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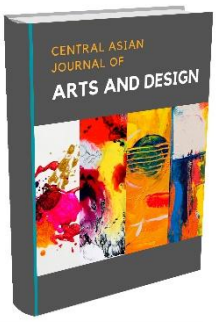

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Contextual Analysis of Some Benin Blacksmithing Works

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Abstract

The signification of iron lamps, gongs and staffs in the socio-cultural, religious and political lives of the traditional Benin society cannot be overemphasized. These items are products of the blacksmithing artistic practice. These products were common items of everyday use in all spheres of the Community; and they engender both physical and spiritual signification in the communities where they play major roles. The Benin blacksmiths were not left out as they were actively engaged in this artistic iron technology. The configural, contextual and formal elements seem to underscore the peculiarity and importance of these products to the people and the dexterity of the craftsmen (blacksmiths) in these communities. Nevertheless, the contextual elements embedded in these items seem to have been neglected in contemporary Nigerian art historical narratives. This paper takes an analytical look at the underline formal configuration and context of the blacksmiths lamps, gongs and staffs produced by the Benin traditional blacksmiths. It employed the formalistic and iconographic art historical methods in analyzing these art works. This analysis has been able to establish a better understanding and appreciation of these unique artworks in the socio-cultural development of traditional Benin society.

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Introduction

Iron working has been a primordial artistic activity of the traditional African Society. “Iron has played a significant role in the sociocultural, economic, and environmental sphere of many African

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communities, past and present, not only as utilitarian items, but in the creation of symbolic, artistic and ornamental objects" (Iles, 2017). As man began to develop into larger families and communities, the need for food, shelter and security become higher. Therefore, the quest to make the environment better led to the inventing of various tools and implements. With the discovery of iron metal, as a strong (tough) and malleable metal, different items of socio-political and religious importance began to emerge. The environment and society where the art of iron working thrives, the blacksmiths became the fulcrum upon which socio-religious, political and cultural belief system and technology were anchored. The people were provided with the means to sustain life through the mastery of iron and the technologies of smelting and forging (Arnoldi, 1998:11). This has continued even until present day. Radiocarbon analyses indicate that the first occurrence of iron in West Africa (Africa) was in the first Millennium BC (Maclean, 2012); Nok culture smelters may have separated iron from ores in furnaces at Taruga which date to around the fourth century BC (Shaw, 1978:82 in Rebora, 1983:27). However, "recent discovery from Oboui in Central Africa and Lajja in the Nsukka region, Nigeria point to the late 3rd or 2nd millennium BC for the emergence of iron metallurgy along the Northern margins of the equatorial forest" (Bocoum, 2002; Bisson et al, 2006; Zangalo, 2007; Eze-Uzomaka, 2008,2009 in Holl, 2009).

The Benin traditional iron workers were not left out as the technology began to spread and developed from pre-historic age to many ancient African communities. The Benin blacksmiths began to produce iron works ranging from religious, socio-political, defense and other items of everyday use. It was the production of these major implements that made the iron worker an indispensable and respected member of the society (Philip, 2009). They include swords, lamps, staffs, gongs, hoes, weapons of warfare and many more. Since the Benin art works were made to glorify the Oba and his court, the blacksmithing works were very crucial to status differentiation. The rise of iron metallurgy provided a powerful stimulus for the rise of social differentiation (Philip, 2009). Consequently, the iron workers were organized into art guild known as Igun Ematon by Ogiso Ere in the 9th century AD, like every other art group, to cater for the social and economic life of the kingdom (Igbafe, 1982 as cited in Osagie & Ikponmwosa, 2014). This was to properly harness their potentials and for the Oba to have monopoly of their services (Eweka, 1989 as cited in Ophori, 2018.). "The physical and spiritual strength of iron makes it a crucial material in Benin art" (Rebora 1983:27). The art of blacksmithing is one of the major art traditions in metal fabrication and manipulation that has played so many roles in shaping the destinies of many societies. The Benin experience is a typical example, Aisian (2002:138) opined that

Benin iron workers kept the city technologically self-sufficient throughout the centuries of her long history until the advent of British colonialists. On the shoulder of these guild rested the metallurgical proficiency of the kingdom, an expertise which built up, supported and advanced her civilization.

This statement was corroborated by Omo N'Oba Erediauwa II (2008:10), the Oba of Benin who reigned from 1978-2016 when he posited that "the products were objects with religious and archival value to my people ---. They were objects of our spirituality". The blacksmiths are highly revered because their products are highly needed for the community to survive (Omoregie, 1998:62).

Oral tradition has it that the art of blacksmithing in Benin originated in heaven (Inneh, 2015.pc). This creation myth also exists in some other West African kingdoms. For example the Dogon people of Mali who believed that the ancestral blacksmith descended from heaven bringing the raw materials of civilization, that is, fire, iron and seeds (Herbert, 1993 as cited in de Barros, 2000). According to Inneh (2010, pc as cited in Ophori, 2011), blacksmithing practice was established on earth (Benin) by Ogun, the god of iron who was instructed by Osanobua (God) to escort his son, Oba (Ogiso) of Benin to earth for the purpose of protecting him and attending to his everyday needs. Ogun was skillful in iron

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working and mystical prowess. At the death of Ogun, he was deified and worshipped as god of iron. Since then, his descendants have continued in the art and practice of blacksmithing in Benin. Their products include amongst others the lamps, gong and staffs which is the focus of this study.

The origin and development of Benin blacksmithing is still a myth as documentary evidence is relatively scarce. Some scholars have attempted, and literally recorded the general metal smithing practice with little focus on the blacksmithing. Oral tradition has it that the blacksmithing genre is as old as the kingdom. And that when Osanobua (god), sent his son Oba to come and possess the earth, he sent along Ogun (the God of iron and war) to accompany him to earth because of his prowess in iron working, magical power and strength. On their way, according to Ine N'Igun N'Ekhua (2010, pc as cited in Ophori, 2011) a rock obstructed their way which Ogun had to remove by breaking it to pave way for their passage. Fortunately, Ogun discovered his working material iron in this rock. Thus, began the iron smithing practice which has continued till date in Benin. Ogun was deified and worshipped by the Benin after his death. There is at least a blacksmith in every town and village in Benin due to the presence of Ogun deity (the god of iron) in the communities, the use of iron as farm implements and weapon of warfare which is an important part of the socio-political and religious life of the people and the fact that every Ogun priest must (first) be a blacksmith (Izevbigie, 2010 as cited in Ophori, 2011). The art of blacksmithing continued and was encouraged and developed by Ogiso Ere (900-980AD) the grandson of the first Ogiso long before bronze casting was introduced by Oba Oguola (1280AD – 1295AD). (Egharevba, 1968; Izevbigie, 1978 and Hull, 1981 as cited in Ophori, 2018).

Scholars however, are of the opinion that Benin belongs to the Edoid group who also speak the Kwa language that migrated from the North-Central region of Africa where the Nok culture existed to their present location (Otite, 2011; Emanemua, 2011). This group includes the Benin, Uneme, Urhobo, Isoko, Epie and many others. They took along with them the smelting and forging culture that was prevalent in the Nok region at that time. According to Dark (1973:53), "the knowledge of iron working would appear to have been present among the Edo before the introduction of brass-smith art from Ife". This view was corroborated by Inneh, the head of blacksmithing guild of Benin when he stated thus "we blacksmiths are descendants of Ogun. We have been on ground since the origin of Benin "(Inneh, 2010: pc). The blacksmith guild has metamorphosed over the years. There are currently three wards of traditional blacksmiths still practicing in Benin producing different specialized items each for the Oba and his Chiefs. They include, the Igun N' Ekhua, Igun Eyanugie and Igun N' Ugboha wards. Dark (1973:53) opined that the blacksmiths may have emerged at different times in history. The above view was confirmed by Obasogie of Ugboha (2010) in an oral interview. While there is a contemporary blacksmith group along the Television (TV) Road in Benin metropolis currently servicing the people with various products of blacksmithing. The Benin blacksmiths do not appear to have all originated from smiths living in Benin as "opinion differs as to the origin of the various wards" (Dark 1973:135). Blacksmiths from vassal states especially the Northern part of Benin empire were conscripted into the Benin blacksmithing corpus. Dark (1973: 135) observed that the people of Ugboha are said to have come from the Esan village of Ugboha as the followers of the legendary warrior hero Enowe, who came to fight for Oba Esigie (1500-1550 AD). It appears that other blacksmiths captured in war, instead of being executed as ordinary prisoners, would have been brought to Benin and absolved into a ward because you don't kill iron worker.

Blacksmithing artistic technology continues to engender high patronage value even in contemporary Benin kingdom even though they appear to have lost their traditional roles due to the influence of foreign socio-religious interference. Their product which includes amongst others the iron lamps, gongs and staffs serviced several aspects of the socio-economic, political and religious needs of the

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community. These artistic products seem to conjure great deal of latent meanings and feelings. The configured, contextual and formal elements seem to underscore the peculiarity and importance of these iron artworks to the people and the dexterity of the craftsmen in the community. Nevertheless, these elements embedded in these iron works seems to have been neglected in contemporary Nigerian art historical narratives. This paper therefore takes analytical study of the underlining formal configuration and context of some iron lamps, gongs and staff produced by the traditional Benin blacksmiths in pre-colonial and contemporary Benin kingdom. The study looks at the various forms individually and holistically to ascertain their signification within the socio-cultural context. It employed the formalistic and Iconographic art historical methods in analyzing these art works.

Iconography is the practice of evaluating artwork(s) for its content and underlining meaning rather than for its aesthetic quality. It was an approach made popular by Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968). Over the years, many writers have given further clarification for a better understanding of this method. They include amongst others Adams (2003) and Howells (2003). Adams (2003) described it as a method that emphasizes content over form. While Howells (2003) defined it as "an approach to the analysis of visual culture that concerns itself with the subject- matter or context of visual texts" (p13)

While formalism which was propagated by Wolfflin (1864-1945) views an artwork independent of its context, function and content. It studied artworks from purely aesthetic angle. It emphasizes the aesthetics of Art for Art Sake (Adams, 2003). It is "the interpretation of a work of art through its visual or material aspect" (D'Alleva, 2010). It is a method that "moves our focus away from what is being shown unto the manner in which it is depicted" (Howells, 2003). Information was also obtained from of the various wards that made up the Igun Ematon guild. Data was also collected from the National Commission for Museum and Monuments (NCMM) Benin City. Participant observer approach was equally employed. These art historical methods above helped this study to engage carefully the iron works under review for better analyses and understanding of their contextual elements.

Contextual Analysis

Staffs: OsunEmaton (Osunigiogio)

The *OsunEmaton* staff which is also praised named *Osunigiogio* is made with iron rod of about 100cm to 140cm. The iron staff is surmounted with a crown of five stylized zoomorphic figures having the one at the middle looking bigger and taller than the rest. The distinctive figure at the middle is a bird which represents the vicious night birds called *akala*, the lord of the witches through which the witches inflict harm and mischief on innocent victims at night. (Ben Amos, 2010) The conceptualization of this creature in tangible form on the *Osunematon* could mean the bringing down of the powers of the witches in tangible form to enable the Osun priest or Obo (medicine man) have supernatural powers to confront the witches and give succour or cure to their victims (ibid). This culture is also prevalent among the Yoruba and it is referred to as *'opa orere' or opa osanyin/erinle* and also committed to victory over the witches. (Rebora; 1983:31). The Osunematon is named after Osun deity whose power is inherent in leaves and herbs and imbues the medicine man *"Obo"* with the knowledge and how to brew them into magical, medicinal and efficacious compounds which also transforms the medicine man into any animal form to confront the common enemy, the witches (Ben Amos, 2010).

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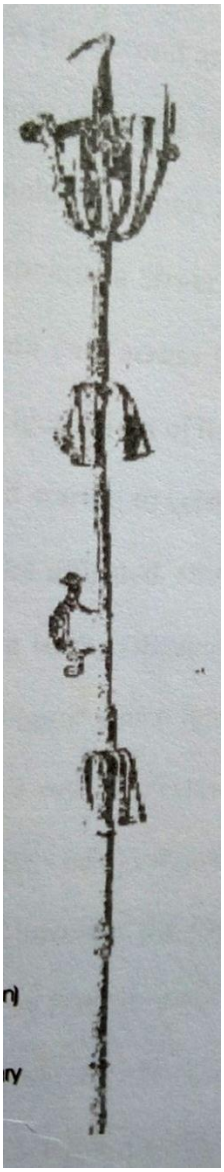

Fig 1: Osunigiogio (OsunEmaton),n.d, Iron, 138cm, National Museum, Benin-City. 2010,Photo; F.Ophori

Fig 2: Osun Staff (OsunEmaton) ,n.d, Iron, 130.5cm, Harry Franklin Gallary. Courtesy: Ben-Amos, P. 1980

The other form that surrounds the main figure could be other animals like birds, reptiles, mammals and different other objects of everyday domestic use and religious rituals. The lower part of the iron rod is attached three forms that depict the elongated images of bells welded and dangling face down on the side of the rod. In some cases, this could be repeated in one or two other places along the same iron rod (fig 2) with the flat shape of a chameleon in between. The chameleon (*Erokhin*) represents the power to transform because it possesses the natural ability to change and assume the colour of its environment. It could also depict the approach of the "*Obo"* to the witches (Rebora. 1983).

The iron metal is metaphor for physical and spiritual power, strength, therefore its usage in the *Osun ematon* also praise named *'Osunigiogio'* links the Osun priest with Ogun, the patron deity of the warrior, hunters and craftsmen (Ben Amos: 2010). The *Osunighioghio* brings into tangibility and units

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the spirit of the Osun and Ogun deities into one force. Thereby creating and serving as checks and balance; and benevolent spiritual and physical force within the Benin cosmology. This therefore places the *Osunighioghio* as an important social- cultural element amongst the Benin.

Asogan:

Fig 3:Asogan, Traditional Staff of Authority (2010) by Oliha, 142cm, Iron, Oliha's Showroom. Photo.F.Ophori

Asogan is a similar but distinct iron staff made by the blacksmiths in Benin. These analogue staffs do not completely have the same features like the *Osun ematon*. It is made up of a long iron rod with bell-like cones attached to its upper end. Undernet these are welded two gong-like structures which are instruments of communication and worship. Immediately below, the above design and forms are repeated but with an intercession at the middle by two flat discs that seem to represent a plate for the Osun devotees to drop money for atonement and show of gratitude for protection. This staff according to Oliha (2010, pc) is used by the osun priest to make special pronouncement. (fig.3). However, in most cases, these pronouncements are declaration of judgements on an erring member of the community by the priest. Thus, the Asogan is a symbol of authority that enables the priest to perform as checks and balance that helps to keep order within the society.

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Gongs:

A Pair of Gongs

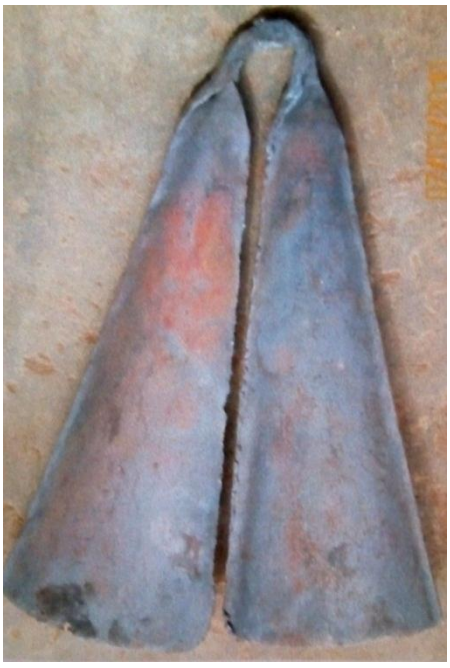

Fig 4: A pair of Gong by Oliha, 2010. 27cm by 5cm, Iron, Oliha's Showroom. Photo by F.Ophori

Gongs are conical shaped pieces of metal that are in most cases made of flat iron forged and folded into conical shapes with tapered handles that look like the tail of a tadpole. Two of these tail like handles could be forged together to form a pair of gongs. They could be made of brass or iron. However, this section of the paper shall focus on the gongs made of iron. Norberg (1972) referred to these gongs as bells and classified them into clappers and non-clappers; and discussed them under musical instruments of Benin. The clapper bells are struck by movable clappers hung within the bell, whereas clapperless bells are struck from outside with a beater. The clapperless bells are labeled as gong by many authors (von Hornbostel, 1933; Jenkins, 1970 as cited in Norberg, 1992). These are the most common types fabricated by the Benin blacksmiths. Norberg (1992) described them as clapperless bells called *Egogo* which is one of the most common musical instruments in Benin. They are made of two pieces of iron folded or welded together into conical shape (round or oval shape in cross section) and may vary from about 15cm to 150cm in size.

They make deep loud sound when struck and its significance goes beyond its formal tendencies. Gongs are used by the town crier in the traditional settings to communicate and inform. During traditional religious worship, the gongs could also be employed as instrument of veneration and to call devotees to worship. The striking of the gong could also signify the presence of the deity. A double clapper bell called *elaghalaogho* could be sounded in shrines to inform the spirit of the presence of their worshippers (ibid). They also served as medium through which divine communication are transmitted from the spirit world to the worshippers. Thereby making they item of special reserve. It could also be used as a musical instrument and to give signal in time of danger. As an instrument of information, it is employed by the town crier who strikes it with a piece of stick or iron rod to make a loud sound that draws people's attention to him before passing his information. Iron gongs are found within most communities in pre-colonial Nigeria due to the various functions it performs. Although there is no archaeological evidence because of the low durability of iron (its rusting characteristic) that allows it a

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short life span. In spite of the great improvement in communication technology in recent time, iron gongs are still been used for grassroots information dissemination and as musical instrument in Nigeria, especially in the South -South, North-central, South-West and the South-East regions of the country.

African gongs come in different shapes and are of different media. They are mostly made of metal especially iron, although in some cultures like the Labola in Congo; they are made of slit hallowed wood. They serve various functions ranging from information, musical and religious to summoning the ancestors and gods as in Gankeke gong of the Southern part of Republic of Benin (Gankeke Bell or Gong has its Unique History, 2010). They could also be made of ivory on very rare occasions in Benin Kingdom (fig5). It is used only on very important socio-religious ceremonies especially during *Igue* festival.

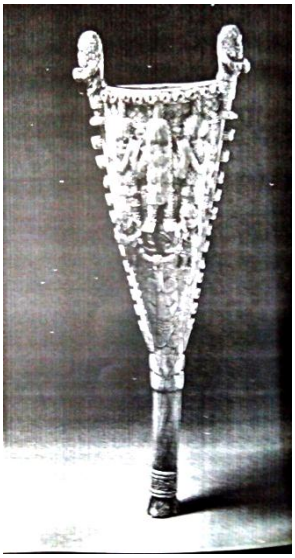

Fig 5: Traditional Benin Ivory Gong, (n.d,) 36cm, Oba palace. Courtesy Ben-Amos

The royal ivory gong (fig 5) is struck with a stick by the Oba during Igue Festival to ward off evil spirits. This symbolic gong is a special preserve of and peculiar to the Oba of Benin. This uniquely crafted gong is made of ivory with its white colour being a symbol of ritual purity, and it has carved designs of crocodiles, mudfish, water tortoises and snakes all drawn from Olokun's pure and perfect world (Ben Amos 2010:111). It also has the figure of the Oba flanked by his chiefs who hold his hands to support the weight of his hands and to ease his movement. Close to the feet of the Oba are other two smaller figures (pages) that seem to be ahead of the procession. Fagg and Ben-Amos in Quarcoopome (1983:101) suggests that the figures or attendants may represent the Edaiken (Crown Prince) and the Ezomo (war chief) or title holders Osa and Osuan, who assist the Oba during the Igue ceremony. At the opposite edge of the upper opening of the gong are two carved figures which could represent warriors or chiefs since the gong is stroke to drive away evil spirits. Iron gongs are also used for the same purpose in the villages.

The pair of gongs (fig. 4) above is a typical Benin style gong forged from flat sheets of iron. It has two conical shape forms with hemmed edges. These two forms are connected in a 'U' shape with the narrow and tapered tips of the cones. The formal configurations of these pair of gong seem to suggest a triangular formation. The tips are fused together to create a solid rod-like formation because of the smithing technique used. The surface is left plain displaying the tactile and colour qualities of the iron metal. The hollow in the cones gives the gong its deep sonorous sound. Apart from functioning as a

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socio-cultural icon; it also serves in religious rites and worship. The curve serves as the handle when in use. These types of bells (gongs) could be seen amongst the Benin neighbors such as the Urhobos, Itsekiri, Ijaws, Etsakos, Ikas, and Esans (Norberg, 1972). The similarity in the formal elements and functions of the gongs in Nigeria seems to signify a singular source for its origin.

Lamps:

UrhukpaIhue (Chandelier) The Benin blacksmiths made iron works not only for royalty and religious ceremonies but objects for daily life usage such as the lamps to lit the environment and interiors. They are usually made in different sizes, shapes and design depending on how they are going to be used. They could be hung on the ceiling, walls, placed on stands and or carried about. Lamps have been an important household utensil since primordial times.

It has continued to play significant role in the socio-cultural development of communities. According to the Illuminating Engineering Society in www.stouchlighting.com "the first attempt at man-made light occurred about 70,000 years ago. The first lamp was made of a shell hollowed-out rock or other similar non-inflammable object which was filled with combustible materials (probably dried grass or wood) sprinkled with animal fat and ignited". Eventually dipping wicks into the oil was introduced. (Historical Evolution of lighting. http://www.stouchlighting.com)

Over the centuries, oil lamps passed through many stages of evolution, including lamp shaped like tea pots, lamps were made of stones, ceramics and metal (The Science of Lights. The History of Lamps. www.nelt.co.jp). Originally, actual shells were used with sections cut out to provide space for the lighting area. These were replaced by pottery, alabaster or metal. In ancient Egypt and China, saucer lamp type was found made of pottery or bronze. It was sometimes provided with a spike in the center of the cavity to support the wick… Another (type) version had a wick channel, which allowed the burning surface of the wick to hang over the edge. The latter type became common in Africa" (Lamp/Lighting. Encyclopedia Britanniea.com). The Benin Lamps seem to fall within these typological classifications.

Fig 6: Benin Traditional Chandelier, c.1850, Iron, 30cm by 73cm, Ogiame's Palace, Benin City. Photo by F. Ophori

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Apart from giving light to the family at night, it is a source of security and also serves as a source of warmth to them especially during cold seasons. Among the Urhobo, lamp/light indicates direction and leadership. In some cultures of the world, lamp symbolized the life and dignity of a family (Job 21:17). It could also be used as a symbolic characteristic of a virtuous and prudent woman because "her lamp does not go out by night" (Proverbs 31:18). As a status symbol the Oba and his Chiefs had iron lamps, while the citizens used clay lamps.

Fig 7: Jewish Clay Lamp. Courtesy New King James study Bible

It seems in most traditions where metals hold sway; metal lamps are metaphor for status appraisal. Radmacher (2014:1648) stated succinctly that the poorer Israel made their lamps of clay, (fig 7) while the wealthy had lamps of bronze and other metal, Fig 6 above is an example of chandelier that is hung on the ceiling. It is fabricated with iron and it is about 30cm diameter by 73cm from the flat bottom bowl to the end of the dangling iron chain. The flat bowl or sauce of iron at the bottom serves as the base and the oil reservoir/container for storing palm oil which is the fuel. On this oil is placed a piece of roll cotton wool material called wick which is ignited with fire to illuminate the environment. The cotton wool helps to keep the light until the oil runs out. On the edge of the bowl is attached four flat pieces of iron bar at four opposite sides. These curved bars are welded together at the middle some 30cm above the plate of oil below. At the center of this joint is drilled a round hole with a rim of small round iron rod fitted around it thereby forming a closed basket shape.

Baskets are common items for carrying and storing of goods in African traditional setting. They are made of thin strips of bamboo material with enough space in between stripes for the content to be seen. The adaptation of this formal design element could be to allow for more illumination from the light. In the round hole above is inserted an iron chain which is used in hanging the oil lamp or *Urhukpa Ihue* on the ceiling.

Urhukpabo: (fig 8) The Urhukpabo was introduced as time went on for easy carriage and movement. The lamp is made of iron sheet forged into cylindrical shape with a handle like a drinking cup. It has upper lid with a hole at the middle where the wick is inserted. On this rests the light fire.

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Fig 8: Urhukpabo (Hand Lamp), artist impression, 15cm by 8cm. Photo by F. Ophori

Lamp Stand (Fig 9):

Fig 9: Benin Traditional Lamp Stand c. 1850, Iron, 110cm, Ogiame's Palace, Benin City. Photo by F. Ophori

The Benin lamp stand is a unique light system that seems not to be a common item. This iron lamp may have been configured from the sunflower with its stalk. The upper part is made of a flat bowl of about 36cm where the oil is stored. The wick is also place on the bowl or sauce with the oil. The bowl

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or sauce is welded by forging it to a thin iron rod at the middle. This rod which serves as the stand is pegged on the floor. Although it does not have any form of surface design on it, the balancing of this simple design element epitomizes the dexterity and technological sophistication of the artistic contemplation of the Benin smith.

Conclusion

The blacksmithing artistic products especially the staff (poles) and gongs have continued to play major roles in the socio-cultural settings of traditional Benin Communities. Therefore they have been in the front burner of the blacksmiths forge. Their formal configuration showcases simple artistic forms with precision to details configured with great artistic dexterity. The works are laden with indigenous meaning and identity that are peculiar to the community. The lamps which hitherto were used to lit the community and symbol of status differentiation has seized to function in contemporary times due to the availability of electricity. It is also worthy of note that the *Osunighioghio* staff which served as item of religion and social justice among the people seems to be edging along despite the fact that only a few cases are brought before it presently. This is because the membership of *Osun* and *Ogun* religious sect continues to deplete by the day. The blacksmiths intense spiritual sensibility has been highly synthesized in the works under review especially the *Osunigiogio*. The articulation of indigenous idioms with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms in the iron works of the blacksmiths seem to underscore their interpretation of the environment and the eco-system which gives the delicate balance in existence. Nevertheless, the Benin blacksmith believe in the superiority of the spiritual which is anchored on *Osanobua* (God) over the mundane world '*agbon'*. Within the traditional settings of Benin, the symbolic importance of blacksmithing in socio-religious activities still persist. The natural symbolic link between kingship and iron working could still be noticeable during investiture, dispute adjudication, agricultural, domestic life and other important ceremonies. The technical and magical indispensability of the iron worker is still prevalent in traditional lives of the Benin even in contemporary time.

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