

Religious Consideration and the Artistic Preview of 'Babasigidi' in ILE-IFE

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Abstract *The myth surrounding Babasigidi statue cannot be underestimated, and his case stems from the fact that he was a warrior who performed many historical feats among his people in Ile Ife in the ancient days. The notable and knowledgeable people such as the custodian of the shrine and chiefs in the communities were interviewed with the confirmation that if Babasigidi is properly studied, it can help to rediscover the knowledge of post ancient culture of Ife for the good of all Yoruba people and mankind generally. It was discovered that with the series of terra cotta sculptures in Ile-Ife, the possibility to interpret Ife culture and to reconstruct their cultural history could be made easier. The theme, Babasigidi is one of the most neglected aspect of research work in Ile Ife history, and this must be delved into critically so as to document the socio-religious, and Art historical facts about this great hero. This will also allow the proper placement of oral tradition of the Ife people. In this regard therefore, it could be said that the study like this is a momentous step towards the development of modern historiography, most especially that which embraces testimonies surrounding the culture and tradition of the Ife people.*

Keywords: *Culture, Babasigidi, Reconstruct, Ile-ife, Ancient, Terra Cotta.*

1. Introduction

The ancient Yoruba town of Ile-Ife, according to oral historical handout submits that "it is the first creation in this world". Ile-Ife is the holy city, the home of divinities and mysterious spirits, the source of all oceans and the gateway to heaven (Fashogbon, 1995). A school of thought even speculates that Ile-Ife was the seat of civilization from where Egypt received its civilization which later spread to the Hebrews and the Babylonians then to the Chaldeans, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans and finally to the Britons (Fabunmi, 1969). Generally, therefore, Ile-Ife has earned many enviable appellations, viz:

Ile-Ife, ile Owuro
Ile-Ife, Oodaye
Ile-Ife, Ibi ti ojumo ti mowa
Ile-Ife, Ori aye gbogbo
Ile-Ife, Ooye Lagbo

(Fashogbon, *op.cit*)

Ile-Ife, the land of the most ancient days
Ile-Ife, where the word of creation took place
Ile-Ife, where the dawn of the day was first experienced
Ile-Ife, head of the whole universe
Ile-Ife the city of the Survivors.

Yoruba oral history even testifies to it that Oduduwa the progenitor of the Yoruba, and other 'Leaders of Mankind' (deities and divinities) were the Survivors (Ooye Lagbo) after the deluge and that they were the founders of Ile-Ife whence the people migrated to the different territories they presently occupy (Fashogbon,

1995). Because of Ife's importance in the realm of creation, it has many traditional festivals to commemorate the many deities known in the history of the city and in Yoruba land.

Ife-Ife is located between latitude 7.29N and longitude 4.35E on an elevation of about 275 meters above sea level. The total annual rainfall in Ife-Ife supports the people in the agricultural practices; hence, this forms their basic occupation. They also engage in art and crafts, which consist of wood carving, metal work, ivory carving, pottery making, dyeing, weaving and bead making. Arts and crafts were originally popular and prevalent in Ife, which became world famous for the beautiful works of art. Babasigidi therefore, represents one of the Ife important artifacts that is religiously celebrated annually. Because of its relevance in the community, pacification rite or pacificatory offering, *etutu* has to be made to him with supportive musical rhythm to enliven the social relevance of the great hero, Babasigidi at Okejan area of Ife.

Lastly, Ife is regarded as the cradle of Yoruba. To support this submission, Johnson (1959) says that "All the various tribes of the Yoruba Nation trace their origin from Oduduwa and the City of Ife-Ife. Cole (1965) also testifies to it that the city of Ife-Ife had its foundation laid in antiquity and geological era far beyond the comprehension of human intelligence. Supporting the important position of Ife-Ife, Ade Ajayi, a renowned historian, adds that it was from Ife, the cradle of Yoruba, that the Binis got their long line of kings, the Oranmiyan dynasty and the technological known how of brass casting which produced the bronzes from which Benin is now universally famous.

2. Babasigidi in the Religion of Ife

According to Fabunmi, the late Odole of Ife-Ife, Heathenism was originally predominant in Ife-Ife and the people were strongly addicted to the observance of their ancient festivals and the worship of the gods and goddesses connected with them (Personal Interview). Out of all these festivals in Ife-Ife, only Edi and Olojo festivals are related to the worship of Babasigidi.

In the traditional setting of Ife-Ife, there is always a communal effort to retain a hold on the deities so as to evoke both the great ones whose blessings and goodwill are indispensable to the well-being of the entire Ife community. The people of Ife-Ife, most especially the traditionalists consider it to be of utmost importance to ensure a continuity of interaction between the various worlds and periodically bring their deities or the ancestors into the living society, inform of festivals. During Edi and Olojo festivals in Ife-Ife, the life of the community is renewed. People are entertained, and their tensions find an outlet (Mbiti, 1975). It brings people together as a group, thus strengthening their unity and cohesion, he further adds. It is a common belief among the traditionalists that the rituals and festivals are religious ways of strengthening the society. It is pertinent to add further that in most festivals, there is a metaphysical import, a psychic interaction between the living and the dead deemed to be able to control the values and beliefs natural phenomena (Mbiti, opt.cit).

During the worship of Babasigidi, invocation, proclamation and placation are the focal points of the festival that involves the pacification of the Babasigidi. Its worship stems from the conscious communal appeal to greater power for some form of benevolence, and its worship also is geared towards getting benefits such as rainfall, good harvest, and eradication of poverty, longevity and human reproduction (Personal Interview).

Ife festivals generally reside in their celebrations and not in any dogma or devoutness of celebrants and that the religious rituals embodied in most of these festivals are renewals rather than mere commemoration. It is therefore valid to add that the worship of Babasigidi is a celebration of acknowledgement of the protection he is believed to have been given in the previous years, while soliciting for continuity. During the worship, the society eagerly looks forward to the directives and responses of Babasigidi, which are interpreted by the chief priest, the *Osoro*, the chief in charge of its shrine.

In other to prepare adequate grounds for Babasigidi worship during Edi festival, the bust (statue) of Babasigidi is pacified with rites, and the common ingredients in use include palm oil, kolanuts, alligator

pepper, and cold water. Palm wine is prohibited because according to the chief priest, he was a warrior and drinking palm wine might intoxicate him because he can be called anytime to go to war (Personal Interview). Libation is also performed because it is an essential aspect of Babasigidi worship. The significance of libation is that the liquid softens the ground and symbolically opens the way to the divine power or powers.

As the libation is poured, the chief priest involves the spirit of Babasigidi with incantation and recitation of his cognomen (oriki) and equally inviting him to attend and accept the sacrifice. A ram is slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on its statue. In the past, human blood used to be sprinkled on the statue (Personal Interview).

But recently, the blood of a goat is used instead in the purification rites, he further adds. Probably the idea behind the use of animal blood is that the life of the animal is passed onto that of the worshippers to strengthen or protect them (Mbiti, opt.cit). The fact that the goat is to be killed, that is, the life of the animal has to be taken before it is used in ritual, as such makes the people to feel that the ritual is a serious business and likewise strengthens their belief in its effectiveness (Ibid.).

Before the blood of the sacrificial animal (goat or ram) is sprinkled on the bust of Babasigidi, the bust is first and foremost wrapped with white cotton material by the Osoro, the chief priest. White (funfun) is mostly cherished by those who believe in traditional religions. White is considered pure and righteous and favoured by the deities (orisa). This is why white is used in most Black African countries to meet traditional religious obligations.

The statue of Babasigidi could be compared with the Maternity figure in terra cotta found in the hinterland delta region of the Niger River near Djenne, in Mali. The figure represents a mother and child. The seated figure holds her child; it has the same function and attitude of Babasigidi because it is believed to have the ability to satisfy the people religiously. The local people worship it with sacrifice, and rites are observed to solicit favours from the spirit world. All these spiritual powers are important and in turn they may help man in his incessant fight against diseases, draught or witchcraft (Parrinder, 1954).

Viewing the statue, the concept submitted by Sieber and Walker (1986-1988) that it is not surprising that African sculpture was considered ugly; the antithesis of beautiful by early observers relates to the bust of Babasigidi because physical ugliness is highly portrayed but to the adherents, the relevant spiritual beauty is apparent. The statue supports African religious demands whereby function and meaning of art works are most crucial, since it was made to meet their religious obligations.

Supporting Walker and Sieber's view about the art object, Parrinder (Ibid) also is of the view that symbols that men use, masks, colours, numbers, names, metaphors, all link up with the energy in the desired object. They are not dead symbol. Because the bust of Babasigidi still responds to the wishes of his people if adequately pacified; it is believed to be alive. When annual festival is combined with rituals and rites, they all become part of the cycle of life, and the art object (Babasigidi) which associated with them can be considered a living being. This is equally valid because, as Sieber and Walker (Ibid) equally submit that man gives life even where natural objects and phenomena have no biological life. This could relate to the statue of Babasigidi, who gives favors to its people if well pacified, since spiritual power resides in it; the power which can be used openly and publicly for the good of the lfe people. The position of songs in the ethnographic analysis of the cult of Babasigidi, is very salient. Songs convey the faith of the worshippers, and their belief in and about the deity (Babasigidi), is assured. Songs enhance emotional and physical prominence in all lfe festivals and worships. To the worshippers songs are path finders to the spirit world.

3. Who was Babasigidi

The paucity of existing literature on Babasigidi has strongly reduced the task of receiving and overhauling the existing literature. In view of this, the few available literature on Babasigidi is not elaborate enough to deal with the subject matter "who was Babasigidi?" Infact most works on the history of lfe, which made mention of Babasigidi did not approach its history in most scientific way. Eluyemi (1986) makes mention of Babasigidi in

the shrine of Ile-Ife but did not elaborate on other aspects such as its relevance in Ife religious history, its artistic preview was also left untouched. Because of this lapse therefore, this paper looks into the man and his relevance to the Ife people, from the socio-religious, artistic, and historical perspectives. This section focuses mainly on oral traditions of Ife through interviews of notable and knowledgeable people in the society.

In addition to this, ethnographic data comprise evidence from the social and religious organizations, traditional festivals and visible material culture of the people. Questions such as: Who was Babasigidi? Was he a warrior or ruler? Elder or semi-god of his time? Why was he deified? Is the statue or bust an ordinary or a ritual image? All these will sum up to answer the question as to who Babasigidi was in the history of Ile-Ife and his people.

Fabunmi (1976) describes Babasigidi as an Ife warrior of antiquity who instead of dying in a normal way converted himself to stone. This paper falls within the same category of papers, which can be referred to as "written oral account." This is because most of the material evidences in it have been lucidly brought to the limelight by pure oral tradition without scientific syntheses. According to Jagun Obaluaye, the custodian of Babasigidi shrine, the magical favour of Babasigidi was the underlying reason for its lithic transformation (Personal Interview).

Before embarking on the historical background of Babasigidi, it is imperative to note that the allusion constantly made to it as having transformed into a bust after his demise cannot be analytically and scientifically proved. However, the fact that he was a hero in historic times cannot be disputed. The bust only represents an attempt by his people to approximate and localize the spirit of their departed ancestor and equally to immortalize him.

According to Humaani Adejuwon, Babasigidi was originally called SALEWA, which literarily means a special gifted child, and a powerful warrior whose contribution in enhancing the military strength of Ife in ancient times is considered monumental (Personal Interview). Oral historical handout holds it that he was one of the earliest aborigines that Oduduwa (the progenitor of the Yoruba) met when he arrived Ile-Ife. Babasigidi's association with Elesije, a powerful man in traditional medicine (Babalawo) made him to be strong in traditional medicine. As the order of the day, there used to be wars of expansion by conquests. Salewa (Babasigidi) used to go warring on different directions in order to help the people of Ile-Ife to expand their city/territory. To support his warning activities, Janet Obajobi recites his cognomen (oriki).

Babasigidi o gbojo Ogun
O gbewu keleku wo
O fese lule pepe nile ijan

Babasigidi, heard war was coming
And puts on his armour
And banged his feet on the floor at ijan

Another oral tradition has it that he lived during the reign of Luwo (King of Ife) the only woman to become Ooni (title of the king of Ife).

She later adds that he did not die but transformed into stone. This explains the genesis of the popular saying among the Ife people, "ki se pe o ku, o se ni Mole dota ni" literarily meaning that he did not die but transformed into stone. There are series of oral traditions regarding who Babasigidi was and his activities in Ile-Ife. Some of these orals confirmed that he was not even a native of Ile-Ife and that he was an Igare, Oluyare or Igbo (a close neighbour of the Ifes); with the submission that he was taken captive during the turmoil between the Ifes and the Igbos and was given a place at Irewo together with his people. Irewo is a section of Ile-Ife where his shrine is located (at Okejan). His shrine is very ancient and occupies a salient position in the annual festivals of Edi and Olojo in Ile-Ife. About how and why he died, Gbenke Awosunle

opines that the trauma of the death of all his children propelled him to take his own life, which caused the earth to open and swallowed him.

It must be noted that death in Africa is a mere departure of the soul from the body; it does not mean that the soul has ceased to exist. This was why Babasigidi's adherents went ahead to localize his spirit or soul through an effigy known as his bust/statue.

4. Artistic Consideration

Looking at this sculptural piece artistically with perceptibly different kinds of 'identities' one detects a tendency for perceived worth, a combination of traditional artistic value and religious relevance. The statue of Babasigidi is more on the side of ethnographic artifact rather than on the side of 'objet d'art'. If this statue/bust is placed in any art museum in the world, it would probably arouse a religious appraisal rather than a mere socio-artistic implication. Whatever side is taken, this has not reduced its artistic merit. Price (1989) stresses that ethnographic artifacts (such as Babasigidi's bust) become masterpiece of world artifact at a point when they shed their anthropological contextualization and are judged capable of standing purely on their own spiritual- aesthetic merit.

Information about this bust of Babasigidi is elaborated during the Edi and Olojo festivals, thus supporting the belief that the artifact possesses religio-aesthetic quality worthy of transmission to the celebrants during festivals. The adherents form an understanding of the artifact on the basis of perceptual-emotional absorption of its socio-religious as well as artistic qualities. With this in mind, it is perhaps valid to now suggest that all tribal artifacts and other religious objects from whatever culture in Black Africa and Oceania share the same fundamental principles and belief, with pride in terms of their trado-artistic relevance and evaluation. From this perspective therefore, it seems important to recognize that cultural background should be considered along when appreciating tribal artifacts and art.

In the western world, art has generally been studied or interpreted in terms of "The work itself" unlike what is applicable in the Black world. Certainly, the bust and shrine of Babasigidi must have a direct relevance to human death. If this was so, then according to Willett (1973) it seems likely that the bust also might have played some part in the post mortem ritual. The association of human remains and bust, archaeologically support Willett's suggestion that the 'classical' sculpture of Ife may have been made to represent deceased persons of importance for use in rituals, like the second burial ceremonies practiced in some Yoruba towns.

The artist who made this bust conveys the authority of his subject in the composure of the face and the directness of the gaze as well as in the seated position and gesture. The expressive power of this statue is that the artist did not only depict a socio-religious role, but also makes us aware of a person who held the role which is the seated babasigidi himself. One feels the weight of the statue in the abdomen as it spreads on the hips as he sits on the semi-circular basement. Balance, composure and religious authority are achieved. The proportions by which the artist defined the figure are similar to the stone figures in Esie (A Yoruba from not far from ile-ife) and other Yoruba figure sculptures. The head is given prominence, constituting at least a quarter of the full sculptures and enhanced by the addition of the hat made of raffia in conical structure.

In most Yoruba sculptural representations almost all seated figures represent persons of authority. The seated Babasigidi figure conveys a quite dignity and composure and represent his importance among the people of ife. It shares with other Yoruba figure sculptures a strong frontal emphasis, and the outer head is the physical tangible aspect of the human presence. In the frontal view, balance is achieved by the legs spread apart. The softness of the material used (clay/mud) permits an indulgence in creating features on the face. The shape of the eyes and the fullness of the mouth add to the sense of power and the physical presence it possesses. There is little or no suggestion of movement and the face does not express any emotion. According to Drewal *et al.* (1989), persons of high rank whether priests, chiefs or rulers are depicted in a naturalistic style that is strongly conventionized.

Although the statue is associated with stone in oral tradition, it seems to have been made of clay/mud; this is because of the possibility to create curves on the statue. Babasigidi is a compound word: Baba refers to father or king and Sigidi mud sculpture which is usually used to serve as errands in the application of medicine particularly those employed in afflicting evils on people by the Yoruba. Therefore Babasigidi means an image of medicinal power found among other Yoruba communities in South-western Nigeria, Togoland and the Republic of Benin. Unlike other statues or sculptures in Ile-Ife, Babasigidi statue is made of clay/mud molded figure. This makes it distinct from the other three principal kinds of stone working techniques in Ife. In the classical period, granite, quartz and soapstone were used. Granite was used for monoliths figures, quartz for ritual stools and soapstone for stools and figures.

The raffia hat as portrayed in the statue, is known as Corronet (oro), which clearly points to the fact that he was a chief before his demise. Only traditional chiefs in Ife tradition and convention are allowed to wear coronet, this informs the use of coronet in the statue. In like vein, the presence of an ethnographic feature, the parrot's feather, iko-ode, indicates that he was an embodiment of authority and power. In addition, the cutlass and the knife found in his shrine indicate that he was a warrior. This infact corroborates the evidence emanating from oral traditions as regards his status while on earth. The statue is one of the many that represent people of high class in the past. It is one of the Ife ancient art, and very important in archaeological reconstruction, because it can be used to establish cultural sequence, define regional groupings and throw more light on the past activities of people or place.

With this artistic preview of Babasigidi, new ideas and desperations will subject its history to be re-written while the whole history of Ife will be revalued taking Babasigidi as one of the cannons to be used for consideration.

5. Conclusion

The oral and historical evidences from Babasigidi as a legend, have enriched our understanding of Ile-Ife, its religion and belief system. As it is, we cannot but be conclusive in the belief that the statue of Babasigidi is a creation of the imagination of the Ife people. He did live as a warrior who performed many historical feats and became unforgettable being. He fought many tribal wars and protected Ile-Ife during the war period, and was one of the founding fathers of Igbo-town. Therefore, in the minds of his people anything that could be done to immortalize and represent his presence among them is not too much. It was because of this reason that a mud/clay statue was molded representing his image called Babasigidi. This paper is just an attempt to unravel the hidden fact about this important warrior, who devoted his whole life serving his people before and after his demise.

Lastly, the paper is of the opinion that further studies into this cryptic topic must continue, and new grounds explored in the ethnographic and archaeological interpretation of Babasigidi.

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