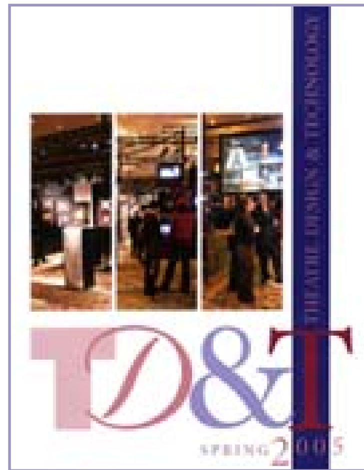

A DANCE OF AFRICAN IMAGES:

American Designers Explore the Beauty of Yoruba Culture

By Natalie Taylor

Published in *TD&T*, Vol. 41 No. 2 (Spring 2005)

Theatre Design & Technology, the journal for design and production professionals in the performing arts and entertainment industry, is published four times a year by United States Institute for Theatre Technology. For information about joining USITT or to purchase back issues of *TD&T*, please contact the USITT office:

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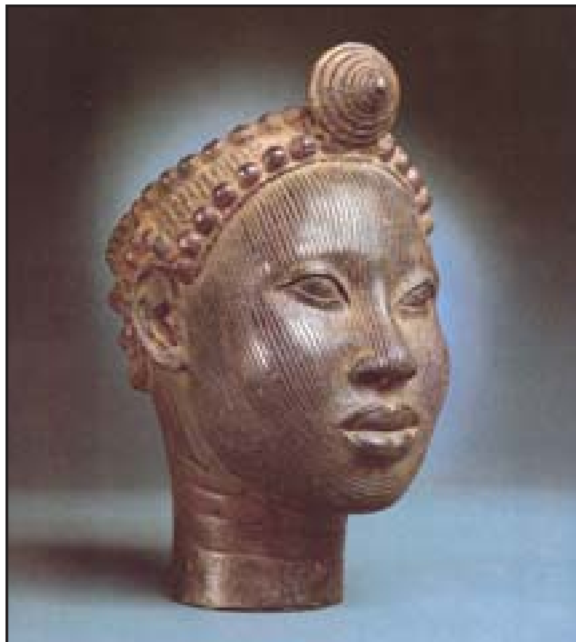
American Designers Explore the Beauty of Yoruba Culture

by Natalie Taylor

with Ursula Belden, Liza Kindl, and Renae Pedersen



1 Portrait-realistic bust with surface linework.
(From *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria* by Ekpo Eyo and Frank Willett. Copyright © 1980 by Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Arts. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.)

A harvest of African prints and wooden carvings cluttered the shops of Ohio University's School of Theater last spring as designers, costumers, and sculptors prepared for a celebration of African culture through performance. For the first time in its history, Ohio University was producing an African play as a full-fledged mainstage production, and behind this exciting intercultural initiative was Dr. Esiaba Irobi, Associate Professor of International Theatre, avant-garde scholar, playwright, and director. As his first offering to the multicultural population of Athens, Ohio, Irobi had chosen to direct a play firmly rooted in a representative African culture, the Yoruba culture. The Yoruba share some commonalities of performance aesthetics with his own Igbo culture in Nigeria, West Africa. Irobi fervently wanted to use this production to open a window to an American audience about the beauty and complexity of African cultures as refracted through the theatre. He states, "I wanted the production to crack open the cultural insularity of people in the USA and for the audience

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2 Abstracted Yoruba carving on bowl.
(Bowl with figure. Olowe of Ise (ca. 1875–c. 1938); Yoruba peoples, Nigeria, ca. 1925. Bequest of William A. McCarty-Cooper, 95-10-1. Photograph by Franko Khoury. National Museum of Aftican Art, Smithsonian Institution.)

PHOTOS COURTESY N. TAYLOR, EXCEPT AS NOTED

3 Quarter-inch model of the set

to recognize and celebrate the artistic and performative sophistication of the Yoruba nation who had an empire centuries before the British Empire. I wanted to shine a light that will help North Americans to understand that Africa is a continent, not a country."

According to Irobi, who was the playwright's mentee, Ola Rotimi created *The Gods Are Not to Blame* to encourage his countrymen and women to examine the endemic problem of ethnic discrimination in their newly independent country. Nigeria is a country the size of Texas with two hundred and fifty different languages and cultures. Consequently, discrimination between cultures has been rampant and social strife has erupted into political upheaval and civil war for several decades. Ola Rotimi wrote The *Gods Are Not to Blame* in the aftermath of the civil war between Nigeria and Biafra which lasted from 1968 to 1970. He based his play on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* with its familiar themes of leadership and political rivalry, but in his adaptation the community's suffering is not caused by fate, but by its reluctance to take charge of its own destiny. Beyond dramatizing the story line, Irobi wanted to use this production to challenge the Western notion of performance by encouraging a ritualistic acting style as well as audience participation at the end of the performance each night. He also insisted on presenting visual elements that accurately reflect artifacts from the Yoruba people.

This culture has a very specific visual vocabulary. Ancient Yoruba artists created sculpture in a very realistic style. There are many examples of portrait-realistic busts with surface detail that resemble skin decoration (figure 1). Later the artistic style shifted into more abstract forms (figure 2). Yoruba craftsmen produced a wealth of intricate and expressive examples of wood carvings. Some objects were created for utilitarian purposes with lavish surface embellishment and some objects were valued simply as works of art. The breadth and style of the crafts produced by these artists show much about their worldview and their relationship to material goods. Their views on art were so specific that separate artists carved utilitarian pieces and figural pieces. Sometimes special types of wood were chosen to heighten the power of the sculptures. The Metropolitan Museum of Art addressed this in an exhibit with a very good on-line archive. According to the site, "Practical and spiritual considerations inform the selection of the appropriate wood for a commission. The ritual contexts of sculptural forms may require

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that they be made from special woods that enhance their efficacy." An experienced master will carve a block of wood into a figure that adheres to a visual vocabulary that specifically relates the piece to a god, a level of power, or a specific person. Even the utilitarian pieces have a meaning in the ritual life of the culture that extends beyond the simple identity of the item as a bowl or stool or staff.

Irobi wanted to use this production to inform the audience about the Yoruba culture and to avoid making an "African collage" that would sustain clichés and misapprehensions about African peoples. It was, therefore, important to the design team to show this visual style accurately in the costumes and props against the background of the more abstract set (figure 3). In our research process, Renae Pedersen (graduate costume designer), and I relied heavily on anthropological texts because Yoruba culture is extremely well researched and documented by scholars. Doing anthropological research was the only way to learn about the aesthetics, cultural definitions, and values of the Yorubas. Then we carefully checked the validity of our choices with Irobi, who was an excellent source himself. As the scene designer, I found it important to clarify symbols with the director in early meetings. I wanted to make sure that "circle" means the same thing to the Yoruba people as it does to a Western audience since I chose to use a broken circle as a central symbol for the fractured community. In my design, the main portion of the stage was a circular disk that was split with a central crack. I wanted the audience to perceive the circular space as set apart for important community rituals and meetings. It needed to function as a place for outdoor dance rituals as well as for private meetings between the king and his advisors. A circle connotes defense from outside forces ("circling the wagons"). It connotes infinity, continuity, equality (as in the Knights of the Round Table). It looks inward at itself and poses a solid barrier with no weak points to the outside. The circle motif captured these ideas very clearly for both Western and African audience members. So, breaking a circle shows that these ideas are not functioning. The community founded on the ideas of the circle is somehow broken and the fortunes of the gods, or of karma, or of social interactions are not lining up as they should.

Symbols were very important in the selection and creation of the fabrics for this production as well. The majority of the fabrics used in the costumes were printed and dyed in the craft shop with patterns selected to approximate the authentic Yoruba patterns found in the anthropological research. Cotton and silk textiles were shopped out of New York months in advance to allow time for these modifications. The costume craft shop cut stamps out of rubber in the shape of eyes, spirals, hands, and turtles. Using Irobi as a source, Pedersen learned that the spiral is a symbol for inevitable action and the turtle is an animal spirit named in the text as a creature of power. The hand is a direct metaphor for action and the eye is a symbol for sight on the one hand, or ignorance and blindness on the other. The stamps were used to apply dye or bleach to the fabric to set the image into the cloth. All of the fabric in the show was made of natural fibers. The result was fabric yardage that reproduced the look of the traditional Yoruba cloth found in Pedersen's research (figure 4). While this procedure was a larger scale undertaking than most shows require, the actual process is well within the reach of most any costume shop.

4 Cloth for the women's garments was stamped with symbols.

5 Research image for the *gele*.

COURTESY JOHN PEMBERTON

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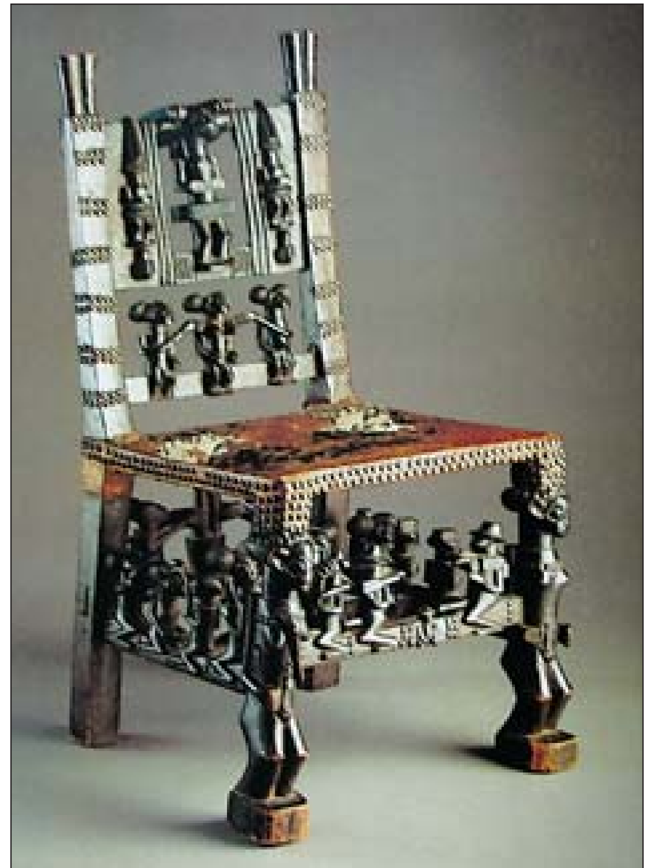
Some of the fabrics and jewelry used in the play were actually imported from Africa. The warrior costumes were made from African mudcloth, a traditional fabric that has a pattern bleached or dyed into the cloth. African mudcloth is a traditional durable and utilitarian fabric that contrasted with the refined embroidered raw silks of the tribal leaders. While similar patterns were available in the American textile market, most were printed on light weight cotton that lacked the weight of authentic mudcloth. Many elements of the jewelry were composed of imported African beads and cowrie shells. The cowrie shell is a symbol of fertility and the power of creation in the Yoruba culture and reflects a degree of social rank and ornamentation in American aesthetics. According to Thompson, "Cowrie shells are common in bartering systems of the Yoruba People." Large colorful cowries decorated the bodyguards while small polished cowries were used to decorate the royal children.

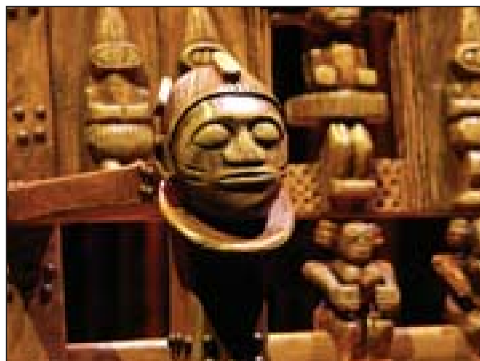
Holly Cole, head of the costume program at Ohio University, remarked that "We used traditional pattern shapes for all garments and modified them only as needed to meet modern production needs, such as quick changes." For example, the complex headdresses worn by all Yoruba women, called *gele*, are traditionally tied and pinned into place (figure 5). However, unlike authentic *gele*, the headdresses for our production could



COURTESY PRESTEL VERLAG

6 Research image for the King's throne.

7 Our shop built this throne and applied the carvings in pieces.



8 The faces on the throne were echoed in the set and other props.

9 Stools of the Queen, the Priest, and court officials

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be pulled on like turbans and were hand stitched into their folded shapes over a hidden elastic headband which secured the headdress in even the most active choreography.

Like the costume shop, the prop shop carefully interpreted research, and then used standard processes to simplify artifacts that may appear daunting at first glance. An excellent example of this is the king's throne. I designed the throne based on an intricately carved chair from Zaire (figure 6), which incorporated the Yoruba penchant for elaborate sculpture. King Odewale's throne needed to be higher and more stately than any of the other pieces of furniture used in the play. Yoruba artists used abstract human sculptural forms to identify which ideas were most important in each particular piece of art. The proportion of the parts of a human figure related to the importance of the symbolic qualities of that part. The head was revered as the place for the brain or thought, as well as for creation and control. It was seen also as a symbol for the good or bad fortune of an individual. The throne thus became a seat of power and intellect fit for a king (figure 7). The masks or heads in the throne were repeated in elements in the set and in other props like Odewale's sword (figure 8). For me, the faces became ancestors, gods, and ever-seeing eyes that are present even in the most private conversations where King Odewale remembered his past sins. Incorporating the faces gave our version of the Yoruba community a real sense of history and place. The attention to this level of authentic detail was key to realizing Irobi's dream of creating a window to this culture in Athens.

Besides the King's throne, several stools were used in the production. In Yoruba culture, stools show power and prestige. Students created three and four-legged wooden stools that appeared to be hand-carved from a single piece of wood (figure 9). Yoruba artists masterfully exposed the beauty of form from wood and then embellished the surfaces of the sculptural form with linework to make an interesting contrast between the cut lines and the smoothly polished surface of the sculpture. The types of linework identified the piece of art as belonging to one culture or another. In fact, according to the Met's Masterhand exhibit, in Yoruba culture, the form and decoration of a piece of art actually served as the artist's signature. People within the culture identified many meanings beyond what an outsider would recognize from the proportions of the figures and from symbols. For example, different positions of the hands symbolized generosity or spiritual awareness. Large open eyes showed that a person is being influenced by a spirit. The Queen's stool featured this sort of intricate linework.

10 The swords in our production were each specific to the owner or function.

11 King Odewale swears to find the murderer who has cursed his community.

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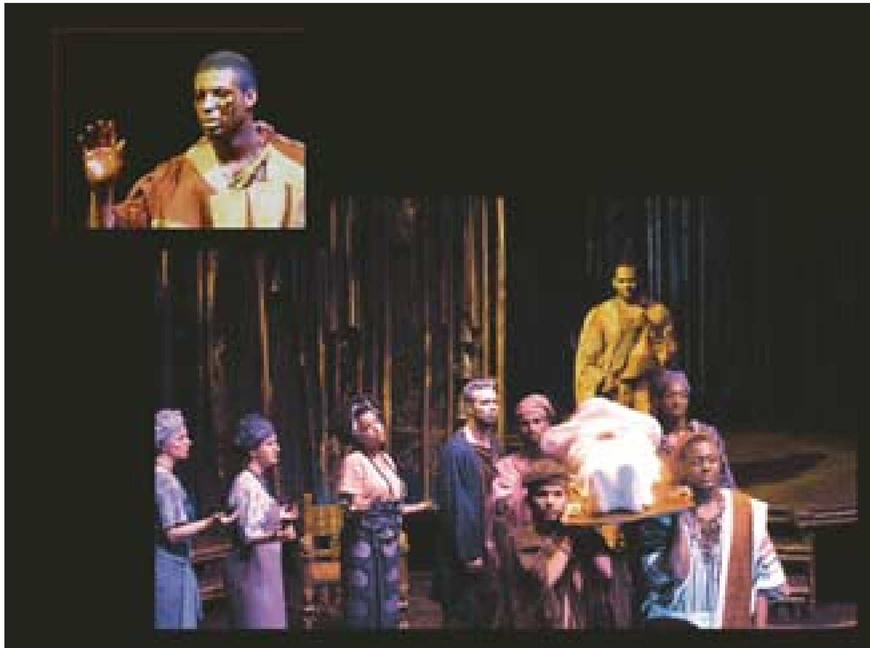
12 The bamboo wall included a mask and cups that simulated gongs.

13 The community celebrates with the ritualized Harvest Dance.



14 The death of Queen Ojuola

The specificity and meaning found in Yoruba wood sculpture applies to metalworking as well. Under the supervision of the head of the props program, Tom Fiocchi, students learned how to adapt standard metal-working techniques to create non-western weaponry. The swords in the Yoruba research were very personalized and all had different blade shapes and handle types (figure 10). In the Yoruba culture, swords and metal objects all represent the deity Ogun. Ogun is the god of iron and technology, of war and defense. One of the central scenic and symbolic elements of the play was the shrine to Ogun. Here King Odewale knelt before a rock adorned with sacred objects and swore on his sword that he would find the murderer who had brought the curse on the community (figure 11). Swearing an oath to Ogun is seen as a serious promise that will bring extreme retribution if broken. Dr. Irobi told the actors that in Yoruba courts today, people who testify are given the choice of swearing on the Bible or to Ogun. Many choose the Bible in fear of the wrath of Ogun if they should break the oath.

In some cases, the trick to creating a specific look is just finding the right materials. The play called for bowls made of gourds, so the propmaster hunted down actual gourds. Taking the time to get the real item saved time in the long run and produced a better look than trying to replicate a gourd. On the other hand, the women in the cast were blocked to dance with earthen pots on their heads—but real pots would have been far too heavy. So the shop used chicken wire and paper mache to simulate rough earthenware.

...we interwove strips of cloth similar to the costume textiles vertically into the wall.

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…African mudcloth, a traditional fabric that has a pattern bleached or dyed into the cloth.

The textures and lines in the props and costumes blended into the scenery, too. The back wall of the set was composed largely of bamboo and erosion cloth and had a concave curved silhouette that swept up from the ground to a tall central portion. The shape was not from any realistic research but spoke to me of the epic scale of the story. The shape reached high as the people tried to reconcile their daily lives with their beliefs about gods and fate. The erosion cloth simply gave a natural color and texture and provided a background (along with actual structural netting) in which to entangle the bamboo. The see-thru wall that this created could obscure and reveal objects behind it. Bamboo imitated the forest environment and created interesting lines that reflected the organic forms of the sculptures. When skimmed with front light, the wall became a textured surface interwoven with African artifacts (figure 12). When backlit, the silhouette provided a pattern against which the ritual dance of the people became the artifacts. I also wanted to include other textures and patterns into the "wall." Strips of fabric often adorn shrines or places of importance in Yoruba culture, so we interwove strips of cloth similar to the costume textiles vertically into the wall. This helped relate the physical environment to the costumes and, more importantly, carried the symbols and linework into the set.

After all the bamboo and fabric was in place, the walls still needed further texture and above all a spark of life. Of course by then our budget was exhausted. So, I raided our storage for upholstery fringe and textural elements. The best find, though, was when I realized that African gongs are shaped almost exactly like plastic Taco Bell cups. I bought a stack from the local franchise for $1.00. When, covered with a mixture of Flex Glue and joint compound, and painted to evoke metal, the cups added just the right touch of specificity and no one ever guessed at their humble beginnings. Incorporating the gongs into the scenery helped tie the realistic elements of the people into the textures of the space.

Music is, of course, very important in the ritual of this culture. When the community comes together, music is always part of the communal language. Besides vocal music and chanting, there are drums and gongs. We had a band of African drummers to augment the drumming and singing performed by the actors. There were very specialized songs for celebration and mourning that moved the action of the play forward. Sometimes the music provided a rhythm for dance and sometimes it was a direct expression of the emotions of the characters. Drums and gongs provided sound texture which vividly underscored the visual textures of the performance.

Another special concern was the focus on dance (figure 13). The performance space for this production was a round stage bounded by raked seating around three sides and a shallow proscenium stage house on the fourth side. Irobi was especially interested in fostering an African approach to theatre that involves dance, ritual, and audience interaction. Actors were choreographed to enter from, and surround the audience at various times, and the entire audience was encouraged to come on the stage and join the performers in a celebratory dance at the end of the play.

Our production of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame,* posed exciting challenges for each of the shops to adapt modern processes, materials, and tools and to gain an understanding of a different visual vocabulary in order to achieve unique culture-specific results that heightened the visual communication. It was an exceptional learning experience for both students and faculty. Holly Cole, head of the costume program at Ohio University, remarked that "*Gods* was a fantastic training opportunity for us because it was such an in-depth exploration of another culture. Matching indigenous fabrics, painting, and machine embroidering Yoruba symbols on the garments, creating the jewelry from imported shells and beads, patterning headdresses and garments using traditional Yoruba guidelines, and creating seemingly authentic props gave all of us a very detailed understanding of this distant and beautiful culture." ❖

***Natalie Taylor** is a scene designer and prop master. She was granted an M.F.A. degree in scene design by Ohio University in 2005. Her design for* The Gods Are Not to Blame *received an Ezekiel Award in 2004. Her portfolio is on-line at www.ntaylordesign.com.*

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