be that the said owner carved the figure in respect of his late twins. However, twin figures are sculptures carved to commemorate the death of twins or one of the twins that might have died in Yoruba land. The act of honouring twins can date back to 1750-1830. Superstitious belief has it, that twins in Yoruba land are regarded as “*emi alagbara*” (powerful spirit). They are believed to be capable of bringing wealth to their parents and misfortune to those who do not honour them. In case one of the twins or both died, surrogate image (*ere ibeji*) were carved in wood and these become the focus of frequent rituals and sacrifices to the spirit(s) of the dead twin(s) (Eyo 1977). The carved wooden images of the twins were washed, dressed, offered food sacrifice and put to bed at night, as failure to do so may result in misfortune to the surviving twin or the family. The parents (usually the mother) might dance and sing in market places asking for alms and gifts for the twins. The twins’ mother also cooked beans regularly for the twins and served to other people.

The carved figures of the twins does not represent god (*orisa*), although they are often referred to as such. The essence of carving *ere-ibeji* lies in keeping the memory of the dead infant alive and to also invoke the spirit for blessings. There are two reasons for the ritual treatment of *Ibeji*. First, the spirit of the dead must be appeased so that it will not harm the remaining twin or any child born after the twin. Second, it is also hoped that if the *ere-Ibeji* is well-treated, its spirit will return to the earth. The *ere-ibeji* is carved in various styles that provide excellent record of Yoruba carving tradition and techniques (*Lagos Museum day book*). According to K. O. Olukotun (personal communication, March 3rd, 2014), twin figures in Yoruba land are carved from *Irena* (*Holarrhena floribunda*). This type of wood belongs to the class of hard and durable wood species.

The twin figure in Plate 7 is 0.29m in height and 0.17m in circumference. The object shows evidence of termites’ invasion at the waist to the base region. The impact of termites was from the primary origin and has since been put under conservation care in the museum (G. Oko personal communication, August 15th, 2011). The current status of the object shows stability fitness for storage in the store. This carved figure has distinguishable hairstyle, and beads tied round its waist. It has a male genital organ suggesting a male child. The technique and style of the hair are prominent in the art piece of *ibeji* figures from Abeokuta. The figure is preserved in

the store of Lagos Museum and is being monitored against pests or other forms of deterioration.



Plate: 8
Title: *Ikenga*
Medium: carved wooden figure
Place of origin: Onitsha
Dimension: 0.27m height; 0.33m circumference

Ikenga (Plate 8) is a wooden figure brought into the museum from Onitsha, Anambra State. It is a representation of Igbo cultural heritage (G. Oko, personal communication, August 15th, 2011). Historically, it is known as the power of the right hand of any accomplished Igbo man in the past. Today, the culture has diffused from Igbo land to Edo State. A similar version of wooden figure carved by the Edo people is called *Ikengaobo*. The Igala people in Kogi State call their similar object *Okega*. The Urhobo people in Delta State call their similar object *Oboh* (G. Oko, personal communication, August 15th, 2011). Although these objects are from different ethnic groups, they serve similar functions and belief about the various people. One can easily know the object representing a particular group from the way in which it is carved.

The *Ikenga* in Igbo land is carved to portray human figure holding different things, such as elephant tusk, sword. The Edo people carve *Ikengaobo* with either a horn or several horns round the base of the object. The Igala's *Okega* is carved into decorated segments of different motifs. The Ijaw and Itsekiri of Delta State carve theirs with complete figure tying white cloth and at times holding knife supported by the base (*Lagos Museum day book*). These objects symbolize the strength of the right hand that is man's achievement as an individual in all fields of endeavour, such as trade, farming, hunting and warfare. *Ikenga* may be owned by an individual or the community. But in case the owner dies as an individual, the *Ikenga* is broken into two parts and buried with the owner or thrown away (*Lagos Museum day book*).

Plate 8 is one of the *Ikengas* in the collections of National Museum Lagos. It is a carved figure holding on to wooden cutlasses in both hands. The object is carved sitting on a round base as if providing a balance for the carved wooden object. Historical antecedent of wood types and names suggest that the *Ikenga* might have been carved from Iroko-*Meliscia excelsa* (Keay, 1990). We observed the object was painted all over with dark colour which was the method of preservation against insects in the past. *Ikenga* was selected for analysis because it is a unique wood carving that symbolizes power and achievement with which people are respected in eastern part of Nigeria. The object is 0.27m in height and 0.33m in circumference at the base. It might have been carved from a single hard log. The object is currently preserved under preventive conservation and monitoring in the National Museum Lagos.



Plate: 9
Title: Nupe door panel
Medium: carved wooden object
Place of origin: Nupe town
Dimension: 1.60m in height, 0.19m width and 0.015m thick

The object (Plate 9) is Nupe door panel. The functional value of this door is noteworthy because of the significant nature of this object to the Tiv people. Nupe door panel is significant for protection against trespassers and hoodlums in a traditional African setting. This kind of door panel was used by noble men, traditional rulers, and those who could afford its cost in the past. The Nupe people of Benue State have produced many of such doors carved in low relief in a blend of decorative designs. Nupe door panels show elaborate styles, themes and detailed decorative designs. All these point to mastery of skillful workmanship and creativity. The decorative pattern of Nupe door panels depict reptiles which are found in that part of the country. The significance of reptiles in the Nupe panels is attached to the belief that Nupes' souls of ancestors originated from them (*Lagos Museum day book*). Sometimes, the panels are decorated with geometric designs like we found among the Igbo people. The cost of the door panel depends on how strong and how attractive the design is (G. Oko, personal communication, August 15th, 2011). According to K. O. Olukotun (personal communication, March 3rd, 2014) wooden panels are usually carved from the class of hardwood because of the functional role played outside the closed door. Door panels are, in certain measures, subjected to environmental hazards. Therefore, the traditional wood carvers go out in search of the best type of hard wood to carve door panel in any given community.

This figure (Plate 9) is 1.60m high, 0.19m and 0.015m thick. The door panel is heavily decorated with different kinds of objects and motifs. The carver depicts: snake, sheep, giraffe, lizard, crocodile, cutlass, sword and geometric shapes. The panel is polished over the natural wood colour. There are no signs of warp and cracks on the door panel. This suggests that the object is responding to the preventive conservation method of the museum. The object is preserved in the store of the museum and it is being monitored against pests or other forms of deterioration.



Plate: 10
 Title: *Opomulero* Yoruba house post
 Medium: carved wooden post
 Place of origin: Owo
 Dimension: 1.93m height; 0.86m circumference

Plate 10 is a house post from Owo in Ondo State. It is 1.93m in height and 0.86m in circumference. In Yoruba land, carved wooden house posts support the roof of the house. The design on this unique historical Yoruba house post tells story about the daily life experiences. According to G. Oko (personal communication, August 15th, 2011) carved house posts represent an important architectural status in Yoruba communities, as they can only be afforded by the rich people. Most Yoruba house posts are generally found in royal palaces and in the homes of titled chiefs. Royalty and prestige are usually reflected in the art of the Yoruba people. This included carved house posts and door panels. Some of these were carved in high or low relief scenes on the door panels. G. Oko (personal communication, August 15th, 2011) asserted that the object must have been carved from hardwood because it is expected to be used in the palace. Historically, Yoruba traditional wood-carvers made use of ebony black or brown colour for the carving of house posts. Sometimes, the carvers may use *ole* (*Nessogordonia papaverifera*), or *apa* (*Afzelia africana*) to carve wooden house posts. This house post (Plate 10) is one of the collections of the Lagos national museum. It was carved with two seated figures from a single log. One figure was carved on top of another as support. The top figure is a male figure holding its long beard. The figure is also portrayed as wearing a cap. The lower part of the post is a female figure. The figure is seated on a low stool and carries a calabash on her lap. The carver might have conceptualized a husband and a wife in a home setting.

The carved house post was left in natural brown wood colour. It was not painted nor varnished and there was no sign of insect attack on any part of the object. It might have been carved from a wood that has the tendency to resist termite and other insects. The condition of the object is stable and fit for storage under preventive conservation in a museum store. The selection of the object was based on its function in ancient architectural design and aesthetics. It also has the tenacity to withstand sunray, rain and other atmospheric agents of deterioration. The object is

preserved in the store and it is being monitored on a daily basis to see if there will be any sign of deterioration.

Table 1: Selected wooden objects in Lagos museum

Title	Nature of objects	Origin of Objects
1. Obu House Post	Wooden house post	Asaga- Abia State
2. Gelede Mask	Wooden head dress	Ketu-Ijale in Ogun State
3. Ose Sango	Wooden staff	Igbesa in Ogun State
4. Ekpo Mask	Wooden face mask	Calabar in Cross River State
5. Ukhure	Wooden staff	Benin City in Edo State
6. Mumuye	Wooden figure	Wamba in Adamawa State
7. Ere Ibeji	Wooden figure	Ibadan in Oyo State
8. Ikenga	Wooden figure	Onitsha in Anambra State
9. Nupe Door panel	Wooden door panel	Otukpo town in Benue State
10. Yoruba House post	Wooden house post	Owo in Ondo State

Discussion

The selected 10 wooden objects (Table 1) for discussion from Lagos Museum were to give an overview of objects in terms of functions, aesthetics and effects of preventive conservation on them in the museum. The selection focused on functional objects, such as masks, head dresses, ancestral figures, door panels, house posts, wooden bowls and ceremonial wooden drums. The selection from different groups in the country was to highlight creativity, skill and technological antecedent of various groups from the ancient times to the present.

Selection of *Mumuye* and *Ikenga* was based on the belief of dead ancestors and legendary heroes to often return to earth to guide and support their living relatives. Also most ethnic groups in Nigeria have believed in a supreme God, and that the only way to reach the supreme God is through lesser gods, ancestors and spirits. These gods are represented in sculptural form in different shrines across the country. *Ikenga*, *Mumuye* and *Ekpu* are examples of such ancestral figures symbolized in wooden image. *Ere-Ibeji* carved wooden sculpture symbolises dead twins or twin in Yoruba land. *Gelede* wood mask, *epa* mask and *ekpo* wooden mask were worn by masquerades to give magical help and protection, to pass judgment on wrongdoers and to provide entertainment among the people. House posts and door panels selected from Nupe and Yoruba lands are functional objects in the societies and are heavily decorated; this present a good reason for their preservation. *Ilu* among Yoruba represents musical instruments. In Nigeria, music plays an important role in daily, domestic, religious and ceremonial life of the people. Drum is a means of communication and information dissemination, as well as a means of commemorating different stages of life. Going by the historical uses of cultural wooden objects among Nigerian forebears, one will agree that these objects are worthy to be preserved.

This work studied and documented methods, facilities and effects of taking care of wooden objects in the National Museums of Lagos, Nigeria. It shed more light on the primary functions and unique history of wooden objects as well as their management in the museum. These objects represent the ancient technology of our forebears, which is being preserved because of their socio-cultural, religious, political, aesthetic, touristic and economic significance to the past, present and future generations. It should be noted, museum is responsible for the care of tangible and intangible natural or cultural heritage. It has a primary responsibility to protect and promote heritage as well as the human, physical and financial resources made available for

that purpose (ICOM, 2006). The 21st century context of museum is “an institution developed by modern society to stop as much as possible the deterioration and loss of objects treasured for their cultural values” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1986; UNESCO, 1987). The museum does not store idle and condemned cultural objects but functional and historical ones for the purposes of information, knowledge, and wisdom on human, artistic and scientific practices. It does not also store idols or gods to be worshipped. Whenever the authority of a museum acquires an object or material, the primary function of such object ceases to go on in the museum. The primary function of the museum institution on any object it acquires is to conserve, maintain, and guarantee the safety of such object (UNESCO 1982; 1987).

Conclusion

Records have shown that National Museums in Lagos and other museums in Nigeria, house great patrimony of the nation’s cultural objects. According to historians, values of collections in Nigerian museums equal and sometimes challenge the finest holdings in the world (NCMM 1998; 2009; 2010). The study views wooden objects as a good medium of preserving and reconstructing history if they are scientifically taken care of in the museums. It took cognizance of a national treasure from ancient times as a benefit to enrich knowledge of tourists, researchers and the coming generations. This study of preventive conservation of wooden objects in Lagos and Oron museums throws light on the creativity, skills, usefulness and ancient technology of the carvers who made these exquisite art pieces. The objects in the Lagos museum are expected to last for longer periods if modern scientific equipment and facilities are procure to raise the level of conservation practice.

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